

## Sandwiched Dignity

I was in fifth grade, and my children's pastor had arranged for a group of us to go on a November mini-missions trip to downtown Tulsa, Oklahoma. Looking back, I'd call it a change-your-perspective trip because that, ultimately, was its purpose. For a full two months before, I traipsed about the Tulsa area to all sorts of local businesses to gather, through donations, a list of items I would later put into small boxes to pass out to the homeless.

On the list were all the necessities of homeless living: toothbrushes, gloves, Band-Aids, a scarf, canned soup (the kind with the top you could pop without a can opener and spoon out the goopy, unheated insides), bottled water, shampoo. I was in charge of filling eight of these boxes. I got mine done well before the deadline and to the exact specifications of my pastor's list. Another girl in my children's church stuffed a whole coat in one of her boxes instead. I couldn't believe how selfish she could be not giving the homeless people what they really needed: shampoo and Band-Aids.

Mid-November we finally packed aboard the People-Mover (what we called our church van) and headed down to the financially and spiritually impoverished streets of downtown. Our first stop was the homeless shelter. It was dinnertime, but we didn't eat with them. We also didn't serve them dinner. Instead, we were to sit and talk with them. I don't remember any of us actually having a conversation, but we did do a lot of staring at the people coming in. I remember thinking that none of them had shaved for at least three weeks.

I sat with my friends Kendall, Matt, and Cameron, and we watched a man with big hands and deep, black, oily lines in his face make a lanyard out of a neon orange shoestring that he had found in his coat pocket. He twisted the string around his finger, looped and knotted it, then stuck the end of the string back through again and pulled. Over and over he repeated this until the lanyard was done. He gave it to Cameron. Cameron didn't want it though, and I did, so Cameron gave it to me.

We started to get hungry, so off we went again in the People-Mover to an alleyway even deeper downtown. A few of our children's church sponsors were already there making a fire in a trashcan. There was a grill grate on top of it so that we could roast hot dogs. Each of us was given one wiener and no bun. And no plate.

When we were finished eating, we wanted to know if we were going to be sleeping back at our church. In response, we were handed boxes, big boxes, and told to make our own sleeping arrangements. The person with the best cardboard house won a competition. Kendall and I snatched two of the refrigerator boxes and made a little cottage together. We lined our boxes up parallel to each other, gashed a hole in the adjoining walls (for a window), used permanent markers we found in the People-Mover to draw on doorknobs, and, not to be neglected, ripped a little paper halfway off the door to make a doorbell. When it was our turn to present our home, we kicked the flap doorbell, sang some wordless musical noise, and danced around. We won.

We all slept burrowed in sleeping bags within our boxes, our pastor and sponsors taking turns staying awake. We thought it was to make sure that no one tried to steal our fire trashcan or cut us into little pieces while we slept.

In the morning, we were so cold. The trashcan fire wasn't nearly as big as it had been the night before, and we had to eat cold bagels. Luckily, we didn't have to stay there much longer before we loaded back up to go to our church for phase two.

In our church kitchen, there were three stations: sandwiches, chips and apples, and water. I was at the sandwich station. Turkey and cheese, turkey and cheese, turkey and cheese, ham and cheese. Sandwich, sandwich, sandwich, sandwich, sandwich. There was no way that we were going to find enough people to give these sandwiches to. We put the sandwiches into brown bags and passed them down the line to be joined by the chips and apples and water bottles. Filled bags we put in crates and carried back out to the People-Mover's back storage area. It was hard work making that many lunches, but we finally finished and got to eat pizza before we left again.

After our hour lunch break (and our subsequent game of tag), it was time, yet again, to go back to downtown, this time stopping at a large, empty parking lot. Friends of the church met us there with their truck filled with our pre-filled charity boxes, and we opened the bed of it up to put water coolers and speakers on the ledge. We boomed Christian pop music from the speakers and started a new game of tag.

They came.

It wasn't like a handful of people came and more followed, they were all just there it seemed instantly. Homeless people from all directions and from behind trees and from the corner nooks of nearby buildings came and snatched a box and a lunch and left. They didn't even say thank you. One lady in a teal green puffy jacket held up two fingers and nodded her head fast before she snagged two of the necessity boxes and scampered away from us.

Another man pulled up his purple low-rider car to the street closest to the truck and asked if we had chips. We did have chips, but if he had a car then he wasn't really homeless, so we told him no.

As quickly as the mass of bodies had shown up, they disappeared, leaving a few apples and a half-full cooler of water. Cameron and Matt and a couple of the other boys filled cups full and threw them at each other and me, a water war.

