



Hats, Handouts and Humor

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

Free wool hats hanging from trees, begging to cover a homeless person's head. So it is in the Heartside district of downtown Grand Rapids on frigid winter days. The hats hang there for the taking, whether the individual is a corporate CEO or unemployed and living under a bridge. Each comes with a hand-written message:

*Take me, I'm free! Free to a good head.
You deserve this. Enjoy! Smile!*

The person crocheting the hats does not have the M.O. of a typical homemade hat-maker—a nice, little old lady sitting on her sofa. No. A man is doing the needlework, and his alias is Ernie.

Tom Rademacher, a local columnist tracked him down on one of the coldest days of the winter. Turns out he learned to crochet watching YouTube only a month earlier but had already left in his wake more than thirty hats. Does he ever hide out behind a fence just to see who might take one of his hats? No, he doesn't because "it goes toward honoring their dignity."

What is Ernie's philosophy of life? "I just think everybody should be treated as human beings. And if everybody did just one little thing, it would improve the lives of so many people."

Ernie brings me up short. My life is scheduled too full with the pressures of writing deadlines and speaking engagements—too often with very little time devoted to deeds of kindness.

When I think of Ernie, I think also of Ann. Not an alias, but the real Ann Kelsey, my college roommate of decades ago.

When I have visited her in Longview, Texas, we would often spend a morning in good clean fun going to garage sales. Ann had a stall in an antique mall and she had

an eye for treasures that everyone else overlooked.

But her shopping was more for others than for herself. I'll never forget spotting a cross necklace that I liked, but she snatched it first. It was for Maria who had been displaced with her little ones in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. "She loves crosses." That was Ann's excuse for grabbing a cross her houseguest wanted. She spotted an afghan for another needy mother.

But Ann's deeds of kindness went far beyond those displaced by Katrina. She was in close contact with many poor Amish families who came South during the winter, looking for work.

Finding housing, providing meals, offering childcare were a matter of course for her. In fact, when the headlines told the terrible news of Amish children being shot in their schoolroom in Pennsylvania, Ann was in the front lines of service. Her Amish friends were neighbors and they called on her to help. All this while battling cancer.

Ann's laughter was as much of a gift to the needy as were her afghans and crosses. And her laughter was a tender mercy for me when I needed it most.

Without warning, I had been told I was being terminated from my faculty position. My initial response was one of humiliation. For two nights I cried and could not sleep. On the third night I got a routine phone call from Ann. She was the first person I told what had happened.

She took me seriously, but she spotted the humorous side as well. Her comebacks were comical and her laughter was contagious. There in the blackness of my bedroom I cried tears of laughter as I've never cried before—moments that marked the beginning of my healing. Tender mercies come not only in hats and handouts, but also in good-hearted humor. □

For Ann Kelsey 1946-2009.

—Ruth A. Tucker

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