

JEFFREY CARR

Mt. Miguel and Neighbor's Yard, 2018
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ANTHONY DEL ZOMPO

Hungry for Change

A homeless
perspective

My friend Deb and I met for lunch at the Palomar last week. The hostess seated us in the bar, and the room was bright and warm. The humidity was high that day and it felt like we were actually on vacation in Mexico. As the waitress handed us our menus, she told us about the specials.

"Today we have grilled ono tacos."

"That sounds really good," I said. "How much?"

"Fifteen dollars."

She walked away and gave us a moment to decide. Deb opened her menu and deliberated between two vegetarian options. I didn't even pick mine up. I wanted the special tacos.

"Fifteen dollars for lunch? I think I'm worth it."

"No, Tony. You *are* worth it," Deb said with a laugh. She had recently introduced me to a CD set by Wayne Dyer on the power of intention and manifestation.

"Right, Deb. Good catch. I *am* worth it."

We took our time and enjoyed ourselves. Neither one of us has a job, but we still felt good. Deb had just found a tenant for her spare bedroom, and I had finally given myself permission to take a sabbatical and work on my book for the next year. When the bill came, I asked for a box. There was more food than I could eat, and I decided to take one of the tacos and some rice and beans home for a second meal. I put down a twenty and so did Deb. The service was good, and the waitress had told us that she was a student at Cabrillo.

"I like to tip a little more than expected," Deb said. "Especially for a young girl working her way through school."

"I agree. Plus, I always feel like I'm getting a good deal when I bring home extra food."

We stood and left through the back exit, and as I opened the door, the stench of urine assaulted my nose. It was getting hotter, and as the temperature rose, so did the odor outside. When we came around the corner, three homeless men were sitting ten feet away. I felt an impulse to offer one of them my leftovers and hesitated. How could I choose one and not the others? Besides, I had just spent twenty bucks. That would be like handing the guy a ten dollar bill. And I hadn't asked for a fork because I was heading straight home. How would he eat the rice and beans?

I said goodbye to Deb, and although I had made my decision, my ambivalence continued. I got in the car and

the leftovers rode shotgun. As the aroma from the food filled the interior, I recalled the smell outside the restaurant and felt a pang of guilt as I thought about how much my life has changed in the last twelve years. When I passed the State Park Exit, I remembered a night back in the winter of 2003.

It was already forty-two degrees and the temperature was expected to drop into the mid thirties. I started the car and turned the heater on full blast. I had spent the day stacking firewood, and although the sweat had dried, my shirt was still sticking to my back. I hadn't changed my clothes in a week, and I had no idea when I'd have my next shower. As I waited for the car to warm up, I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror. My beard was only three weeks old, but it was full, and the gray spots were thick and wiry.

When the car was hot enough, I shut off the engine and crawled into the backseat. I was parked on an empty lot in Aptos, and I knew I'd be safe for the time being. I fluffed the pillow under my head, pulled the sleeping bag tight around me, and turned on the dome light. I read for fifteen minutes before I shut it off. The gas tank was full, but I'd be screwed if I killed the battery. I had been arrested for a DUI six months before, and although I wasn't about to drive with a suspended license and expired tags, I might need to warm up the interior every few hours if the cold snap continued. As I pulled myself into a fetal position in my Saturn sedan, I was grateful that I was short. My arthritis wasn't too bad, and I could still get some decent rest in my car. But before I slept, I endured the nightly torment that had become my constant companion. I ruminated over my failures, and a part of me believed that I had finally gotten what I deserved.

I was in my tai chi class at Grant Park one fall morning a few years before that lunch at the Palomar. It was a gorgeous day, and as my classmates and I gathered in a circle, Kenny approached from the other end of the park. He was wearing the same clothes he had worn the week before: faded jeans with a rip in the knee and a red-and-black Pendleton shirt that was missing a few buttons. He bowed into the circle, knelt down, and gathered a handful of dew from the grass. He scrubbed his face vigorously with his moist hands, and when we had completed the warm-up exercises, he bowed and left without saying a word.

"The courage," remarked one of the women. "Just think. He chooses to be homeless."

Half a smile crept across my face as I considered the idea of "choosing" to be homeless, but I didn't say anything as a conversation ensued.

"Why can't he get a job?" asked another woman.

"No one should be hungry, there's plenty of food for everyone." "Can't the county just build more shelters?"

I felt uneasy, and as the tension began to build within my body, I realized that I was here to relieve stress, not create it. The conversation continued for several minutes. Solutions were posed, fingers were pointed, and everyone agreed that more should be done. Finally, I spoke.

"Yeah, I really don't think it's that simple."

"How do you know?" demanded one of the men in the circle.

"Because I've *been* homeless."

The class fell silent once again. I don't talk much about that period in my life, but it's getting harder to keep my mouth shut. What the average person can't comprehend is how feral someone becomes on the way to losing everything. Nobody wakes up homeless one day. I was fully aware that I was in a free fall toward the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, but by the time I let go of the final rung, there was nobody left to catch me.

A friend of mine recently told me that he and his wife had allowed a homeless woman to move in with them. They had known her for years, and they had watched her alcoholism spiral out of control. By the time she drank through her life savings, her adult children were completely disgusted with her. She had been on the street for about a year when my friend and his wife offered to let her move in.

