

The Fourth Bear: Relating to homeless people

by [Lydie Raschka](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

Paul Manship's bronze sculpture *Group of Bears* is just inside Central Park at the corner of 79th Street and Fifth Avenue. There are three bears in the group: a middle bear standing upright on his hind legs, a second on all fours, and a third squatting on his haunches. The bears are in the center of a small, protected oval of benches where nannies and mothers sit while children play. The bears' little "den" reflects the refined wealth of the neighborhood: silver memorial plaques adorn bench backs and pruned greenery drapes the clean curve of wooden seats.

Just outside this oval, I pass a man in a yellow coat every weekday when I walk my son to school. His face, burnished by the sun, is the same smooth-and-taut coppery brown as the bronze bears. Next to him sit a large rolling suitcase and assorted smaller bags. A bright yellow cloth neatly covers his belongings and is anchored in place by two apples, each nestled in a paper coffee cup. The yellow cloth and the yellow coat—along with other items, including a plastic yellow banana and a cardboard yellow taxicab—are the reason I took to calling him The Man Who Likes Yellow. But my husband calls him The Fourth Bear, and that is the name that has stuck.

My husband and I have "named" a lot of homeless people in the 18 years we've lived in New York. There was the pimp we called Bill Sykes for his proclivity to hurl obscenities at prostitutes under our window at night. I used to peer down through the curtains when I heard a woman cry out, trying to figure out when and if to call 911. There was the long-haired Strange and Mysterious Eskimo Woman who sat at the corner of 88th and Broadway in front of what was first a bank, then a Starbucks, then another bank.

When we moved here from the Midwest I felt overwhelmed by the number of homeless people on the streets. At first I gave handouts. The clink of change in a cup soothed my conscience on the way home from work. Then, from placing money

in a cup—which many advocates of homeless people say is not helpful and possibly detrimental—I “progressed” to buying sandwiches, salads and soft drinks. My virtue meter went up a notch, but my acts didn’t do much to assuage the complicated mix of emotions—guilt? annoyance? fear?—I felt when I encountered homeless people.

In church I hear stories relevant to my experience. There’s the Bible story of the lame man who is healed at “the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful.” The man looked up expecting a handout, but Peter “took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaped up, stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple.” Peter didn’t offer a handout, our pastor says; he offered the beggar a measure of equality, a chance to participate fully in all the benefits the temple had to offer. I like this story, but I have trouble placing it in my daily life. I can’t perform miracles.

In June of last year our church opened a homeless shelter for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth. I took on the job of organizing Saturday-night volunteers who would relieve our paid shelter monitor on his night off. But before scheduling others to volunteer I volunteered myself.

After years of keeping my distance by offering loose change and false names (I’d heard lots of stories about homeless people going berserk), I nervously dragged my red cart and my pillow and sleeping bag to church, let myself in and thought about where to put my belongings. Should I lock them in the office? I worried about how I’d get help if something went wrong and was grateful for the police station across the street. I worried too about whether or not the youth (ages 17 through 24) would like me, or if they would give me a hard time when I told them to do their chores. Then, at 10 p.m., they began trickling in, and as we shook hands and exchanged names, the church basement slowly became transformed into a cozy bedroom with cots and trunks and clothes. After midnight, when everyone was peacefully asleep, I slept too.

During this first year of our shelter I have also been part of JustFaith, a Catholic-based, lay-led class about social justice and faith. In this class we have read about the giants of social justice: Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Our initial discussions were full of noble talk of “helping the homeless”: a phrase that seemed to encompass all the need in the world. But the problem of homelessness was so big in our imaginations—so personally frightening and difficult to tackle—that the energy slowly seeped out of the room. I confess I resisted these champions of justice. Their examples of gross injustice and grandiose solutions

paralyzed me. I am not Gandhi, I thought grumpily after one class. I am just me, trying to figure out my individual responsibility toward The Fourth Bear.

It could be said that The Fourth Bear, like the lame man in the Bible, sits at “the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful.” His bench home is, after all, in the lee of some of the highest-priced real estate in the world. Half a block away is Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s house, where two police officers stand sentry 24 hours a day. In this neighborhood, kids’ party invitations are sent on pink Lucite boards, and parents rent jumping castles for the birthday parties. Private school tuitions can cost up to \$26,000 a year.

On rainy days The Fourth Bear moves himself and his belongings to a dry spot underneath Greywacke Arch, then sits on his suitcase reading the paper. He never wanders far from his belongings. I can’t help wondering if one day his patience will snap, if he will start screaming and become violent like the student (a “loner”) at Virginia Tech who went on a shooting rampage. “How can he stand to be so alone?” I wonder.

It turns out that he’s not completely alone. “Sorry I’m late today,” a short, gray-haired woman said cheerily one morning, handing him a mug with a hot drink and calling him by what is probably his real name. When I told my husband about the lady he shrugged as though it were obvious that she would show up. “Life can change,” he said. It may be simplistic, but I found his response helpful. For too long I have held on to a conceit that has led me to feel responsible (and guilty) for every homeless person I see. It is difficult to be helpful if your ideals and role models are so lofty that they become unwieldy.

A belief that life can change is one of the best things you can bring to work with homeless people. Life has changed for R, a soft-spoken, conservatively dressed transgender woman who has spent the year sleeping in our shelter. With a safe place to sleep and to put her belongings, she was able to seek help from volunteer social workers who work in conjunction with the shelter. They helped her craft a college essay and fill out applications, and she was accepted at two colleges, each offering a full scholarship. “My self-esteem went through the roof!” she said.

We’re now in the second year of our shelter. When I pass The Fourth Bear and other homeless men and women in the city, I see them more as individuals whose circumstances are as varied as snowflakes. I no longer feel predominantly pity, helplessness and guilt. What I do feel is something closer to compassion, a word that

means *to bear with*, "to feel sympathy for the suffering of others, often including a desire to help."