

Money and Worth

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The streets of San Francisco are lined with poor people looking for a little spare change. Many different strategies are tried — some just shake a jar, others call for help, some make specific small requests, and a fellow I saw today just kept sunnily repeating “a nickel and a smile will last a long while” in an endearing tone. Others, however, try to earn their keep — playing music, doing tricks, selling special papers like *Spare Change*.

I have a strong urge to help out the first group, those who simply ask, but helping the second has always struck me as odd. People tell me that it’s better if the poor receive their money by doing work, because it lets them retain some dignity, but I’ve never quite bought that. After all, how much dignity do you get when your income comes from people patronizingly pretending to buy a newspaper specially created for this ruse?

But there’s a much more serious problem with only giving the poor money for doing things. It encourages them to think their worth as a person is defined by their success in the capitalist economy.

Now there is a grain of truth to this delusion. There are many useful jobs for which society can compensate you. (Although even that, frankly, requires a level of non-useful skill at fitting into the general capitalist system.) But that’s about it. There are many useful jobs that society doesn’t compensate well. There are many useful people who can’t do any of those jobs because society never trained them or gave them the opportunities required. And even if, perchance, there existed someone who cannot and even with training and opportunity could not do anything useful, it seems clear to me that their simple existence as a human being endows them with some inalienable value. (If human beings didn’t have value, then we would have no one to do useful things *for*.)

People on the street don’t deserve our money because they can pretend to do certain menial jobs. Nor should their sense of dignity be bound up in doing them. Instead they, like everyone else, deserve our money because they are *people* and if we cannot care for other people, then we have precious little else.