

Encountered

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The hostile city pavements were as near to anything he could call home — a place of perpetual loneliness, devoid of comfort, a place of inescapable despair and pain. And perhaps, if at any long forgotten time when he was young, there might have been a place called home, it was only faintly engraved as an elusive memory now.

Three years in Costa Rica brought with it experiences that changed my thinking and remain deeply etched in my mind – but none of them as profoundly as this man and the realities he encountered each day. I often saw him curled up in foetal sleep on the hard concrete pavement, his hand tucked under his head as a cushion and if he was lucky, a piece of cardboard for a mattress. Did the momentary escape from life's realities into the oblivion of sleep bring relief? Or was it a freefall into the even greater torment of nightmares that never went away?

Amongst all the helpless, hopeless homeless I passed by daily, he stood out. His 'lostness' so apparent, so stark, so raw. He would come unexpectedly into view from my homebound bus seat, shuffling seemingly aimlessly to who knew where. On occasions he materialised almost ghost-like, suddenly up close, perhaps crouched in the refuge of a shop entrance. Fluids would stream from his mouth and nose while he sniffed deeply and desperately at some concoction in a plastic bottle, seeking insatiably to fill the gaping pain in his soul. I would stare, transfixed, trying to glimpse a shred of humanity but seeing and hearing only the signs of animal survival instincts.

A man devoid of any human dignity, the reek of his own excrement often preceded him. The silent unvoiced cry in my head, 'What am I to do, Lord? How will I wash him and give him clean clothes and care for him? Where will he sleep?' was relentless. Never hearing

a response, I would turn away, pulling the cloak of defiant anger and frustration at my helplessness tightly around me, and take my only option – the walk to catch my bus home.

Distance would, for a short while, diminish the stark images of his reality into manageable proportions.

As the blue San Jose twilight transformed slowly to the indigo of evening, I saw him stumbling through the park, oblivious to all around him, including the cries of the vendors selling tamales and hot coffee. Or perhaps more than that, he ignored them, knowing those tempting smells remained always outside the realm of his world. I noticed even in the fading light, as he hobbled along in pain, the deep red gashes in his heels where the hardened skin had split into gaping wounds.

Again, ‘Lord, what am I to do? There is nowhere to take him, nothing I can do!’

An unexpected but clear and formulated reply penetrated my thinking as I walked towards the bus stop. ‘Take a foot file and some lotion and attend to his feet.’

‘Ludicrous!’ I shook my head to clear this voice and allow the voice of reason to slip into the dialogue and formulate my response. ‘The unpredictable behaviour fuelled by the toxic substances he has consumed could lead to violence and rage if I even approach him, let alone touch him. It would be irresponsible’.

But the answer to my helpless silent cries persisted as I gazed from the bus into the darkness of the San Jose streets. And it would not leave. In the familiarity and protection of my casita that evening I inexplicably found myself methodically packing the foot file and a small bottle of hand lotion into my bag. ‘Lord, if I am to do this thing, bring him across my path tomorrow, as I go to work.’ The likelihood of seeing this man in the morning was remote. My previous encounters had always been in the afternoons or evenings. So, in the comfort of the idea of being released from any ‘obligation’, I relaxed, and thoughts about him began to recede. But a subconscious sense remained that I had in fact entered into a Dialogue.

My recollection is vivid, of daylight arriving bright and full of hope. And as it replays in my mind, not even the fumes of the San Jose traffic or the grime of the filthy streets are able to diminish the beauty of the gift. The bus comes to a lurching halt at the final stop in the ‘Coca Cola’ bus terminus, San Jose. Carried along by the surging humanity, stepping off the bus and into the day ahead, my feet reach the pavement. Adjusting the strap of my bag securely across my shoulder and chest, as had become my habit in an unpredictable society driven relentlessly by the needs of poverty and addictions, I look up. And there he is. Directly in front of me. Filthy hand outstretched for money, staring at me — eyes locked only on mine. The adrenaline flows and my mind forms the words, ‘Okay, Lord, here we go.’

Looking into tormented and infinitely sad brown eyes, I shake my head and tell him, ‘No tengo plata (I have no money)’, motioning him to step out of the path of the surging crowd and sit down against the wall of the nearby shop. We settle down side-by-side on the filthy, cockroach-infested pavement in vague awareness of people swirling around above our heads, immersed in the business of a new day. Pointing to his grime covered feet, I ask, ‘Tiene dolor (Do you have pain)?’

‘Si (Yes).’ He nods and gazes detachedly at his feet, as though they somehow they do not belong to him.

Furtively pulling the foot file from my bag, I move to kneel at his feet, setting to work on the rough skin. It is impossible to make any impression on the hardened, calloused, wounded heels. I take the lotion and pour some onto his foot, subconsciously aware that it does not lose the sweet perfume, even as the green colour turns a grimy grey mingling with the filth of his feet. The man is now gazing intently, as though seeing his feet for the first time. I instruct him in broken Spanish on what he needs to do daily, to try to heal his feet.

‘Si, si,’ he responds to the novel idea of caring for himself.

His sudden forceful lurch towards where I am kneeling is unexpected. I am aware of the blood pounding in my ears. Grabbing the plastic bottle out of my hand, he extravagantly squeezes every last drop of lotion into his hand and tosses the container into the gutter. My eyes rest on the empty container lying amongst all the other garbage. I watch as he begins to massage the lotion into his feet. My gaze returns to his face and I move back to sit alongside him. As he turns to look back at me, I am riveted by the smile on a calm and peaceful face. His dark eyes are shining, extraordinary in depth and beauty. Somewhere inwardly, be it heart or mind, I grapple in the midst of this surreal moment, with the look on that face and in those eyes. It is elusive, but I know in an indefinable way that it is somehow part of the Dialogue.

‘Jesus te ama’ (Jesus loves you),’ I whisper, and I am compelled to reach out and touch the beard on his cheek. The silky softness takes me by surprise.

His face is serene and free of torment. A transformation has taken place.

We stay briefly engaged in that timeless moment, and then I rise to leave. The moment is over. I tuck the foot file into the pocket of his tattered shirt and walk away.

I glance back at his seated form and see him watching me. Propped up against the wall, head cocked slightly to the side, chin up, his eyes continue to meet mine. The elusive compelling smile still caressing his face emanates a sense of knowing, and I trust that it is prompted by more than the thought of ‘crazy gringo’.

The intangible awareness of earlier on seems to be reforming into something more. I turn away and once again straighten the strap of my bag. The beautiful day is unchanged except that, in its very normality, a divine truth is evolving.

The reflection of subsequent days, weeks, months and even years, have brought the profound realisation that the bonds of this realm had been momentarily parted to reveal the manifest Christ in his grace and mercy: the Immanuel who is God present with us. For a

fleeting moment on a street in San Jose, a homeless man and a helpless woman had encountered in that Presence, a place of help, of refuge, of rest and hope.

Throughout the remainder of my three years in Costa Rica, I never saw the man again.

