

A Poem

Soupline

Dr. Edward Gabriele

Editor-in-Chief and Executive Director,
Journal of Health and Human Experience
President and Chief Executive Officer,
The Semper Vi Foundation
Tel: (301) 792-7823
Email: egabriele@mac.com

Opening Reflection

Ultimately, the human animal is not a solitary being. From the moment of conception, we are ever in a sense of connection with others. We cannot escape our being relational. In fact, from the moment we enter into this world we leave the womb always hungering others with whom to feel complete. As we journey through our lifetime, we many times experience the never-ending call to serve those who are in need. While we may try to escape or even deny that driving call, the voices of need never stop. And when we in fact might answer and give service to others, our experience always leads to a wide variety of deeply probing questions about the world, about life itself, and especially about our own individual selves. In recognition of such, the following may serve as a probing mirror experience.

Two hollowed pools framed within the vapors of the kitchen air
gazed back at me intensely from the front of the counter.
My hair seemed to stand on end
as she followed every emotion that was beating in my chest.
A young boy and girl clutched at her scraggy skirt,
a younger child in her arms.
That look,
like God throwing a glance at chariots and warriors,
made me stop dead in my tracks
with the soup ladle suddenly frozen midair in my hand.
For a brief moment time stood still,
my breath stolen by this fearful appearing
of the world at my doorstep.
Such despair.
Not even a hand to knock at the door of my heart.
She just stood there.
Motionless.
Seeming not to move except for the tugging

that hungry children coupled with their whimpering.
She stared at me the kind of stare
that raises guilt from every corner,
the guilt that makes every memory of every meal
seem suddenly distasteful
wanting to be hidden from view.
Caught between acting and not acting,
the earth seemed suspended in its rotation:
the holiday season arrested in its tracks.
This giving suddenly seemed empty of any dignity
like an out of place suit in an out of place gathering.
Which was worse:
not to feed her
or to make this meal into another act of pity?
I wondered what had made me come here this day.
What could have possessed me?
Anger dried my throat.
I thought I was giving something of my holiday.
I thought that I was acting out of love.
And all what struck me now was something dirty and less worthy.
I felt sullied for the money in my pocket,
the clothes upon my own back,
the thought of car and home and friends,
the work world which was mine to enter each working day.
Here was no sloucher,
no parasite feeding off my proud taxes.
Here was despair all wrapped in human telling
with children born to pass this sadness down the generations.
Her eyelids momentarily closed
without her emptiness ever blinking.
How I wished this could be like the end of a happy story
where the poor before me would smile in recognition
and my guilt might vanish into forgetfulness.
Her empty poverty never blinked, never faltered.
Poverty is like that after all.
It never blinks.
It never steps away
but only leaves a deep indelible impression
like the empty hollow eyes before me.
I have no idea how long my hand was frozen in midair.
But a bit of life came back into my fingers.
Quickly, I filled her bowl and those of her children.
I wanted to push some extra crackers into her pockets.
But she turned away and drone-like found a place at the tables.

Under City Lights

And all I could do was turn away and weep.
But weep for what?
For her?
For her children?
For an unthankful and uncaring world?
For me?
In the end there was only one thing I knew:
I was there
and was crying.

Author Note

The author published this poem for a volume of poetry in the later 1990s. The insights and views expressed in this poem are those of the author and do not represent the views of any of the agencies or communities the author has served in the past or continues to serve currently. The author has no financial conflicts of interest.

