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Writ 1133: PHC Response

Chasing Solitude

For the entirety of my young life, I have been accustomed to an abundant amount of space. I've always had as much personal space as any non-reclusive person could want. The most amount of time I've ever had to share a room with someone was a total of six months; and growing up in the mountains of Colorado, my finding new and seemingly undiscovered escapes from the constant demand of social interaction was never a challenge. This world of luxury is undoubtedly appreciated; but up until this past weekend, I am ashamed to say it may have been taken for granted to some degree. Every year the population of our world grows; and with it, so does the number of people in homeless shelters, prisons, and orphanages. Not every human being is fortunate enough to have the ability to roam free. Camping outside under the stars was one thing, but camping outside on the sidewalk would have thrown this lucky teenager head first into a world he had never truly understood. Living may be an obvious human right, but living a life unbridled is an extremely rare privilege that must be worked for every second of every day.

Volunteering at this year's Project Homeless Connect here at the University of Denver was an experience I wasn't quite sure how to prepare myself for. I went into it knowing that I could be working with literally any type of person imaginable. I could picture myself being paired up with a deeply psychologically impaired person, someone who basically refused to

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speak, or worse yet, someone who had no idea how to stop talking; needless to say I was a little nervous. This apprehension should by no means tell my reader that I wasn't willing to work with these sorts of clients, but simply that I was confused about what my tactics may be if I were paired with someone I wasn't prepared to interact with. I had plenty of ideas, but nothing could have prepared me for the roller coaster I was about to board.

Comment [U1]: Make this one line.

The actual morning of the event made me think my job would be simple. My classmate, T., asked me if I would be willing to team up with him since he had a previous obligation for another one of his classes. To me, this basically meant that together we would work with one of the many clients coming to visit; this isn't what happened. When the time finally came to be paired up with our clients, T. and I simply planned on telling the coordinator at the front of the winding golden line our situation. We told the man, but his response wasn't quite what we had hoped for. "Uh, yeah, we're a little swamped so I'm just going to give you each a client for now." It was clear that this was not negotiable; we met our clients and were quickly ushered inside.

The first twenty seconds of the day were enough to prove to me that the day might take some serious patience. The first man made his presence known immediately. He was R., and in two weeks he would be homeless for three years. This man was definitely not afraid of speaking his mind. The second man, who had long graying hair, only spoke in response to my asking of his name; his one word response was, "K." I could tell instantly that I was working with two men who could not be more dissimilar. We made our way to the tables to quickly complete the initial paperwork while listening to the interesting tidbits R. was offering about

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himself. For the paperwork, T. worked with R., and I interviewed K. This is when I actually realized how interesting my day was going to be.

I was already aware that keeping R.'s attention focused was going to be a challenge, but on the opposite end of the spectrum, K. was barely speaking. He had no problem answering the questions, but he used as few words as possible. It seemed that K. was making up for R.'s soliloquies with quiet adherence. I wanted K. to open up, but I also knew it wasn't going to be easy. This man had been divorced, hadn't spoken to his children for a year, recently became homeless, and to top it all off, had been released from prison only a week earlier. I was extremely intimidated by what I was getting myself into.

Our plan was now to start completing the services each of our clients was requesting and to figure out what to do about T.'s absence when the time came. This split away from T. and R. seemed to be just the space K. was craving. He was much more willing to talk once they were gone. What's more, the success of the first resource we sought out made the man appreciate what I was doing for him. As we stood in the long line for Colorado State I.D.s, K. told me that this simple piece of paperwork was the only thing in his way of a new twelve dollar an hour job in hotel maintenance. I couldn't have been happier. Countless people who stood around us had been living on the streets for years and were seeming to make no progress; K. was the exact opposite. He had been homeless for only one week and had already been assured a job that would help turn his life around. We were both extremely happy about his improving situation; conversation began to flow freely.

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I wasn't quite ready to risk asking K. about his recent experience in prison, but I was very interested in learning about his current living situation at Crossroads Homeless Shelter. His explanation was pretty close to my preconceived idea, but his attitude toward it seemed to follow the pattern I had already started to notice. He mentioned that he had to wait in a long line to get a number representing the bunk he would be occupying; if these bunks were full, he would sleep on a floor mat. It seemed to me that this man simply needed a break from the demands of constant supervision. He needed time to himself. Our conversation continued to blossom until, seemingly minutes after we had parted ways, T. and R. returned.

