

Crossing Paths

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In the early '80s I owned a Victorian-style house in Richmond, Virginia. It was a lovely 2-story building constructed in the early 1900s. I used the downstairs rooms for my film production offices and I rented the upstairs rooms. My office was in the front of the building facing the street.

The neighborhood was located in between downtown Richmond and the main campus of Virginia Commonwealth University. Most of the businesses in the area were somehow related to the advertising industry. Graphic artists, printers, photographers and ad agencies. My building was located on Cary Street .. a feeder street for commuters to find their way to their office building. It was one way and had few traffic lights. Since there were few retail businesses within a 10-block range, you seldom saw any pedestrians walking by.

We didn't produce any tv spots or programs at or near our office. It was just a place to sit by a phone to set up some appointments and do some basic editing. Our office was quiet and rarely had any visitors.

One late morning in the spring of 1987 an African-American man abruptly entered our building. He was, more or less, 5'8" and 160 lbs., wore average blue collar clothing and had a short haircut. What distinguished him from most people who I occasionally crossed paths with was his demeanor, his style of breathing and his eyes.

The moment he entered my building I got up and met him in the hallway. When he saw me he immediately backed up against the wall, swung his head left and right looking like a petrified cat. The expression in his eyes indicated a clear and present danger. The palms of his hands spread out on the wall as if he was cornered with no escape route. To say that I was a bit concerned by his behavior would be an understatement. I felt myself starting to react to his paranoia. By this point we were both breathing heavy. "Mister, I was just let out of jail. I need bus money to get back to New Jersey. I don't want to hurt you."

Clearly, this guy was desperate. I wondered, did he have a gun or a knife? Or, was he about to punch my lights out? I never encountered a mugging. It was all new to me.

"Mister, what can I do to make some money?"

When you're sitting in your car at a traffic light, it's easy to have a predisposed opinion of a hopeless looking guy on the street. Unfortunately, we see them all of the time. Holding out a container looking for some cash. And, you can't help but wonder, why don't these guys just get a job as a dishwasher or, a grass cutter? Or, some other menial endeavor that can carry them over from day to day? Of course, my wife often reminds me that you need an address to secure a job and these people live on the street.

This guy had an immediate need and a short fuse. The outcome of this experience was unclear to me. I said, "Wait here." I briskly walked to the back of my building, grabbed a broom and a dustpan. "Here .. Sweep the steps and sidewalk outside my building and I'll pay you." He grabbed the broom, exited the building and proceeded to thoroughly sweep from one corner of my property to the other. He swept the stairs very carefully so as not to throw the dirt onto my plants. He didn't rush through the job. He did a very thorough job.

When he finished he came back into the building, handed me the broom and dustpan and just stood very still. The quiet was a bit unnerving. It was an odd way of indicating he was done. Somehow, I could feel the reward and punishment experience he encountered as a prisoner. I felt sad.

Nevertheless, I handed him some money. He looked down and thanked me. And, that was the last time I ever saw him.

I never crossed paths with a released prisoner. I never really thought about what their reentry into the world would be like. It was certainly strange, thoughtless and abrupt. What kind of society are we that releases a prisoner without any money, no lodging or job contacts and no place to live? Well, that surely seemed like the case in Virginia back in the 1980s. Hopefully, things have changed.