

PERSPECTIVE ON CHRISTMAS : Peace in Westwood Toward a Man of Goodwill : An encounter with a 'bum' stirs questions: What is charity, who is worthy, how much or little can we do?

December 25, 1995 | JORGE R. MANCILLAS | Jorge R. Mancillas is a neurobiologist at the UCLA School of Medicine. His e-mail address is mancills@ucla.edu

I had not seen him in a while, the thin, wiry African American man in his late 40s who usually stood outside the convenience store across the street from my apartment building. I must confess, I never gave him any of my spare change. Not that he ever asked. But it was clear to me that he was one of the legions of "homeless," the down-and-out who depend on sidewalk charity.

Like most of us in Los Angeles, I'd become desensitized. When I first arrived here seven years ago, my reaction to this then-emerging population was very different. A good number of dollar bills later, my generosity cooled, influenced in part by several TV newsmagazine "exposé" about homeless drug addicts, alcoholics and just plain lazy abusers of our goodwill. However unrepresentative the TV images may have been, my attitude hardened as I came to recognize the faces of the regulars around Westwood, where I work and live. From the window of my apartment, I would spot some of them drinking in an alley nearby.

How can I know whether I am really helping someone in need or supporting the chosen lifestyle of a bum, I asked myself. Homelessness is a social problem, I decided, so I'd best put what little I can give to solving it socially. Out went my grandmother's maxim: "Do good, and never mind to whom." No more parting with my hard-earned money for strangers to waste.

So, by the time this fellow first appeared in front of the minimarket where I often stopped on my way home from UCLA late at night, my new policy was in place. But he never asked for money. He would just stand there and greet passersby. Sometimes a conversation ensued--he seemed intelligent and witty--and some people would then hand him some change. Not me, though. In fact, we never talked. He would just smile and greet me.

Then, at one point, he began to address me as "professor," or "doctor." While surprised--how did he know my occupation?--I still did no more than return his greeting. After all, that seemed to be his angle: get you to stop, befriend you and stir up just enough guilt to make you fork over a little contribution. Who knows, while he didn't seem the type, he'd probably just drink it up, for all I knew. So he remained a stranger for years. A familiar stranger, but a stranger nonetheless, someone to whom I had no responsibility.

And now, there he was where I'd least expect him: working.

As usual, I had been too busy to get a Christmas tree early and now some of the lots were running out. The selection was very poor, with even small trees priced at \$30 and more, and the few nice ones at \$50. Discouraged, my son and I kept looking. It was at the lot on Sepulveda near Wilshire that I spotted him. He waved and walked toward us, smiling, and greeted me with the familiarity of an old friend. When we shook hands, I felt the calluses and hardened skin, the hands of a working man.

"So this is where you were," I said. It turned out he had worked on this Christmas tree lot for the last four years. He seemed different here. He was no longer "a bum," the label we find so convenient to dismiss the poor. For the first time in three, or perhaps four or five years--I mean, who's counting?--I learned his name, David. But only after my 9-year-old son had told him his name, and he replied, "Oh, that's my name too."

As I started looking at the trees, he went off and came back with his boss. He proceeded to tell him that I was a professor at UCLA and, as my face reddened, went on about my participation in the efforts to create a Chicano studies department at UCLA, the 14-day hunger strike and other "community work" I do. He had been a stranger to me, but I was no stranger to him. As I marveled over this, he was urging the owner to give me a good deal. I was embarrassed but grateful. I could have any tree on the lot for \$20. David smiled with satisfaction and helped organize the trimming and tying of the tree so we could take it home. I tried to learn more about him, this man whom I had avoided and who at the first opportunity had not hesitated to do what he could to help me.

As we talked, he was nice and engaging. He had left his native New York 20 years ago with a friend. They made their way around Canada and parted ways in "that cowboy place," Calgary. From there he went to Colorado, then to Los Angeles, where he hoped to find his friend. It turns out he had been a "flower child," living in "communes." "Do you remember them?" he asked. I wondered: Is this what happened to hippies who did not become yuppies? I guess it was not as easy to "turn on, tune in, drop out" and then drop back in again for black, working-class flower children. I probed for clues that would reveal how he had come to find himself in his current condition, but he resisted. Then I realized that he didn't want his co-workers to know his situation. Once more, I was embarrassed.

Now, as I sit with my son in our living room, admiring our newly decorated Christmas tree, I wonder where David, the former flower child, now aged before his time, with half his teeth gone and no apparent future, would spend Christmas. And the following 12 months. And how he would earn a living until next Christmas. And how I would feel the next time I heard the cashier in the minimart snarl about "that bum outside." And then, of course, there is the key question: What am I going to do about him? I mean, personally, as an individual human being. David didn't hesitate to do what he could to help me out. But is his life any of my concern or responsibility?

The Christmas tree in my living room won't let me forget who is the better man. Then again, it will probably be gone by the new year.
