

# The Panhandler

I gave \$20 to a panhandler today. My panhandler. He is a black person who sits on the sidewalk at the intersection where Santa Rosa Road meets the freeway – the easiest access to him would be as you're heading west up the overpass, then turning north onto 101. I never do that. I'm either going EAST on Santa Rosa when I turn onto the freeway – or I'm going straight through to El Camino, or if I am going west on Santa Rosa, I'm going straight through and there are always a million cars in the right lane – blah blah blah – excuses, excuses.

I've been thinking about doing this for a long time. \$20 is probably more than most people give him, but if I'd given him a dollar every time I thought about it, I'm probably still a couple of hundred dollars in debt to him...

## Why

- I was deeply moved (god that sounds corny) by handing \$5 to a homeless woman in L.A. several years ago. Dick thought I was crazy, innocently foolish, and yet, he was touched that I did it. It was quite the poignant moment and I've never forgotten it. I'm doing this to make myself feel better and I'm not really even apologizing for that!
- I do not go to church or "give offerings" that support "the less fortunate" to use the white-bread middle class-ly arrogant terminology. I don't even have my payroll deduction to the United Way anymore. I need to do this for me.
- I fundamentally believe in random acts of kindness
- And, finally – I do firmly believe in Marilyn Loveless's assertion that to whom much is given, much is required. I am ridiculously comfortable – my home is nearly paid for (well, at least I am on a path that is leading in that direction) – I can pay my bills and afford a few luxuries. My financial future is secure and predictable, and I don't have to work. Now, I suppose the cynic in me is thinking that this guy could own a better home than me, and has found he can make more untaxed on the kindness of strangers than by getting a real job, but even if (as unlikely as that seems) that turns out to be true, there's a rebelliousness in me that would toast him for his creativity!

## Why this guy

- There are panhandlers everywhere in this town – but somehow I've latched on to this guy as "my panhandler".
- It has to be hard to be black in Atascadero. This is the most red-neck, conservative town I've ever lived in. I used to talk about this with Alice Brooks, telling her how courageous I thought it was for her to even TRY to live in a shit-kicking town like this... She sort of blew it off, but I could tell she agreed with me, and that she was glad for the recognition that I noticed ...
- He's consistent. Almost every time I drive through this intersection (which is often since this is a major artery division point near my house) he's there – with an umbrella sometimes in the heat or the rain.
- He always looks dejected – which I'm sure he is – it has to be humiliating to beg
- He's on my street in my town

Why I've talked myself out of it before

- Fear & loathing – I keep thinking about Brian David Mitchell and Wanda Barzee and how that worked out – some innocent stupid rich person takes pity on a drifter and gets their child kidnapped... (at least I didn't invite him home for lunch...!)
- Disdain and arrogance on my part – he should be out looking for a job – he shouldn't just be sitting there begging

Why this doesn't matter any more

- Who cares if he follows me home and kills me? I refuse to live my life in fear. Everybody has to die of something – if God has decided that my giving this guy money is reason enough to end my life, I don't really care.
- Who says I'm special? He's just getting by the best he can. I'm not going to sit in judgment of his choices. As noted above, this is really more about me than him anyway.

Why now

- I'm in a really bad mood today – about to burst into tears with very little motivation. This week begins the shit season for me – Veterans' Day is Thursday, Dick's birthday is next Thursday, Thanksgiving is the Thursday after that, then I get to live through Christmas alone... I tried to find out about the Vets Day program at the Vets Memorial but couldn't learn anything – then I got to suffer abuse at the hands of the Albertson's pharmacy staff trying to get the last four pills on antibiotics I don't think I should be taking that are costing me a bloody fortune. I just needed something to make me feel better, and I decided that no matter what the traffic situation was, I was going to give this money to this guy **today**. I've had the \$20 in my hand several times before but either he wasn't there, or the traffic was bad – today I just decided I was going to do it even if I got sideways of the traffic. I was ready to hurl Sandra Bullock's line from "The Blind Side" if anybody got pissy with me ("Don't get your panties in a wad"... )

As it turned out – there was no other car in sight in any direction (that really only happens in this particular intersection at three in the morning – it was a sign from god). I pulled over to his curb, rolled down my window and handed him the money.

He said thank you – he called me "hon" or something like that – he smelled like cigarettes – I felt instantly better.

I came home and felt like writing – which is another cool thing – I've decided that I need to create situations to write about. The "Little Ashes" piece that was so satisfying to write just flowed out of me because I was so high over that whole experience. I can't get that excited about cleaning the toilet or doing the dishes. I'm not Erma Bombeck – I'm discovering that I can't just write about anything and be excited to do it. I'm still learning what the triggers are, but passion is definitely involved. I'm not a house-wife. I love my house and yard, I love puttering around, but I definitely need (**NEED**) creative outlets. Writing – designing – music – decorating – painting – jewelry-making – photography – those are the things that are going to save me; and slipping a \$20 to my panhandler every now and then.

November 9, 2010