

Olek Yaldas

Skills of Mind Trip

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Community Service Paper

Getting up at five in morning isn't easy; neither is going outside and walking a few blocks in the wicked cold while it's still dark out. It's not an easy task to hand out clothes to people you don't know, to talk to them, listen to what they say, and move on, carrying what you know with you. It's no fun serving food to dozens of palid faces for whom daily life is a constant struggle. But being one of those palid faces, not having a bed to sleep on, not having a house to live in, not having *anything* but the clothes on your back and the things that you can take with you, having to get up at five in the morning just to get a meal... I'd much rather be the one serving food than taking it; I'd be much better off. But what if I'm not? What if by never experiencing hardship, I become weak? What if being homeless is a good thing?

Charlie's Place is an interesting spectacle to be a part of. The day starts at 5:30 in the morning, with the serving of hot cereal and pastries. At 6, volunteers start handing out clothes, and this goes until 7. Then at 7, a full meal is served. I had the opportunity to do all of these things. It was a experience that I'll never forget. I feel that the only reason Charlie's Place impacted me in the way that it did was because I did what I did with an open mind. Not passing judgment, not being overly pretentious, but just listening to the things that people had to say. I know that had I gone into Charlie's Place with a different attitude, I would have heard things very differently. I am glad that I heard things the way I did.

The thing that affected me the most at Charlie's Place were the people. A group of men in particular whom I connected with, affected me deeply. I do not remember any of their names, but I

know that they were not from America. They were Salvadoran immigrants. I had been to El Salvador a year previously, and I told them about what I did there. They smiled and began talking to each other in that rapid fire Spanish that even a seasoned speaker could have trouble with if it were not their first language. There was one man in particular who I remember vividly. He wore a drab grey, long sleeve shirt, and I remember his face. I couldn't find any clothes that would fit him, and this made me frustrated. I couldn't just let this man go back into that cold with nothing but what he had entered with. I had to find *something* for him. As I was rushing around the church, the man called me, not by name and not even in English, but I knew he was addressing me. "Chele" is a word that means 'white-boy', but with positive connotations. I turned and walked over to the man, and told him that I knew what he meant by 'Chele'. This made him and his friends laugh. But I still hadn't found anything for this man. It was already past 7, but I had found a pair of sweatpants that worked. I gave them to the man and I saw the look on his face. I can't find the words to describe it, but it was one of deep feeling. I never saw that man again, but if I do, I know what I'll say to him when I see him.

Something that I noticed on the trip, throughout all of the formerly homeless people that came and spoke to us, was that they thought it had made them better people. I have been thinking about this constantly after the trip. What about becoming homeless makes you a 'better' person? I think that it is not that those who become homeless *are* better, but those who come to recognize the truth of other peoples lives, and those who gain awareness about poverty, can come from experiencing homelessness. So am I a bad person? Maybe, maybe not. Should I let that stop me, should I become homeless so I recognize the error of my ways? I don't think so. What I took away from this experience, what I learned on this trip, was that people, no matter how bad it may seem, can always, *always* be helped. Even if it just means saying hello, that can be enough to give someone the hope to keep going, to persevere. So when you see someone on the street, laying on the ground in blankets, or walking around with a shopping cart, or sitting outside a pharmacy asking for change, if you do nothing else, just remember to

say hello.