

The Man With the Orange Bucket

By Kathy Rosati

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I rarely cry. Perhaps life's experiences have helped me become tough, perhaps my action-oriented, logical approach has taught me that problems are best tackled and solved with a clear head rather than an emotional response, or perhaps being strong and capable is the mask that I wear to protect myself from the inevitable "slings and arrows" of life. But yesterday – I cried.

So, what brought me to tears? Let me explain. It was lunch time and I decided to walk to a deli near my office to get a salad. I work in the city, so the street was fairly crowded with people. Just a few feet away from the doorway to the deli I spotted a man, sitting on the sidewalk with a cardboard sign and an orange Home Depot bucket. As I drew closer, I realized he was slumped over and appeared to be either sleeping or unconscious. Everyone walking by ignored him or was completely oblivious to his presence. As I paused to

make sure he was at least breathing, I realized he had no shoes. His feet were covered only with dirty, worn socks. His cardboard sign explained that he was homeless and in need of money – his bucket was empty.

I continued into the deli and placed my order and as I left, lunch in hand, I saw that the man was now awake. I approached and dropped a few dollars into his bucket and he looked at me and I realized that he was young – probably in his 20's or 30's. His face was thin and marred by sores, but there was still a beauty in his eyes as he said, "God bless you." I knew I was looking into the eyes of an addict and I found myself saying, "Please get help. Recovery is possible. God loves you."

This brief encounter was on my mind for the rest of the day and into the night. I thought about how only a few weeks ago and only 2 blocks from this deli where the busy lunchtime crowd ignored the guy with the orange bucket, there had been an orange cat stuck in a tree. That cat immediately captured the attention of hundreds of people who rushed in to try and rescue the animal. Even more people reacted to the plight of the cat as it was broadcast on the local TV news and social media. Within 48 hours of being spotted, the cat had been successfully rescued from the tree, fed, taken to an animal shelter for medical care and even given a name – "Ben". Just yesterday morning I had gotten an e mail with a photo of Ben letting me know that he had been adopted and was now safe in a good home.

While I am happy for Ben the kitty and thankful for the people who came to his rescue and for the generosity of others who donated toward his food and medical care, I was suddenly struck by the contrast between our reaction to Ben the orange cat and the homeless man with the orange bucket. I was ashamed of myself that I had not even bothered to ask the man for his name. I realized that in the face of the nameless man with the orange bucket I saw the pain, the fear, the desolation and the loneliness of every addict. The man with the orange bucket is someone's son, he's someone's brother, he's someone's friend and perhaps someone's dad. His eyes conveyed so much loss – how many people had he lost, how many shattered dreams, how many family celebrations missed, how many lost opportunities to be happy, how many times had he been judged, ignored, given up on – not only by strangers and passers-by, but by people he loved and who had once loved him? His bucket was empty and I cried.

With tears in my eyes I wondered how so many people could rush to help an orange cat in a tree but ignore a homeless man with an orange bucket. And then I wondered how many more people like the man with the orange bucket are out there tonight and I cried some more. When the tears finally stopped, I resolved to go back to the deli tomorrow and look for the man with the orange bucket. If he was still there, I planned to ask him his name, so at least to be able to give him the respect and dignity of being recognized as a person, a child of God, someone with a name. I also decided that I would ask him if he had a favorite sandwich so that I could get one for him at the deli along with my lunch to make sure he had something to eat. I prepared a card with a few phone numbers to shelters and recovery services help lines to put with the sandwich. Finally, I planned to thank him for the lesson he had taught me.

I returned to the deli today at lunchtime, but he was not there. His cardboard sign and orange bucket were propped against the doorway – and I cried.

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My friend with the orange bucket was back outside the deli today. I stopped to talk with him, gave him some lunch and found out that his name is Louie. I gave him the list of phone numbers and addresses for various shelters and recovery groups that I had put together. He told me that he has been clean for a week. Please pray for Louie and for everyone struggling with addiction, mental illness and homelessness.