

## The conventional goodness of mankind

*The haves pity the have-nots, yet they are unwilling to give up any of what they have — capitalism with its good side turned toward the camera.*

BY MICHAEL S. REED

We are walking through the park. It is Sunday, the weather warm for Oregon. The ground is laced with shadows of leaves. An immobilized Abraham Lincoln catches our attention. Dusty, Twink and I all wear blue. We look for opportunities: a bitchy quip, a pair of heavenly thighs, the possibility of some serious shopping. A typical Sunday.

There on the grass, a man is sleeping, a few paper sacks stuffed with his belongings near his head. His knees curl protectively to his chest. The shadows become more intense. The day, somehow cooler.

Twink murmurs something about wishing the winos kept to another part of town. It is as if this man were littering the park with his dreams. Twink has spoken for many: please hide your ugly lot — I do not wish to know.

I am momentarily paralyzed. I envision my apartment, my walk-in closets filled with racks of clothes. I see my kitchen where parties are prepared, my sofa upon which cocktails are sipped, my bedroom where love is found in easy touches. I have all this, I think, while this man must sleep on the grass. No walls to keep out intruders, no locks to insure privacy. He has no place else to go.

Then I wonder why Twink is so repulsed by another's misfortune. Can it be that it intrudes upon his cozy, well-fed existence? Does it threaten his little red convertible or his beautiful apartment high above the city? Or is it merely the contempt that winners can have for losers?

Twink has learned how to make money. The sleeping man has not. Is it that simple? Twink can jump through corporate hoops, smile when needed, say the right things in order to sell himself. Is it a question of fate or personal choice?

I romanticize the sleeping man. He is a vagabond poet, eking out a meager life on the streets, searching for the perfect verse. His name is Cavanaugh and he walks with sad shoes.

But that is silly. Truth is, he's probably a laid-off mill worker from Idaho, searching for a new life somewhere. Perhaps he left a family behind, a family that waits daily for his phone call: "I've got a job now — come right away!" But who will hire Cavanaugh with his wrinkled trousers, his threadbare shirt? Will anyone be able to look into his defeated face and see potential?

Again, I romanticize. Perhaps Cavanaugh doesn't give a damn about any of it. Maybe he has just given up, doesn't care, willingly dropped out. Is that what Twink thinks? Everyone is responsible for his own failures and losses, right, Twink? You made it on your own, why pity those who can't or won't?

Twink, Dusty and I are lucky. We've been to college; we can write a resume; we can articulate all the reasons why we're good enough for the job we want. We make a decent living; and therefore we can turn our fortunate minds to things beyond ourselves. Most importantly, we understand the value of a good credit rating.

But instead of simply ignoring Cavanaugh, Twink would relegate him to the Dipsy Dumpster near Storefront Theatre. Cavanaugh harms nothing but our conscience. To dismiss him summarily only enables us to enjoy our own good fortune without gratitude. Very American: little piggies at the trough, getting all we can before anyone else takes our mouthful.

A man like Cavanaugh might see us quite differently. He couldn't care less about getting on the right guest lists, setting meaningless words on a piece of paper, or finding a good bargain at Nordstrom.

I wouldn't blame Cavanaugh for sitting up suddenly and sneering at our silliness. We seem very facile and hypocritical in the face of this



Michael S. Reed  
Tribal Drum

Currently looking for a producer for his play "Seven Sundays," Michael works fulltime in a law office. He is a native of Salem, Oregon.

inequity. The haves pity the have-nots, yet they are unwilling to give up any of what they have — capitalism with its good side turned toward the camera.

I am secretly ashamed because I share Twink's distaste — how many times have I become angered by the tattered, grimy men who stop me on the street to ask for spare change? In Portland, it is certainly not a rare occurrence. One can't go anywhere without being approached for money. Sometimes it's genuine need, other times, it's someone scamming.

I become angry at myself for being so suspicious, yet knowing that there is good reason to be suspicious. I cringe when I hear the words, "You got any spare change?" because of the decision I must make. And I find that if I look — really look — at the person asking, the decision becomes harder. So I make them invisible. Human beings vaporized by selfishness.

Twink might say it's not selfishness. After all, he pays plenty of taxes, gives to charity and is very unselfish with his friends. I can vouch for his kindness. He could vouch for mine. So why do I feel guilty? Because it's a denial of my humanity to simply make disappear or dehumanize those who make me uncomfortable. Our society is already alienating, why make it worse?

Twink is a good man. I am, too, for that matter. Or, at least we are good men by conventional standards: we pay our taxes, obey the laws, make a contribution to our world and try not to harm anyone.

In this story, however, Cavanaugh isn't even panhandling. He is just sleeping and homeless. Many people would like to dispose of him like so much garbage. Except, who is he harming? Who are the homeless people harming when they sleep in the parks during the summer? How many of us have wished them away, simply because another's despair was too troubling to consider? I have, more times than I'm comfortable admitting.

What is needed here is compassion. It doesn't necessarily mean giving away our money or taking responsibility for other people's lives. What it does mean is exorcising the priggish self-righteousness and contempt that we feel for those less fortunate.

And another thing that wouldn't hurt: more gratitude for what we have. Understanding, always, that there but for the grace of angels, etc.

The conventional goodness of humankind. It is hypocritical when we give to our society with the hope that it will take care of these unpleasant problems so that we won't have to face them. It is hypocritical because we believe we are doing so much, except it is from the distance of signing a check to the Salvation Army. When we are asked to come face to face with one of those problems, we shudder and say, "I don't mind giving, but please don't come too close to me."

The conventional goodness of humankind. Yes, please, a heaping plateful for our land of plenty.

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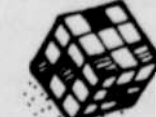
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