I took a different route to the office today. I’m glad I did. A red light stopped me at a street corner. Two men had set up shop on the corner, complete with backpacks and cardboard sign. While I watched, one of the men flashed his sign at the company van in front of me, and, not getting the reaction he hoped for, displayed some frustration. I didn’t see what was written on his sign, and the whole transaction piqued my curiosity: what was he asking for?

Like you, I’m sure, I’ve seen my fair share of cardboard signs wielded by homeless men, women, teens, and even wrapped around the occasional dog. I have spent many hours with transient individuals, listening to their stories. In my vehicle and my messenger bag, I carry with me a small supply of granola bars (sometimes with fruit and water) to offer to anyone who I encounter that is looking for assistance. It’s a worthwhile practice and I encourage everyone to do it. But I just realized it has a downside…

It sets a normative expectation that people are looking for me to help them. They are asking for something, and I, in my benevolence, can offer support.

The time I have spent listening to the stories of others and trying to understand them has been vastly rewarding. I am continually amazed at the impact these individuals have on my life. It has shown me that each person has incredible value. Even so, I find it discouragingly easy to slip back into the mindset of a unidirectional transaction, where I am the person helping another.

This man reminded me how false such a belief is. After his failure with the van in front of me, he turned his attention my way. He quickly unfolded his sign and pointed… “Smile. It’s more fun.” I couldn’t help but burst into laughter. And neither could he as he nodded and gave me a thumbs-up. Little did this man know that I had been wondering at my cynical nature for the past two days, but he did know that a smile can go a long way, and he offered that to me. I needed a smile. He helped me do so.

By all means, help others: carry a little supply of healthy snacks to distribute upon request. When you hand something to someone, make a physical contact and look the person in the eyes. Touch and respect are things we all need, and transient people rarely receive either.

Perhaps you might take it to the next level. Take a moment to talk with someone, collect their story and allow it to inform you of their reality. Suspend your judgment for a moment or two and just listen. Realize that they have something to offer you. You may find yourself smiling deeply from within. And this, as my favorite new street philosopher observed… is more fun.

“Want to change the world? Begin with myself - transform myself first. How? Through observation, through understanding. With no interference or judgment on my part - because what I judge I cannot understand.” – Anthony de Mello

Daryl Geffken, Gonzaga University.