He knew it was a bad idea from the start. She was up all night for the first three days talking to herself, and on the fifth day she called my friend an asshole and hurled a vase at him from across the living room. He had no choice but to kick her out, but despite his attempt to help her, he still felt guilty. I explained to him that by the time someone ends up outdoors, it's going to take way more than three hots and a cot to put them back together again.

For me, it took a village. I became a client of the county's mental health system and, in 2004 I was admitted into the Page Smith Community House, located on the

River Street Shelter lot. I made a half-hearted attempt to get sober at the time; still it was difficult to recover while I was surrounded by the despair that envelops the homeless community. Active addiction and drug dealing were epidemic on the property, along with theft, mental illness, and occasional violence. And even though I had burned my life to the ground, I lacked the conviction necessary to get sober for good.

It took several treatment programs, medication, and therapy to get my feet back under me. In 2006, I worked with an exceptional therapist named Kathy Wilke. During our time together, she said something that I'll never forget, something that has proven true for me time and time again: "Tony, I don't care if it's mental illness, drug addiction, alcoholism, or a combination. The number one predictor for sustained well-being is social support. You need a peer group."

At the core of every addict and alcoholic is a bottomless pit of shame and despair. I was estranged from my immediate family, had no friends left, and even though I didn't think anyone would ever welcome me again, I took her advice and got active in the recovery community in Santa Cruz. I can describe in detail turning point after turning point on a journey that defies the odds, but I can't connect the dots without believing that a miracle took place. For the first time, I was seen and heard by a group of people who were willing to bear witness to my humanity. As I felt their love and acceptance, my shame began to fade. I found a job in my second year of sobriety and started to put the pieces of my life back together. And it was at that point that I received the greatest resistance to getting well from within the mental health system itself.

I had been interviewed several times by social workers and psychiatrists to determine my eligibility for federal disability, and even though I had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, I was certain that I would be denied financial help. Federal disability is for people with chronic conditions who can no longer function in a normal capacity. I was working as a live-in care provider, and I had a roof over my head. And, most importantly, I had begun to believe in myself again. The social worker in charge of my application, however, did not. When I asked him to withdraw my petition, he protested.

"It's important to complete the process," he said.

"Why? I'm working full time and I have a place to live. I'm pretty sure that demonstrates that I can make it on my own."

"It's still a good idea. You know. Just in case." "Just in case what?"

"Well, God forbid—"

"God forbid I ever need your help in the future," I interrupted. "I'll probably kill myself or die of an overdose before I get back here. It's time for me to do this on my own."

The safety net the county had laid out had become a web that had entangled me, and the harder I struggled to free myself, the more tightly bound I became. I was angry at first. It took time for me to realize that my case manager had probably seen more than one person recover briefly and then relapse into addiction or become overwhelmed by mental illness once again. But by then I was convinced that this was my last shot. One more drink, one more joint, and I might be finished for good.

In my third year of sobriety, I discovered that I did not have bipolar disorder and was able to get off of my medication. It turns out that I had suffered from complex PTSD since childhood, which had been exacerbated by chronic alcoholism and addiction. I continued therapy, anger management, and grief counseling. I kept a journal, and I learned that there are some wounds from which it can take a lifetime to heal. Now, with over twelve years of sobriety, I feel as though I'm finally beginning to recover.

So what can I tell you about solving the homeless problem in Santa Cruz? You might think that because I lived the nightmare and came out the other side I'd have the answer. Sadly, I don't. But that was never the point. There is more to the homelessness than meets the eye, and the problem just might be as unique as each and every homeless man or woman you see shuffling around the county or panhandling on Pacific Avenue. One size will not fit all. And it's going to take more than housing to solve the problem.

First, it's going to require willingness and cooperation on the part of the afflicted. I couldn't be helped until I was ready to help myself. And, perhaps more importantly, it's going to require a disciplined empathy on the part of the helpers, particularly those who work in a professional capacity. Learned helplessness is epidemic among the poor and downtrodden, and it's difficult to recover when you're

being enabled by a system that depends upon your inability to get well to sustain its very existence. Like a good parent, a care provider has to learn when to let go and allow their client the dignity to succeed or fail. Too much dependence is never a good thing. It's easy to take as long as someone is willing to give, whether that someone is a friend, a parent, or the county itself. But although I know the difference between a handout and a hand up, I also know what it's like to be hungry.

This past Saturday, I took a date out for Thai food downtown. We ordered fresh spring rolls and agreed to share a curry dish with brown rice. We were going to a movie at the Del Mar and decided that we needed to save room for popcorn. By the time we had eaten our fill, there was more than enough left over for an additional serving.

"Shall I get you a box?" the waitress asked as she put down the check.

"Yes, please," I answered. "Oh, and I need a fork, too."

Tony del Zompo is a Capitola, California, resident and hospice volunteer, and he has worked as a physical therapist throughout Santa Cruz County. He is a frequent contributor to *Genesis* and has had several opinion and editorial pieces published in *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. He is currently at work on his memoir, "Fallen Apples."

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Mt. Miguel Late Afternoon, 2018

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