That was when I saw him.

He had lopsided cotton candy hair, a hunched spine, and a shuffle you could clean floors with. He came to me, not the boys, not any of the girls milling about or my pastor or the sponsors. Me. Thick-tongued and toothless, he tried to speak. I made out "water." His deep-soot eyes plead better than his single-worded request, and I turned to the truck bed to satiate those eyes, but the

water in the cooler had been relocated, soaking the clothing of the four boys. I grabbed an apple and apologized to the endless-eyed man, offering the fruit instead.

He extended no hand to receive my gift, just his disgusted gaze, saying and fluttering his hands near his mouth, "I don't have teeth."

I don't know how long I stood there after that or which direction he went. I think I saw him later sitting behind a tree or in a tree by a droopy eye-lidded man, but I couldn't be sure. The fragment rest of that memory I'm not even in my body. Instead, I just see my braided ponytails in my long-sleeved "Mission Kids" shirt staring at the place in the air where the old man's dark soot eyes were once sunk into it.

I never told many people about my interaction with that man. I think I tried it out on my mom and she thought I was being dramatic. Instead, I folded up those moments and stuck them in the back half of my brain. For the next ten years I couldn't look at or think of homeless people on street corners (movie, commercial, book, or reality) without my memory of his eyes deadening my pulse from their sockets. I still respond by locking my car doors, rolling up the windows, fast-forwarding the movie, and changing the channel, and I'm not even afraid of homeless people. No, it's not fear.

I run away from the memory of him because I am ashamed and I don't know how to handle it. I thought I was better than that girl from my children's church because I gave a man a dollar-store scarf instead of a fluffy, warm jacket. We had a fundraiser for our weekend excursion in the form of a bowl-a-thon. We spent more money than we made. We had matching shirts just for the occasion. We neither served them nor were we served alongside them. We mock-emulated their way of life. Why?

I think the answer is that my children's pastor hoped that one child would be infected with a deep pain and disgust for what a portion of our society has been reduced to. That child, in this case, was me. But there was no follow-up conversation, no instructions. I felt the nausea of pain for them, but I couldn't fix it. I was ten.

In high school, after having tried to ignore my visions of the cotton candy haired man, I began to volunteer at a food bank. Every Saturday, my best friend and I organized and boxed and bagged grocery carts full of weekly provisions. It wasn't downtown; it was in the middle of my small Tulsa outskirts town. I may have even known some of the community members who came in for a week's worth of groceries, but I didn't ever even see them. Haley and I stayed in the back. It was a good job, one that whittled down my guilt, but I never could get rid of that low churning in my stomach when I saw someone begging. I had made poverty an idea, a fixable idea, and I couldn't handle it when I saw that that idea could look at me, speak to me, ask me directly for the bills we both knew I had in my pocket. There was only so much money and time I could give, and nothing could make me feel less putrid about my life. White, middle class, grumpy if I missed a meal, parents still together, owner of a car.

Was what I had been a part of in fifth grade worth it? Did I, in participating, reduce even further those people's dignity? I don't know. I do know that I, in participating, reduced, for the first time, my own sense of dignity.

I am now a senior in college. Over this past fall break, I went on an "immersion trip" to Chicago with a group of thirteen of my schoolmates, a resident director, and his wife. We didn't bring with us any charity boxes filled with toothbrushes; we didn't bowl to raise money; we just went.

Part of the trip's nature was that we were not to be told any of our agenda until the day that we actually did it, and nobody who went the year before would tell me anything about it other than, "That trip really messed me up." I didn't find this particularly reassuring.

The first day, we helped out with a local neighborhood's carnival. It was raining and not a lot of kids came, but it was fun to play with the ones that did and let them splatter-paint our faces. The next day we talked about racial reconciliation and the struggles between the black and the Hispanic and the white sectors in the city of Chicago.

The final day, we woke up to bags and bags of bread on the counter, cheese and turkey on one half of the table, and apples and chips on the other. Our leader had us all split into partners and make four bagged lunches between the two of us. When we had done so, we realized that we had too much meat left, so we opened up all the bags again to stuff more turkey and ham into the two sandwiches which were not meant for us. It was time to confront my homelessness issues. It was time to go.

