

The Homeless Man

December 22, 2008

G. Gibson Carey

It was late one evening in December, 1980... Christmas season. I was just leaving the office. Outside, freezing rain was falling. It was shaping into a dark, cold, wet, wretched December night in Cincinnati, and I was anxious to get to my warm, dry home as quickly as possible.

And then the phone rang. It was my wife. "I'm so glad I caught you before you left. Would you stop at the Mariemont Kroger and bring home some _____?" I don't remember exactly what it was she wanted, but I do distinctly recall that it was something totally non-essential: something like capers. Grumpily, I agreed.

The Mariemont Kroger, in those days, was a modest affair just across the parking lot from the Mariemont Inn. When I got there, it was all but empty. There was one cashier on the checkout line, there was myself, and there was a homeless man.

A homeless man is a very unusual sight in prosperous and self-satisfied Mariemont, but there he was. I've never seen another there, before or since. He looked bad, his clothing was in layers of tatters, he was dirty and unshaven, and he smelled awful. I knew this because he was standing just ahead of me at the checkout counter. I could see that he was buying two candy bars... and I knew with dreadful certainty that they were his dinner: that he would go out into the dark, freezing night and eat them huddled in a doorway... and shiver the night away as best he could.

The whole situation was so totally weird that the lady on the cash register simply couldn't resist making a smarmy comment: I don't recall her precise words, but it was something along the lines of, "Shall I put them in a bag or will you be dining in the parking lot?" I was so embarrassed by her insensitivity that I looked away, down at the floor. And there I saw that the homeless man had essentially no soles on his shoes. Beyond all the other miseries he would have to endure that night, he was all but barefoot in the freezing slush.

I have never known my duty as clearly as I did at that moment.

“Sir, there is a store named Swallens not five minutes from here. I would consider it a kindness if you would let me take you there and buy you a new pair of shoes.”

What a simple thing to say and do. How desperate was his need... how easy it would be for me to answer that need. But I didn't do it. Over and over and over again I have relived that moment and asked myself, “Why?” Instead of doing what I absolutely knew I should do, I chose the flight option: I paid for my capers and rushed out into the freezing rain, off to my centrally heated home, filled with my vitamin enriched children and a loving wife, and tried to put the entire incident behind me.

I think that, most of all, I feared a scene with the homeless man. That he would take offense... or even become abusive. Or somehow take advantage of me. And once the shoes had been bought, what then? Did I drive off and leave him standing in the sleet outside Swallens? Where would my simple act of charity end?

Though I never encountered him again, the homeless man did not go away. He refused to fade into a dim memory. I told very few people about the incident and the pain it was causing me, but I eventually unburdened myself to a particular friend who, without even pausing for thought, said to me, “You should go and see Steve Gibbs.” It was more than a suggestion: it was a command. I vaguely knew who Steve Gibbs was - I had heard he was the manager of a weird-sounding institution called the FreeStore - whatever that was. My friend was - and is - a particularly sensitive, involved and knowledgeable woman: I knew I should do her bidding. I did not know - I could not have imagined, the impact it would have on my life.

So I sought an audience with Steve Gibbs - it was easy - and at the appointed time I walked onto the FreeStore turf as innocently as a novice athlete who walks uninvited onto a well-trained team's playing field. I told Steve who I was, and that I felt a need to serve in the work the FreeStore did. In no time at all, he had signed me up. (I did not tell him, then, about my encounter in the Mariemont Kroger).

I have written about Steve in a Literary Club paper once before, and I will not retrace tonight everything I said on that occasion. But it matters a lot that those of you who don't know about Steve should hear just a little about him, for he is a truly extraordinary man who has profoundly altered my outlook on life.

Personally, Steve was a somewhat scruffy and unkempt bearded fellow in wrinkled clothing who looked like - and was, in fact - an overaged hippy. He radiated good will, cheerful optimism, enthusiastic energy, and a never-flagging determination to make things better. After forty years at P&G I can still say that Steve is one of the most creative and entrepreneurial men I have ever known.

