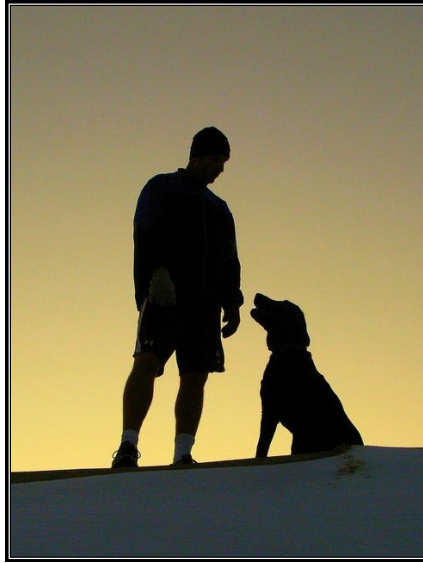


HOMELESS IN PARADISE

February 28, 2015

Column #18



"Share a buck, change our luck."

YOU BE THE JUDGE: PENINSULA PANHANDLERS' SALES-PITCH SIGNS INSPIRE "KITES WITHOUT TAILS" WRITING CONTEST

By Wanda Sue Parrott

SO MANY HOMELESS panhandlers were flying signs on sunny Wed., Feb. 18, it seemed spring had come early to the Monterey Peninsula. Messages painted on cardboard with colored markers weren't banners. What did they say?

I squinted to read the first sign held by a fortyish man sitting cross-legged at the intersection of Playa Ave. and California Ave. in Sand City. His cardboard rectangle blended with his khaki pants and army camouflage poncho.

The words were a succinct sales pitch that might have won a Wall Street advertising slogan award, or humor prize in a poetry contest. It was brilliant because two time-tested adages were exemplified in four rhyming single-syllable words: "brevity is the soul of wit" and "honesty is the best policy." His sign said:

Why lie?
Need weed.

Was he defeating his goal by sitting like a stoned pretzel, unable to rise easily and accept any quick cash passersby might offer?

The question led to investigating signs in general as I drove around the block three times to find out if drivers would stop in heavy traffic, carry their donations to marijuana man, then return to their cars while irate drivers honked, cursed, and raised road-rage fingers.

No one even tossed coins, indicating the witty sign was wasted on everyone except me. I now wondered how many panhandlers wrote poetic jingles versus prose.

Scoping out Peninsula signage started with a drive to Pacific Grove, where nary a homeless sign was flying. Back in Monterey, I stopped at the post office to pick up my mail, then drove down Carls Alley into the Trader Joe's parking lot, a known hot spot for panhandlers.

In the recent past, several sign-flying men traditionally stood at the exit near Peet's Coffee, soliciting money from people both coming and going. Now, nada!

No one occupied space under a metal sign Monterey hung after enacting its sit and lie ordinance last fall. The sign encourages giving to legitimate charities that help the homeless rather than to those who solicit directly for handouts.

By prohibiting sitting and sleeping on sidewalks and curbs during business hours, many of Monterey's homeless migrated to Seaside and Sand City.

I exited Monterey on Fremont Ave. Near Canyon Del Rey, I spotted a sidewalk clown waving a long, arrow-shaped sign advertising cheap cigarettes from a discount smoke shop.

The sign dipped and dived like a kite without a tail flying in up-and-down drafts, and I underwent an epiphany, aka an "aha!" moment. Homeless lingo says "flying" instead of "holding" or "waving" signs because sign-bearers are wings motorized by mind.

This flyer was dancing to his own music, whirling, leaping and spinning, stopping short of executing a break dance on the curb near the pedestrian crossing. My new insight formed the impression this youth was high on electronic ear buds, was working for a local small business person, and was not homeless.

Nearby, spring was also bursting out at the Safeway parking lot, where a gaggle of guys with shopping carts, bicycles, wagons and bulging hand-dragged plastic sacks stretched almost to the street. The only visible signs were pure prose, posted as instructions for exchanging recyclable bottles for cash on payday for the homeless job force.

From Safeway, I took Canyon Del Rey to McDonald's at Del Monte Blvd. a favorite Seaside hangout for homeless people and pets. A young twenty-something man was panhandling at the drive-through lane, where he jiggled his sign that read like free-verse lyrics from an unfinished country-western song:

Travelin' homeless
Broke and hungry
Please help
God bless you

On a nearby wall was an open net sack of jumbo over-ripe red onions from a dumpster. Onions were scattered along the wall, on the ground, and in several paper plates around which seagulls wandered, oblivious to the beggar in his gray "Safety Patrol" tee-shirt.

I ran an errand at Staples, then drove toward the Home Depot exit. Suddenly, I recognized the same words I'd just read at McDonald's. Whoa! Are there two traveling men using a team sales-pitch slogan to hustle bucks? I returned to McDonald's.

A different man was begging in the space vacated by the travelin' homeless flyer, who now stood at the Home Depot exit which someone else had abandoned.

I parked and surveilled the area, discovering a round of rotations taking place, with shifts lasting about 15 minutes per person at the lucrative stop sign from which right turners headed west to Highway 1 and left turners went east toward the Embassy Suites Hotel.

After a man left his post, he trudged across the parking lot toward the onions and vanished somewhere between the seagulls in front and Starbucks behind McDonald's, where several signless men and their dogs loitered in the sun.

Epiphany Number Two: The homeless in Seaside share their sources of wealth.

A young man with a Mohawk haircut displayed this non-poetic pitch in the parking lot:

Traveling
Need help with art supplies, food, sox

Several unshaven men with uncut hair, sallow skin and prematurely drooping shoulders dangled Homeless Vet signs that read like clichés:

Anything helps.
Willing to work.
God bless.

Epiphany Number Three: Plain prose prevails in Seaside.

In contrast, Sand City's signs were so creative I invented an on-the-spot writing contest dubbed "Kites without Tails." Since no women were flying signs, the finalists must be men. Which is your favorite? Please be a judge by e-mailing the number of your choice to amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com. Winner will be announced in a March. We might even learn his name.

Finalists (choose one)

1. Sign seen on bicycle with attached cart loaded with tent and blankets:

Travel partner-girlfriend needed

2. Sign held by clean-cut fortysomething sunburned man sitting on a bus bench"

Ex-wife had better day

3. Sign propped on sleeping bag of youth and his black lab mix (like the photo above) in front of PetSmart:

*Spare a buck
Change our luck*

###

Photo used from Pinterest post: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/oakleyoriginals/8915215516/>; no copyright infringement intended, used for illustration purposes only. Contact Wanda Sue Parrott at Books for Beds by leaving a message with The Yodel Poet at 831-899-5887 or e-mail amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com.