As a giant wad of people, we took the public transportation system instead of our vans into the inner city of Chicago. Our assignment was simple: find someone and eat lunch with them. We had three hours in which to do so. My partner Caleb and I walked around for a long time before he finally said, "I think we should split up so we don't overwhelm whoever it is. Don't want them to feel ganged up on." I agreed with him, but I wanted to throw up. I chose him as my partner because I knew he would talk and I could listen and smile. Now I was by myself. We were without cell phones, so we stayed in seeing distance from each other. Caleb walked down a set of stairs by the river to a man on a bench, and I found a man sitting on two crates on the middle of the bridge over the river.

"Hi. Uh...do you want to eat lunch with me?"

"Why yes I do. Have a crate."

So there we sat. In the middle of a bridge in the middle of the day. An old black man and a young white woman, sitting on crates, eating sandwiches, and watching people walk by.

That was when the "problem" stopped being a problem and started being a man. A man named Leroy. Leroy who loves chicken and German Shepherds. "Nothing's like some fried chicken and a good dog." Leroy whose best friends are Jesus and his mother. Leroy once who married the

beautiful Carolyn, the woman who made him forget about the “rough rider” he was dating at the time, the one Carolyn whose sexy yet innocent eyes made him curious. Carolyn had died, though, and their only daughter was off at a university studying medicine. She didn’t come “home” a lot to see her dad.

The funny thing about sitting outside with Leroy was watching the people, though. We looked at them. They didn’t look at us. I noticed a lot of people suddenly receiving a text message right before they passed us or abruptly needing to say something to the person on their far right just before they crossed our shadows. If anyone did happen to look at us it was to look at me. A half-second glance with a cocked eyebrow and a half twitch to their lips, as if to say, “You are not supposed to be there.” I made them nervous because I was engaged with “the problem.” Every person that walked by us was doing exactly what I had been doing for ten years. They had made this image in their mind of “the problem” of homelessness and had kept it on the top shelf to take down during Thanksgiving and Christmastime when they might donate some spare change to the Salvation Army bell ringers in front of the mall. They had made homelessness into something that could fit into a charity box and be taken care of, help given away quickly and without pain or thought.

I messed that up for them, and they couldn’t handle it. I was folding the box up and sitting on it beside “the problem” eating a sandwich and cracking jokes. During those three hours, though, Leroy didn’t receive a single nickel in his cup that he jingled in his hand, and I can’t help but think that was his punishment for my sitting by him. The people wouldn’t give a man spare change to save their own dignities because I was restoring his. They felt guilty, so much that they couldn’t even buy it gone anymore. They were infected, however momentarily, with disgust for what a portion of our society had been reduced to, and it was my fault. Unforgivable.

When I left Leroy, I had this moment of wholeness and not the kind I was expecting. If I had been in a holy Christian mindset of “I just ate lunch with a homeless man; what did you do this afternoon?” I think I would have fulfilled my expected after-feeling of savior-complex, but I didn’t. The whoosh of positive self-sentiments didn’t come. Instead, I felt as though Leroy had done me a great honor and had restored, for those three hours, my dignity.

A man with no job (he lost it when they cut everyone over the age of sixty-five), no house (he lost it when he had to cover his dying wife’s medical costs), and no dog (he lost it when a car hit it just weeks after his wife’s death) had sacrificed the best money-making part of the afternoon to sit with a chirpy blond girl, eat a white-bread sandwich, and talk.

I met Caleb by the stairs, and we started back toward the train. On the way there, I tried to count how many homeless men, women, and children we saw. I couldn’t count them. There were too many. Too many to fix, too many to feed, too many for me to talk to in a month, let alone an afternoon. That black acid started boiling in my stomach again, and when I was approached by a homeless man selling a newspaper, I jammed money into his hand mid-sales pitch, grabbed the

paper, and scampered away without even saying thank you. I got overwhelmed, and I didn't know what to do.

Those men and women living on the streets are my brothers and my sisters and a whole chunk of my community, and I try to pretend that they don't exist or I tell myself that the money I give them will be spent on alcohol or drugs. And it might. But does that excuse me from not helping them or ignoring them? No.

I don't know what this leaves me with. I don't know what to do. They aren't all drug addicts and alcoholics and thieves and prostitutes, they aren't. Some may be, but what they really are are people whose problems are just more obvious than mine are. Talk to them and it will become quite obvious quite quickly who looks at the world most optimistically and who doesn't.

I run around every day trying to turn in assignments, freak out angry if someone gets my order wrong in a restaurant, and cry if I don't get asked to a dance. They see more than that. Leroy told me his favorite part of sitting on his bridge is the people. They don't talk to him, but he thinks about their lives and prays for them, prays for his city, prays for reconciliation, prays for his fellow homeless men and women. He is better than I am. I just don't know how to deal with that.