

Protagonist Corner

Cries of Angels
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The morning hours of the Stewpot actually begin long before the 8:00 A.M. opening of the big metal doors. Once Big John beckons the people who wait alongside the building to come in, each person thankfully accepts a hot cup of coffee from one of three oversized pots.

For some, the coffee cup is soon empty and they are headed out the door—some to seek work, some to share a hidden bottle of booze, some to enjoy the open spaces of a neighboring park. Most who have entered the cavernous room find a place to sit at one of the long tables. What might seem to some a monotonous way to spend the hours until lunchtime is worth the safety from the harshness of the streets.

Soon, at least for awhile, a sense of camaraderie and comfort settles in as conversation is shared and the routine of the day is underway.

It was in morning hours such as these that I learned one of many, many lessons from the Stewpot—this one about my fears and assumptions and the Kingdom of God.

I had noticed Vincent from the very beginning. He was a large man with broad shoulders and big hands. The right side of his skull, from the eyebrow back, was crushed. That one eye squinted; the muscles on that same side of his face were partially atrophied. His appearance coupled with his seemingly permanent scowl and perpetual silence gave him a Frankenstein monster illusion.

For the few months I had been at the Stewpot, I had managed to avoid Vincent. Others of the regular patrons were easy to converse with or seek after. But I was afraid of this strange looking hulk who did not offer thanks for a cup of water poured and whose eerie gaze seemed to mask some unknown threat.

On this particular morning, Vincent sat with his usual cadre of cronies including Louise, one of the frailest of the “earth mothers” who wandered the streets.

The morning coffeepots had long been drained dry. Faces from earlier in the day returned, filling the few empty chairs or forming another waiting line. It was time for the noonday meal.

Several of us “walked the tables” with brimming pitchers of milk and water to complement lunch. The low buzz of hungry people eating and chatting filled the room.

I came to the table where Vincent and his cohorts had been sitting for the past four hours. Each offered his or her cup to be filled. Most had retained their early morning coffee cups rather than accepting new ones.

Vincent handed me his cup. No longer just plain white styrofoam, blue ink flowers now circled the entire cup. Louise was the usual artist-in-residence, but these adorning flowers were not her style.

Had this big, scary, unapproachable man decorated this usual, everyday cup?

"Did you draw these?" I queried.

He tilted his head and looked up at me.

A simple kind of half smile appeared on the left side of his face as he nodded.

"This is beautiful!"

The smile broke into a grin.

From that moment on, Vincent and I had a special affection. I would watch for him as he would for me on any given day. It was difficult to believe I had ever been frightened of him. And such a simple gesture and response had melted the unnecessary wall.

I never knew much about Vincent because he really could not talk very well. But his half smile was quick and warm. I learned from others that years before he had been in a terrible car accident, thus, the collapsed skull and apparent brain damage. His veteran status allowed nursing home residency when his health continued to deteriorate as the months went by. I missed him when he was gone and still think of him often, especially when the lesson needs to be remembered.

In another neighborhood where many large old homes had been converted into group residences, a local congregation committed time and resources to ministry with and among the residents whose mental illnesses often left them abandoned and alone. Much of my time was spent getting acquainted with the neighborhood folks as well as the "official" congregation. Only one person seemed a little disconcerting to me.

That was Earl; Earl with his 6'3" stance and his gravely, base voice; Earl with his inappropriate laugh and his standing too close; Earl with his piercing eyes and unexpected appearances at the office door.

I had to think of Vincent a lot to open my heart to Earl.

Earl and I had a confrontation over a cup of coffee one Sunday morning. (It is interesting how coffee is such a reoccurring theme!) As we faced off—Earl wanting the coffee, I trying to explain when and where it was OK to get coffee—I began to wonder if I hadn't maybe pushed my luck a little too far. Earl left angrily—with the coffee. He did not come back to the church for weeks. I felt awful about his absence.

One weekday, when no one else was around, Earl suddenly appeared in the hall. Startled, I greeted him, hoping to make amends for the possible infraction.

He questioned me about having called the police.

Puzzled, I asked him to repeat himself.

Earl wanted to know if I had called the police on him that coffee hassle Sunday.

"Of course not; there was no reason to call the police."

A huge smile replaced the drawn look on his face. He grasped my hand between his two big hands, shook it ecstatically and thanked me. His step quickened as he headed for the door. The absence mystery was solved and Earl began to return occasionally on Sundays.

But his returns did not last long.

We got word that Earl had jumped off the high, riverbank bridge not far from where he lived, not far from the church. This was not his first suicide attempt. Apparently, his depressions heightened every year around his birthday.

As with any such tragic death, one wonders how great the pain and confusion must have been. Were the voices worse? The desperation intense? The hope lost in darkness?

And, for me, the inevitable question of, "What could I have done differently?" a question damnably left unanswered.

Members of Earl's Sunday school class—several who lived at the same and neighboring addresses as had Earl—contributed bits and pieces of information as we talked about Earl's life and death. Several asked when there would be a memorial service. One person could not understand that Earl was really gone; he wanted the County Hospital to take care of Earl and make him better. Another voiced an excellent imitation of Earl's guttural voice. We laughed together. Still another shed tender tears. Several called him friend and knew he would be missed.

Some would dare to offer that, "He's better off now." Others would struggle to remember exactly who he was and wonder if kind words were ever offered. Some would consider their own uncertainties.

Unnecessary fears are created by our choosing not to know. Contemplating the unreachable answer to tragedy's question of "Why?" can propel us past those barriers.

I am thankful for the Vincents and the Earls. They force me to deal with the ugliness that lurks with fear and unnecessary judgment. The ambiguity of their lives and their deaths pushes me away from complacency and towards the uncomfortableness that has no choice but to hold on to God's grace. The smiles they were willing to offer in light of my righteous indignation reflect mercy such that angels might herald.

I trust they now know the comfort of the Presence more tender than this earthly life had to offer.