

There but for the Grace of God go I

by Gordon Laird

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We shuffled along in our line, slowly making our way to the serving counter. We didn't speak to each other. We didn't know each other. When my turn came I was given a tray with an indentation to serve as a soup bowl. There was still water in the bottom of the bowl. Soup was ladled in, and a few crusts of bread were added. That was my lunch at the Harbour Light in Vancouver.

We had to endure a religious service to "earn" this modest lunch. I saw nobody join in the gospel hymns or pay particular attention to the message, the point of which seemed to me to be that I, personally, was the reason for all the problems in the world and if only I could change my ways, be born again, everything would be fine!

I was one of 25 in the summer of 1967 who were part of a program to understand and develop ministry in the downtown area of Vancouver. First we had to undergo the "Plunge" experience: live for 2 days and 2 nights on Skid Row on \$2.00 per day.

At the outset I had wondered to myself: How should I act, how should I dress to fit into this new venture? Would I be discovered and embarrassed as an Obvious Imposter? Do I need to concoct a story to explain why I am living in Skid Row?

I had dressed myself in blue jeans, a tee shirt and a blue jacket. I wore walking shoes and sported a ball cap. Marilyn drove me to Skid Row and she and the children dropped me off.

I began assessing my environment and thinking about my first meal and where I would spend the night.

The Central City Mission offered a hostel for overnight stays right in the middle of Skid Row. That evening I had lined up with the others to claim my bed. I learned the strict rules about when I could enter the Mission and when I needed to leave. There was no dinner or food of any kind offered - just accommodation. We slept, dozens to a large dorm, on cots, with our few possessions by our side.

I never saw any of my project colleagues. Everyone on the street was a stranger

to me. We all became face-less and also history-less. We offered our stories to no one. The shock was: I needed no disguise, because nobody asked me anything! In two days, after a growth of beard, uncombed hair, and the body odor from having slept in my clothes, there was no difference between me and my fraternal colleagues. We looked the same. We smelt the same.

There is nothing to do on the street. You simply keep walking, otherwise you look like a loiterer. I decided to visit the Hudson's Bay Company (Granville and Georgia). I entered the Seymour Street entrance and walked in on a fashion show. Soon I felt the stares of the well-dressed shoppers. I was feeling out of my element and very out of place.

I scurried back to "my area" - Skid Row, where nobody stared and nobody asked any questions. I was back "among my own".

We were on the sidewalk by 8:00 a.m. I began to plan for my lunch. I found out that the Sisters of Charity gave away sandwiches at noon, so I made sure I was in that lineup. The Sister who handed me my packet of sandwiches avoided any eye contact with me.

While I was waiting in the lineup a remarkable thing happened, which gave me some insight into the whole question of my "Imposter" status. Along the street we were lining came a car - a family: husband driving, wife and two children. I looked at this 15 year old car and its occupants and thought for a moment:

"If only I could aspire to what they have - a comfortable car and a pleasant, loving family".

I had completely forgotten that that was exactly what awaited me when these two days and two nights were over.

The experiences of my two days and two nights in Skid Row have stayed with me and served me well. I remember them whenever I see the homeless people and the squeegee kids living on the street. And I often think: "There but for the Grace of God go I".

