

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

April 15, 2016

Column #79



Bon Tindle

VIEWS ON NEWS

Part 1: How should you react when you can't avoid homeless people?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

AVOIDING the homeless is almost impossible. If you never step outside, your chance of encountering a homeless person is slim, but otherwise, as I often hear, “You see the homeless everywhere these days.”

Or “I don’t know how to react to homeless strangers, so what do you suggest I do or say?”

Sorry, there’s no etiquette book—yet—about interaction in today’s polarized culture in which the “have” class and “have nots” are no longer measured by Blue Book status or wealth alone.

Today’s criteria for assessing haves versus have nots include whether they have adequate, if any, shelter?

The New Generation Of “Haves” And “Have Nots”

Several participants in the Interfaith Homeless Emergency Lodging Program for Men (I-HELP) have told me they are working and/or otherwise have money, but they just don’t have enough income to afford the high costs of rent on the Monterey Peninsula.

If you were to encounter the men in the I-HELP program on the street, would you realize they are homeless? Probably not. They are clean, well-groomed, and well fed. And one young man I saw at a recent I-HELP dinner, who is employed, was exceptionally well-educated and well-shod.

“Those are gorgeous shoes,” I said about his fine leather footwear.

“They cost \$500,” he said.

“You paid five hundred bucks?” I exclaimed.

“No, they were donated.”

“How do you know they cost \$500?”

“I looked them up on the internet.”



Today’s homeless may have no permanent shelter, but most of them have some form of income as well as e-devices ranging from computers to iPads and smart phones.

The less-presentable, more-obviously homeless are individuals who make non-homeless people most uncomfortable. Imagine yourself in situations like these:

Homeless Encounters Of The Unnerving Kind

A homeless man is flying a HELP ME sign on the traffic island in the intersection where you've just stopped at a red light? He is outside your window. How do you react?

What about the old woman in the stinking heavy coat and stocking cap? On a sweltering day she sits outside the fast-food place where you have to pass her to purchase a burger.

Do you ignore them? Give them change? Do you say anything? Or hope to flee?

Bon Tindle, now a candidate for the City Council in Springfield, Mo., was one of my star creative writing students in the 1990s. On April 7 she shared an insightful Facebook posting that's excerpted here, with her permission, dealing with the homeless she has encountered in Springfield. Read more about her at WWW.BonTindle.com.

Selling Their Pain For Your Spare Change

Bon writes:

After I started talking to homeless folks regularly, I notice they tend to tell you their "story" right up front. "Hi, I'm Jim. I have two kids in foster care and my wife died of a heart attack. Now I can't find work." Also, "Hello, I'm Sue, I lost everything in the divorce and then I got sick."

Weird, huh?

Then I started watching people. They. . . would pause, wait for, and listen to the story and ponder for a second, throw a couple of bucks (or not) and move on.

WE have engineered the system where homeless lie or make up stories to get money.

Without meaning to, WE have established a routine where they have to tell us their private business.

We then sit in judgment, and if they're pitiful but excusable enough, we give them money.

If I had been broken after months of cold and hunger, I'd say what I had to for some relief, and I think most people are the same. It doesn't matter where they've been. It just matters that they are standing in front of you right now.

They shouldn't have to sell their pain for your spare change, and that is exactly what is happening there.

...It's one of the ways we subtly set ourselves apart. It's how we portray a little bit of dominance, a ribbon of "I'm better than you" that is accidental but runs all through our actions and motives if we aren't careful to think it through.

Don't play into that game. Give or don't give, but don't expect to hear their most personal details in exchange for what we would spend in a vending machine. It isn't right.

Most of us aren't even aware of it, but now that we are we can stop it.

Etiquette Is Your Choice

Is Bon saying it's okay to speed away from the homeless hustler or ignore the smelly old woman? Or is she suggesting you talk with the homeless and learn something about yourself?

Anything goes. Etiquette is your choice. Feel like writing a much-needed book about it?

(Next week: Could the Monterey Peninsula become Chinatown West?)

###

Images provided by the author; used for educational/illustrative purposes only;
no copyright infringement intended.

Contact Wanda Sue Parrott at amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com or leave a
message with The Yodel Poet at 831-899-5887.