



A little give and take

Every day, Alonzo sat on a crate outside Walgreens, cheerfully greeting passersby. His jovial “hi!” rang out like a song as yuppie parents and their children strolled by.

Alonzo lived in the men’s shelter up the street from me in Chicago. He donned a worn black cap, jeans and a grungy shirt every day. He was thin as a rail, yet he never asked for anything. He reached out his hand, not for money, but to shake the hands of others.

Whenever Alonzo saw me, he hugged me, and his voice inevitably rose into a sing-songy, “How ya doin’?” When he asked that question, he listened to the answer.

I lived in that neighborhood for four years. In all that time, Alonzo never asked me for money, and I never gave him any. I rarely gave him anything but attention.

Occasionally I’d buy him lunch, or on hot summer days, a Dr. Pepper — his favorite. I considered him my friend. Maybe I was naïve, but conversation seemed to mean more to him than money.

If I gave the same attention to every homeless person that I did to Alonzo, I would never get anything done. And if I gave them all money or bought them all lunch, I would be as broke as they are. So I understand why people walk by homeless people on the street.

And I can’t blame the couple who blew right by a homeless man in the days leading up to Christmas, even as he implored them repeatedly, “Please help a hungry man out.”

I was on my way to do last-minute Christmas shopping. Heck, I felt grateful the man wasn’t talking to me. I kept walking. Then I turned around.

“You hungry?” I asked the man. There was a Jimmy John’s sub shop right there. “Wait here. I’ll buy you a sandwich.”

“I don’t want a sandwich,” he said. “I want wings.”

Wings. Huh. If I had been smart I would have told him right then and there, “It’s Jimmy John’s or bust.”

But I didn’t. Instead, I found myself being carried along wildly, as if by some strong current. So off we went to get wings.

By the time it was over, the man was dining on a burrito grande and a Corona inside an upscale Mexican restaurant and I was out \$20. I left thoroughly angry at myself, wondering what just happened, trying not to think about what was about to transpire inside the restaurant.

People always say, “Beggars can’t be choosers.” Apparently they can be, at least when I’m around. I may have lost 20 bucks from this experience, but I gained priceless wisdom.

There are various levels of giving, and now I see there are various levels of taking, too. You can give begrudgingly. You can give selflessly. You can accept graciously. Or you can take greedily.

In buying the homeless man dinner, I discovered far more than the going rate of a burrito. I learned you can give willingly and still be taken for a ride; that generosity is not always noble; that with the right audience, even a beggar can be demanding.

Later that evening, I continued my shopping. I bought gifts, but my mind was on my friend Alonzo. I look for him whenever I visit Chicago. The last time I went, his crate was there, but he wasn’t. If he had been there, I might have bought him lunch. Or I might just have given him a smile. It’s the only thing he ever asked me for.

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