The FreeStore was started in the 1960's by an employee at the city dump named Frank Gerson, who was much troubled by the quantity of usable food and materials he saw being thrown away. When Steve came on board shortly after it was started, he first opened a storefront on Vine Street hill where many of our wives took dented and unlabeled canned foods that could be used by the poor.

From that beginning, Steve grew the FreeStore on Liberty Street, and then the FreeStore's Foodbank on Tennessee Ave. Today, the FreeStore on Liberty Street provides emergency food, housing help, and a full range of related social services to over 2500 people in need every week. And reaching far beyond Over The Rhine, the Freestore's Foodbank on Tennessee Ave. distributes more than ten million pounds of food each year to the poor and hungry across twenty tristate counties. More than four hundred and fifty charitable organizations that feed the poor - soup kitchens, the Salvation Army and the like - are supplied by the FreeStore's Foodbank. Few people have stopped to consider where soup kitchens get their soup: in Greater Cincinnati most of them get it from the FreeStore's Foodbank. It is a simply amazing story. One of the happiest experiences I have known was to be involved with Steve while he built the organization that accomplished these miracles.

While the raw statistics are staggering, the ingenuity with which the FreeStore does its work is equally gratifying. Steve was always on the lookout for ways to address the cause of social problems while he was treating the symptoms. He loved to solve both short-term and long-term problems simultaneously. An example: When the FreeStore was overwhelmed by evicted Over the Rhine families needing shelter and clothing as well as food, I watched in awe as Steve met their critical immediate needs while studying the root cause of the evictions, which dropped by more than half in response to changes he brought about in the eviction process.

Perhaps the most ingenious multi-benefit program in the FreeStore's long history is in place right now. Here's the deal: Far too many children attending Over the Rhine schools go each night to a home where no dinner is served: this is a situation which spawns a host of nutritional, educational and social problems. Separately, there are far too many men and women in our community who are unemployed and often unemployable: Cincinnatians who need training that will get them a productive job. And this led to the creation of Cincinnati Cooks! - a FreeStore program of dazzling ingenuity.

A fully equipped cooking school was created (with the aid of a visionary underwriter) to train unemployed men and women in simple, basic food preparation. The foods they cook come from the FreeStore warehouse. And the meals they prepare are served in locations around Over the Rhine and beyond to children at the end of their schoolday. Hungry children are fed, a steady flow of the unemployed receive on-the-job training as qualified cooks and then enter the job market, and wonderful use is made of foods that might otherwise have been scrapped. If the inventiveness of the program impresses you, say something nice to the Literary Club's own Mike Kremzar who has served years with the FreeStore and was one of the key architects of this plan.

Today the FreeStore is run by John Young, an exceptionally skillful and feeling manager who is fully worthy of Steve Gibbs' heritage. But times are hard, and getting a lot harder. And that means business is good at the FreeStore. Just drive by Liberty Street and take a look at the lines. The number of people coming for food and help is soaring. Over the last three months, the FreeStore has seen a greater than twenty percent increase in the number of people seeking help, and just now the increase is higher still. If you are feeling blessed in these holidays, or moved to

do something for those in need in this season of giving, let me respectfully suggest that a gift to the FreeStore would be a wonderfully appropriate way to express your thankfulness. Hunger is always a dreadful thing, but it is especially cruel in this season of feasting and plenty.

And what about my homeless man in the Mariemont Kroger? He's still out there somewhere. And he's still on my conscience. The poor are always with us. Many of us have our own homeless man somewhere in our past... a ghost of Christmas Past who haunts us in Christmas Present. I live with the knowledge that I was tested and I failed. I like to think that twenty years of work with Steve Gibbs and the FreeStore produced some compensating good. But I also like to think I'd do better if I had another chance...