K. and I both figured that our new friend R. would be quite the ball of energy, and we were about to experience just how true this was. It seemed that before T. left R. with us, his rambunctious client had checked out the resume workshop for a minute or two, and spent the rest of his time picking new outfits from the clothing drive. He couldn't wait to show us the three different jackets he had found, the pair of white khaki shorts, the two T-shirts. K. and I just simply smiled to ourselves and let him talk while we waited in line. I attempted to keep up with R. in conversation, but it seemed like each subject spawned at least a handful more. After a few minutes of semi-patient waiting, R. decided he needed to once again explore the auditorium. I was a little nervous about letting him wander around on his own, so I made sure to ask him not to wander too far.

About ten minutes later, K. and I finally finished with our mission to the I.D. booth and moved on to find him financial help at the Colorado Indigent station. K. said he needed to use the restroom, so I offered to watch our spot in line; K. returned with some amusing information.

From the time we allowed R. to fend for himself momentarily, he had been trying on every new outfit combination he could think of. At the time I was very humbled by the fact that something as typical as trying on clothes was, for R., liberating, but failed to think about the possible outcome of such an activity.

Once our easily distracted friend came out of the bathroom, in one of his new mismatched outfits, he was ready to move on to something new. He told me he was going just outside the auditorium to smoke a cigarette, and that he would wait for us there; I literally never saw him again. This point in the day, for me, was when the biggest test of my social skills would come into play. I knew that I couldn't just ignore the fact that one of my clients was missing, and K. was clearly happy with spending quiet time alone while I searched. So, I directed K. to his next resource, made sure he would stay there once he was finished, and started my quest.

As one can probably imagine, finding a single man in a sea of brightly colored shirts and buzzing conversations was not easy; this difficulty was boosted to near impossibility when his constant outfit changes were taken into consideration. I searched the full expanse of the event about three times, concentrating mainly on the bathrooms and growing food line. R. was just a few too many steps ahead. After about a half hour of confusion, I decided that it would be best to return to K. and wait for T. to come back before continuing the search.

When I returned to my first client, I was happy to see that he was in the same area, consulting a dentist and nurse. I apologized for leaving him alone and told him R. was truly missing in action; he seemed to like this fact. For the next hour, we looked for clothing, got some

food stamps, and watched while T. returned, searched for R., and finally decided to give up and help another client. It was clear to me that as time went on, and we were truly on our own, that K. was more than happy to share. I figured that since we had completed all the things my client needed to do, it was time to go to lunch and dig in to the heart of our conversation.

Actually getting to eat after burning so much energy was amazing, but the conversation that came along with it was even more rewarding. I had spent the entire morning trying to get K. to open up to me, and this proved that he finally had. We were sitting out on the grass eating when I finally decided to ask him about prison; to my surprise, he was more than happy to share. He told me that he had been a serious methamphetamine user turned dealer since 1992. This in itself was hard to believe when simply looking at the man's character, but what was even harder to believe was that he had gotten away with it for fourteen years before finally being busted on possession charges in 2006. Since then K. has been in and out of jail constantly; his longest stay was the most recent span lasting nine months. The information about life in jail was interesting enough, but what was more interesting to me was what life was like once finally being released.

After speaking with K. about his recent experiences, I came to the realization that my new friend has been a captive in some form or another for the past decade and a half. For fourteen years he had been a slave to his drug of choice, and because of this, was constantly surrounded by people just like him; without the space to get free, quitting his addiction was nearly impossible. Of course, being in and out of jail periodically for three years was yet another large chunk of time when he lacked any sort of personal freedom. It is hard for me to put into

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words the energy radiating off of K. when I asked him how it felt to be free, free of the free loading drug addicts, free of the constant trials that come with being imprisoned, and most importantly, free of the drug that has completely dictated the past two decades of his life. I could tell weight was gradually being lifted off the shoulders of this man. It was no surprise, then, that when I asked him what the best thing that happened to him during Project Homeless Connect was, he simply smiled and said, "Losing R.."