

The Man on 96th Street

On the corner at 96th Street and Broadway there is a man who calls the doorway next to McDonalds home. He is a man of about-forty His hair is greasy; he wears a patch over his left eye, an eye which I imagine was destroyed in the Vietnam War; he has one leg and a stump where the other once was. On his left foot he wears a bag that acts as a shoe, and around his shoulders a ripped and ragged blanket shields him from the cold. If you listen carefully you hear a timid request, "Do you have any extra change?" Hundreds of people pass him daily. Most without even hearing his cry either because they are tuned to the latest music on their Sony Walkman or because the noise of construction work on the new luxury condominiums across the street is too loud, or the horns and cars, buses, and subways drown him out. Ironically, it is technology that shields us from hearing or dealing with the most primitive problem, poverty. On school days I observe the problem only briefly, in transit between the comfortable suburb where I live and the private school i attend. I have become less able to ignore the problem because the man on 96th Street has become an individual to me.

One day I was hurrying to catch my train and bus home. The rush hour crowd was so thick on the corner of 96th, I was annoyed at the prospect of missing my train. The only way out of this gridlock of people was to step over the outstretched leg of the man on 96th Street. I did so. At least two other people followed in my path. I got to the train, but my conscience started to bother me. I was uncomfortable because I had just literally stepped over another human being. In my haste, I hadn't even dropped a coin into his cupped hands, which I often did to placate my feelings of guilt. The whole ride home I couldn't stop thinking about this man. I wondered if he had a family, how he lost his eye, and leg, and if he had friends. All of a sudden he wasn't just the man on 96th Street but a human being. I realized that society as well as myself is guilty of figuratively and literally stepping over a great many people. I thought about some efforts that had been made, shelters and soup kitchens, or the recently passed New York law allowing the homeless to vote as long as they give the nearest park bench or corner as their address. I also realized that my conscience could no longer allow me to overlook the man on 96th Street.

I called a nearby church to find out what services they offer for the homeless. They had none but referred me to St. John's Cathedral. They only had room for ten and said they were always full. There was another number to call and many after that. They would not come to him; he would have to go to them. I didn't know how to approach him, or whether he would even accept such services. The only thing I could think of to do was something personal. He nodded when I placed on his lap a package containing my father's old overcoat and shoes. This small gesture made me feel a little better but I don't even know if it did anything for him.

I plan eventually, to go to law school. My goal is to be a lawyer who can provide services for the poor and homeless. I am embarrassed that I had to physically step over another person before reevaluating myself and the society that I am caught up in. I know that there are many men, women and now families that live on corners around the country and I cannot help them all. However, I hope to train myself to be an effective advocate for, at least, some of them.

This quote by Edward Everett Hale best expresses my ideals:

"I am only one
But still I am one
I cannot do everything
But still I can do something
And because I cannot do everything
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."