

The Hobo*

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In 1950, when I was not yet five years old, our one-bedroom apartment in Hyde Park, a middle class neighborhood, was too small for the family: my brother Arthur had been born, taking over the crib I slept in the single bedroom—I had moved to my parents’ double bed and they moved to the Murphy bed in the living room/dining room. Looking back as an adult, it must have been an untenable situation, though I was perfectly happy, so my parents began looking for larger places. But in those post-World War II years, housing was very tight with millions of returning GIs starting families and looking for housing. My father’s solution was to buy, with a substantial mortgage, a six-flat apartment building in South Shore, an up-and-coming middle class area a few miles southeast of Hyde Park: the owner of the building got a two-bedroom apartment in the building. Bryn Mawr, the neighborhood elementary school was across the street and South Side Hebrew Congregation, a Conservative synagogue, was two doors away. Perfect.

The red brick building, at 7413 South Chappel Avenue, was three floors, two apartments per floor. We lived in the northern of the two apartments on the second floor; it had a living room, two bedrooms, a dining room, an eat-in kitchen with a small pantry, and a single small bathroom. The kitchen was at the east (back) end of the apartment, with a back door to the sturdy gray wooden stairs which extended from the ground up to the third story. Arthur and I shared the back bedroom and my parents were in the other bedroom.

We had lived there about two years when one day while Mom and I were eating lunch at the kitchen table (I imagine that Arthur was napping), there was a knock on the back door. It was a scruffy, very shabby, middle-aged man in dirty, torn clothing. He said he was hungry, hadn’t eaten in days; he asked Mom if she could spare a quarter, the equivalent of about \$3 in today’s terms, so he could buy some food. My mother gave him some money; as he turned to leave, she asked him if he wanted something to eat. He said yes and Mom invited him into the kitchen. She offered to fix him a sandwich. He said, “Thank you, but I

*I know this term is now considered a somewhat offensive term, but it was, and I use it as, a simple description—it is not just a homeless person, but a person, always a man, who is a wanderer, existing on whatever is free.

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have no teeth and I can't chew a sandwich." Mom asked if he could eat, and would like, some oatmeal; he said yes and Mom said, "Come in and sit down at the table." I was terrified by the man sitting there, but she calmly got out a pot and ingredients, and proceeded to cook the oatmeal for him. He ate and then left.

I doubt that she realized it, but in those few minutes Mom taught me a lesson about the importance of charity that I have never forgotten.

Postscript

I am proud that my mother's values continue with my progeny, all of whom were born decades after her death. Two episodes come to mind.

While having coffee at a Starbucks in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago with my wife Ruth and my daughter Eve, a homeless man came in looking for a handout so he could buy a cup of coffee; I gave him a dollar to buy coffee, but the barista told him no panhandling was allowed, the the chairs were for customers only, and he had to leave. Without saying a word, Eve went up to the counter, bought a sandwich and coffee for the man, and asked him to sit down and eat.

My 12-year old grandson Joseph was visiting me from Boston; we were driving to the grocery store, stopped at a red light. As we waited there, a corner where homeless men would often stand, one approached us for a handout. I had no money with me, just a credit card, and apologized to the homeless man. Unbidden, Joseph took out *his* wallet and gave the man a dollar.