



## The View from Right Field

*by Rick Ohler*

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**“More Questions Than Answers”**

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**T**o my loyal (and patient) Right Field readers: Please indulge me this week as I write a letter to my kids—Addie (22, Warrensburg, NY), Gabe (28, Nashville, TN) and Mariah (29, Hamburg, NY). Feel free to look over my shoulder as I do.

Hey Addie, Gabe and Mariah,

We're in Denver as Kateri begins her fifth (How awesome is that?) session of filming art lessons for Craftsby.com. More than 30,000 students have signed up for her courses in the past three years. It can be difficult finding a classroom big enough to accommodate them all—just kidding; these are online classes. And through them, folks who never imagined they could draw or paint are surprising themselves with their newfound abilities.

This time, we're staying in downtown Denver, at the Magnolia Hotel, a block from the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Pedestrian Mall that runs from Capitol Park to Union Station. It's kind of posh for this townie; they have fluffy towels and terry cloth bathrobes. They leave bottled water in the room, but they cost five bucks if you open one. We can just see the Front Range of the Rockies looming beyond the skyscrapers from our 12<sup>th</sup> floor window. It's beautiful scenery in a gleaming city—ancient, snow-capped mountains in the distance and dazzling new buildings with cranes so close to our hotel window we can almost touch them.

Even though I'll never forgive Denver for taking what we were sure was our Major League Baseball franchise back in 1990, Denver is a pretty cool city. Its vibrancy infuses itself into you from the minute you set foot in Lower Downtown, or LODO, as they call it. Young people are the name of the game here; they look fresh and fit and Blue-toothed and business-ready from their gelled hair to their Patagonia/business-casual/one-step-removed-from-a-weekend-in-the-mountains wardrobe to their

bicycles locked up outside the organic coffee shops or their offices. They are the face of a city that exudes confidence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There is another face to this city, however, a face that jolts this small town, suburban father and grandfather into a realization that perhaps the 14052 doesn't tell the whole story of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. I'm talking about the burgeoning troupe of panhandlers and mendicants (RIP Snake) who apparently call the streets their home. They come in all shapes and sizes—men, women; black, white; my age, middle age, 30-something, and plenty—a majority, actually—that are your age.

I'll admit that I don't know what to think about all this. Should I be compassionate, terrified, indignant, skeptical? Should I be ashamed that I have dollars in my pocket that I only occasionally share with them? Or is their plight simply a fact of urban life in 2018 and a harbinger for darker days ahead?

I encountered some who were forlorn and downcast and wasted with stories of torment broadcast by their eyes. Some have wild hair, tattered clothes and a lumbering, awkward gait that brings with it an odor that only lack of bathing and laundry could produce. A few, however, looked more recently arrived to the panhandling protocol—their North Face jackets, Columbia cargo pants and Merrell hiking boots still with plenty of miles left in them. The resourceful attempt some busking—strumming a guitar, beating on a bongo, busting rhymes in a rap for spare change. Others are mining the city garbage cans and dumpsters for leftovers in a bagel wrapper or the bottom of a pizza box. Most are chillin' and biding their time, jockeying for position for nighttime sleeping quarters: retail business doorways, alleys, or the grounds of the Capitol that seems at times like KOA without tents. They've got signs, scrawled on cardboard, that announce their plight, "Need money, anything will help" or something like that. I juxtapose that with the preponderance of "Help Wanted" signs we see at restaurants, and skepticism rears its ugly head. Who knows which ones are legit, which are Dickens-like grifters, which wheelchairs are only props, which self-proclaimed veterans actually served, which of them suffer from mental illness and addiction that remain undiagnosed and untreated by a miserly health care system? As a writer and a teacher, stories are my stock in trade, so I am, mostly, curious.

I hope you can forgive your old man's naiveté. I know Denver isn't exactly East Aurora, but imagine this happening at home. Imagine going for dinner at Rick's or stopping at NOCO and passing a cadre of supplicants, maybe holding a sign, maybe bold enough to confront you with, "Hey brother, can you help one of God's children out?" Imagine going for early morning coffee at Taste or Elm Street Bakery and finding the doorway occupied by a young man in the remnants of a sleeping bag, dust and dirt rising from him like Charles Schultz's Pigpen. Imagine the train tracks or behind the library becoming reminiscent of a Depression-era hobo camp.

One quick anecdote: We were at dinner last night at Sam's No. 3 Diner, our favorite Denver haunt. So this panhandler came in—wild-eyed twenty-something guy, dirty,

scruffy, in, shall we say, an altered state due to some substance or another. He kept bugging the girl at the register, and we couldn't tell if he came in regularly or was a first-timer. The hostess was a tough woman; she wasn't taking any guff from anybody, and I thought she would throw him out, call the cops or get some help. The situation was uncomfortable for us, because it 's not what we see at home. I don't know how it would go down at the Right Field Satellite Office or Charlie's Diner or the Iron Kettle. Eventually, he left, or so we thought. As we walked out, we saw that she had found a dark corner of the restaurant for him and had given him a bowl of mashed potatoes, which he seemed to be appreciating. A kindly soul. It warmed our hearts. He is, after all, more than a kid looking for a handout; he's somebody's son.

Which brings me, at long last, to the point of this week's offering.

When I see street kids, part of me pretends to be a sociologist or a cultural anthropologist, postulating about the reasons for homelessness. But let's face it; I am neither of those. I'm a father, now a grandfather, and a human being. These kids begging in public, rooting through dumpsters, grabbing filthy, half-smoked cigarette butts off the street must have fathers, too, don't they? Addie, Gabe and Mariah, none of you have the good sense to live in East Aurora—yet—so I don't know exactly what goes on in your life from day to day. But I do know you're all working, earning some sort of a living, sleeping indoors with a roof over your head (unless you're camping), and making your way in an uncertain world. And I know you're not asking strangers for money, either out of necessity or lack of initiative, because if it ever came to that, you know I would be there. I am grateful that you are okay, but the images from Denver stick with me and I wonder how this can be in the land of plenty.

Carry on. Love, Dad