

The Electric Lodge No. 495
November 20th, 2013

“Closer Than You Might Think”

Prologue: “Brethren, I am truly humbled by the support as evidenced by the attendance this evening. I cannot thank you enough. When I did a lot of work in community theatre, we would prepare flyers and posters of upcoming productions to bolster support and audience attendance. We included warnings such as ‘May contain Nudity’. This seemed to work, even for such productions as Mary Poppins or The Sound of Music. We didn’t promise Nudity, but we said there may be. I don’t know what you have been promised this evening...but I can assure you...it won’t be nudity”

It was hardly his choice. The circumstances that led to his current predicament were unbelievable. How had the dreams and plans of an eager youth been so quickly dashed in nearly the blink of an eye? One minute he was earning a ‘hand to mouth’ living and surviving in the city of Calgary and the next, he was drawn to Vancouver by the promise of a much better job in exchange for a favour; but sadly, wound up sleeping on a park bench. The promise was in fact from a prominent businessman who later was found to be more adept at lying than fulfilling his commitments.

The favour seemed reasonable. Please bring my daughter home. The young man had been working at a hotel in the downtown core of Calgary and had by the nature of his job as a Bellman, made the acquaintance of a young woman.

It was the intent of her father however to have his 'spoiled' daughter, now residing at the hotel, returned and his gratitude would be expressed by more gainful employment in his company.

With what little savings he had, he gave notice to his employer and packed up her car with all that he owned and headed further west.

Upon arriving in Vancouver, the favour fulfilled and father and daughter reunited, the tables turned, the other shoe dropped and all hope of a 'better life' and employment was extinguished. Rather than a warm reception, this fellow received a few dollars for his troubles; hardly adequate compensation for the costs he had endured and was driven to a park in Richmond on the outskirts of Vancouver. Savings exhausted, and unceremoniously delivered at the intersection of 'hopeless and desperate', fear soon crept in.

Someone slept well that night...but it wasn't me. This is pretty much the time of year I suffered my ordeal, November 1979. Do you know what the temperature is in Vancouver right now? It is comparable to our temperature in Hamilton. Imagine for a moment, leaving here tonight with only the clothes on your back and a few dollars to your name. As you step outside into the chilly night's air, the doors lock behind you and the lights are dimmed. You are alone, and you have no one to call your friend; as a matter of fact, you have no one to call at all.

This was the beginning of my experience with homelessness. I could have called my family for assistance and I am sure they would have come to my aid, but I was on the west coast because I simply did not see eye-to-eye with my father and I had to prove I was a man. Of course I had envisioned a different maturing path from my current predicament, but this is the fate I had been dealt.

My circumstances may have been precipitated by pride or stubbornness, but many find themselves in similar situations through no fault of their own, or by the collapse of their employment, health or familial standing. Alexander the Great said ‘Pride goeth before destruction’. This was a lesson I had yet to learn.

So after being dropped off in the park, I needed to find shelter. The best upgrade to my circumstances was moving off the damp ground and onto a park-bench. From my duffel bag, I layered my upper body with the few clothes I had and I slipped my legs and feet into the bag itself.

After a night of cold and discomfort, I was sure the morning would hold greater promise. Quite the contrary, my circumstances did not improve. As a matter of fact, it started to rain, which is no surprise for Vancouver. It was more of the same for the next 5 days at least.

What do you do when virtually all you own is on your back? Where do you shave and tidy yourself? Where do you relieve yourself? Where do you stash your belongings? And the question is not where to eat, but how to pay for a meal?

Yes, I did have a little cash, but only for a very short while and certainly not sufficient for a big meal or hotel accommodation. Now, one evening as I prepared to sleep, if you can call it that, I was faced with a no-win scenario. Believe it or not, I actually had to decide between starvation or a severe beating. A beating was inevitable if I refused to surrender my cash to the demands of a person I suspected was under the influence of some gross addiction. In hindsight, rather than surrendering my cash, a beating would have likely afforded me a ride in a cozy ambulance and perhaps a warm meal at the hospital.

Now, literally, poor and penniless, I did not have a lot of options. The social services in Vancouver at the time were not as accommodating as perhaps they are today. Honestly, B.C. would prefer out-of-work and homeless Ontarian's return to Ontario so they might better serve the residents of their province first.

Have you ever begged? I don't mean groveling to get a brother to fill in at the last minute, but begging; sticking your hand out at a crowded street corner and asking for assistance from total strangers.

Now, keep in mind your appearance leaves a lot to be desired; your clothes are dirty and every day that your circumstances persist, the more desperate things become. To your humble request for aid, you are either ignored or insulted with sentiments of disgust or arbitrary denouncements of “get a job deadbeat”. You are humiliated, embarrassed and how is it that people presume to know the circumstances of your distress?

I digress for a moment, but I would not entirely agree with Blanche DuBois, a pivotal character in Tennessee Williams play ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ who said, “Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers”. I was *desperate* for the kindness of strangers, but I hoped I would never be dependent.

When your head aches, your stomach pangs for some nourishment and all you have in your ‘hat’, so to speak, is a buck and a half, you leave your senses and will do just about anything to satisfy your most basic needs.

Survival instincts can be a strong motivator resulting in predictable conduct; not necessarily desirable conduct. I know, I have been there. If asked if I would do things differently, given a second chance, I would have to say NO.

Being reduced to the lowest depths of poverty and despair myself, although for a brief time, was extremely humbling and has guided me to be more benevolent and less judgmental. It is hard for me to pass by 'an obvious need' when such a small gesture can offer some hope.

Even though I worked extremely hard to extricate myself from the misery that had become my life, I was in some degree, lucky. For so many, it is not possible and the opportunities of recovery and redemption may never appear on the horizon.

There is a saying I have used so often I focus on its meaning and have all but forgotten its origin. Its import is far more important than who said it first. "To know and not to do, is still not to know". By extrapolation, I am not suggesting you take a leave from your current station to experience hunger, poverty or homelessness, but I do hope my personal experience might bring you a little closer to a truer feeling and understanding. We all give to charities and that is very commendable and civilized indeed. I would expect nothing less than selfless acts and charitable deeds from the brethren present and Masons at large, but I might ask you reach a little deeper for that Loonie. You know, the one that will only find its way under your car seat or between your sofa cushions. Pay it to the soul on the street who claims your assistance.

It would be no surprise for you to learn the North-East angle of the lodge is for me, the most cherished. The charity lecture in the first degree does not couch the question that goes to the very heart of one of our fundamental principles; 'Relief'.

There is no mincing of words; "Would you give if it were in your power?" The question was not "Would you give after evaluating the situation and determining the circumstances of distress are worthy of further review and if not found to be of their own making will give?" Do you recall when you said 'yes'? It is important you never forget *why* you said 'yes'.

Personally, I will never judge the circumstances of one's true distress as being worthy or not, whether a Mason or not. And, I will never decline a request for assistance when the benefit to them is far greater than any disadvantage to me.

Finally, I had the opportunity to witness a man on Front Street in Toronto at our last Grand Lodge Communication which amongst his prized possessions was the Tim Horton's coffee cup he extended to receive assistance. I was amazed at how literally hundreds of people passed by as though dismissing his very existence, or as if to say, "I gave at the office". Was he raising money to pay the lease on his BMW? I don't think so.

He wasn't causing a disturbance; he was one of God's creatures on the lowest spoke of fortune's wheel who deserves our due regard and not our judgment.

Brethren, I said in the beginning "closer than you might think" and I stand before you and thank you for listening to my story.

Prepared by:

R.W. Bro. Geoffrey S. Allan