

Thursday was an ordinary day, I ate breakfast, drove to Timmies for my coffee and planned business appointments. I pulled into Tim Horton's and hopped out of my late model car. You've probably got the picture, I don't suffer from a lack of funds. I have a habit of saying hi, hello, heh or what's up to almost everyone I meet - often to the chagrin of my family and friends. Thursday was a special day though for me. Walking across the parking lot was a young man, I would guess in his late twenties, early thirties. He was unshaven, unclean, wore very tattered clothes and cheap, broken sandals. We unfortunately witness this a lot in our town, but this young man also had cuts and bruises on his hands, face and the top of his feet. He looked as though he'd been roughed up a bit and had fallen face first on pavement. He was gaunt; his stomach indented. That wasn't bad enough but when I stopped and really looked into his eyes, they were hopeless, dead. He looked at me fleetingly and flinched as though I was going to inflict pain, or at the least, cast a disparaging comment. I did what came naturally, I said "Heh." He stopped dead in his tracks and looked right at me, not offering me a smile, but a fractured smirk. Something in his eyes changed. Recognition, that I wasn't judging him, wasn't critical. He said "hi" back and continued on. He wasn't begging, but I assume that he was homeless, and that he was very, very hungry. Embarrassed by his next action, he waited for me to go into the store before he continued to the garbage bin in search of something he could salvage for breakfast. He looked around to make sure no one was watching him. The long line of cars waiting held people who averted their eyes. They pretended to be busy. Windows went up quickly. You could see the panic in their eyes and hear their thoughts, "Please don't come near me."

It broke my heart to know that we can so easily ignore the pain of others. I wanted to help. I knew nothing about him. Nothing of his past or present. Nothing of his afflictions or addictions. Nothing of his family or friends, or if he had a place to lay his head. I learned a long time ago that you can't save everyone, but you can influence the direction of some lives with just a word, or a deed. My opportunity had come, to influence in some small way the experience of one young, very hungry man.

When I approached him again, he was wary. Dirty fingers pulled straight the folds of his tattered shirt. He was so embarrassed. I fought to keep my eyes from misting, put a smile on my face and prayed that it reached my eyes. My conversation with him was short, asking briefly if he was shy of cash. He was taken aback, not expecting normal conversation, expecting to be pushed away. Directness was the only way to salvage his pride. I pulled some money out of my pocket and handed it to him. He mumbled thank you and unlike other career beggars didn't shuffle off to the next "mark." He ran, I mean ran, with his broken sandal flapping, to the door of the Tim Horton's restaurant. As I drove out I saw that he was seated at a table, head down concentrated on his breakfast. His circumstance brought me a quick dose of reality.

We can get pretty hardened by the constant barrage for charitable donations and people asking for money on the streets. If you really stop, look and use common sense, you'll know when it's real, when it's your turn to reach out in some small way, to influence, to the good, an experience of another human being. For me it all started with a sincere "heh".