

I went to the bridge last night



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

Benny was an older gentleman who would drop into the chaplaincy office now and then. Sometimes my assistant Elizabeth and I would be working on a project or handling someone's "issue" and turn around to see Benny sitting, silent and patient.

Usually Benny had a smile on his face, a bit like a Cheshire cat. Or he would look a bit lost. In any case, we would welcome Benny and ask what he was up to.

For a period of time, Benny was without a permanent dwelling (sometimes called "homeless"). When he finally got into an apartment he could afford with Social Security and his veteran's pension, he was very happy. Now and again he would show up for one of our outings — van trips to a lake, forest or beach — when we would pick up people at the St. Vincent's free dining room downtown.

Benny seemed to prefer being a loner, yet he kept showing up.

One day Benny found me in the office. He looked troubled. "What's on your mind?" I asked.

"I went to the bridge last night," he shrugged.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I just felt bad and didn't think I could take this anymore," he confessed. "I took a bus to the bridge [the Golden Gate Bridge] and walked across. For some reason, I decided not to jump. I don't know why."

I listened closely, as chaplains do. I said, "Well, Benny, you knew some of us would miss you, and we'd be angry with you too!" He smiled. We laughed.

From then on, whenever Benny appeared, I assumed he needed the companionship. Or simply didn't want to be alone. I suppose that's the same thing.

At the end of some months, low on cash, he would ask me for a few dollars. He always paid me back.

There were times when I noticed Benny giving an encouraging word to another person feeling low. This was evidence of what we often said: Anyone can serve as a chaplain.

One afternoon I came into our office and found a note from Benny. "I'm going to the bridge. Thank you for everything."

I quickly drove across town to the



Labyrinth to walk, bridge to cross. CHRIS HIGHLAND

lounge where Benny hung out. Benny was sitting at the bar and turned to see me walk in — almost as if he expected me. I sat with him, ordered a brew, let him talk.

People who are suicidal are crying out for someone to notice, to care, to just be with them. Despair is a slippery, muddy trail in a dark forest. At times, the best another person can do is walk along that trail for a short time with a person who is suffering.

It's not about rescuing (though there are times when we need rescuing — when the house, or our heart, is in flames). It's mostly about one human being finding time, making time, to "be human" with another human being.

It's not about faith, though for some people faith can help. It's more about having faith in another person enough to regain faith in ourselves.

Benny stood in the chaplaincy doorway one afternoon with a piece of paper in his hand. He'd been observing how the chaplain team was supporting the music of the streets, even producing an album of original music to raise awareness of the talent of unhoused people and to raise much-needed funds for the chaplaincy.

Benny handed the paper to me. "Maybe you can make a song out of this."

I read the words he scribbled on the page:

"You need to forgive all your sadness and your sorrow:

"You need to forget the past and look into tomorrow.

"I love this great big beautiful world ... And I thank God that I'm alive!"

I sat down with a guitar and tried a few tunes. Benny sat with a big smile. We knew how significant those words were.

A few months later I took some of our musicians to a local congregation to play their original "songs of the street." I gave the morning message. Then we led the congregation in singing Benny's song: "The World is Mine." He wasn't there that morning. He was probably in one of his "funk" moods or maybe at a casino or his bar.

I don't know if that congregation could fully appreciate his gift that morning, but everyone seemed to love the song.

I wonder if some of the most meaningful gifts are those given out of hopelessness, instability, uncertainty. I wonder if there are amazing ideas and solutions to community issues, just waiting to be heard, by anyone who might give some time to listen.

Truthfully, I don't wonder about that. Benny taught me how true it can be.

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