



For anyone who's ever been homeless and for anyone who's ever helped the homeless.

I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.

Albert Schweitzer in a commencement address.

Bill the Barber

I cut hair every Saturday; blond hair, curly hair, tight black African hair, thin straight Central American Indian hair, old guys' hair, finer than thread, trying to cover a bald head, but mostly dirty hair, abused hair, hair that gets no air, hair that no one cares for. I'm probably the first person who has run his fingers through this hair, the first person to touch these heads in years. I'm Big Baby Jesus, the homeless barber, AKA Bill the Barber.

I never set out to be a barber, I'm still untrained. How did I get here? A friend of mine, a 60 year-old actor who's a barber in his day job, learned to cut hair in prison. I just started doing it one day. All my life I knew I'd be bald, I watched my father lose his hair before I was ten years old. By the time my own kids were five or so, there were only two haircut options for me; very short or no hair, so I picked up an electric clipper at a yard sale and started taking care of my hair needs.

Five years ago, I began volunteering with the Hand to Hand Feeding Project, which has been feeding the homeless in Santa Monica, California since 1988. One day, as we were making lunches, more than a year after I joined Hand To Hand, I looked at Robert, one of the homeless volunteers, and I thought he looked shaggy. I happened to have my rig in the car and offered to give Robert a trim. I was nervous, but knew him well enough and I'd observed that his thick, thick hair would probably be pretty easy. It went well; it was fun to talk with him. He loved the haircut and the attention and Debbie, the leader of Hand to Hand, and the others all oohed and aahed over it. I was a goner.

The next week another of the homeless who come to help at the church (in return for first crack at the clothes, extra food and a sense of community and self worth) asked me for a

haircut. Within a few weeks, driving to Santa Monica City Hall (where we give out our lunches) with a car full of guys, I realized that I had cut the hair of every person in the car (including my own). It wasn't long after that that I first dared to set up a chair at City Hall.

The first few weeks of cutting hair at City Hall were frightening, thrilling, and exhausting. The fact is, I had no idea what I was doing. Sure, I could put a guard (a plastic spacer with about twenty teeth that snaps onto the metal blades; there are 6 different sizes and each determines the amount of hair left on the head) on a pair of clippers and run it all over someone's head, give them a "number 2", but was that really a haircut? I could take it all off, being careful not to nick them, but what are you supposed to do with these scissors? How come barbers always grab a bunch of hair between two fingers, pull it out and then snip? What's a fade, what does it mean to feather?

The homeless guys taught me how to cut hair. As long as I asked and listened, I was all right. Some of the guys learned to cut in prison, some in the service and some at cosmetology school. No matter what their experience, EVERYONE had an opinion and it wasn't hard to figure out which of those had validity.

Even from the first day, however, I was appreciated and encouraged. I instantly saw that this was a great service I was giving and that beyond what every man was receiving in terms of his haircut, the buzz around the bench was benefiting many more people than the man getting his hair cut.

As my knowledge and comfort level grew, so did the kit that I bring every week. The first few weeks, all I had was a home electric clipper set that wasn't up to the job; it would punk out after three or four haircuts and wasn't designed to handle the grit in these guys' hair. I plugged into an outlet

at City Hall near the parking lot and was practically immediately harassed by a park ranger, who claimed I was stealing services. The next week I returned with a large automotive battery, a converter to AC and professional clippers. Now my crate has two clippers (three actually, one reserved for the filthiest of clients) four regular scissors, two thinning shears, two capes, washcloths, hand mirrors, Q-tips, hair gel, hand lotion, scalp conditioner and shampoo, antiseptic wipes, safety razors, oil and a screwdriver, combs, brushes, a transistor radio and especially important, Pinaud's talcum powder. I think the Pinaud's is the *madeleine* of the entire procedure.

The service that I offer is not merely grooming, it's not just an opportunity to look better for a job, to enhance self-esteem. I help to hide the shame of being homeless, I can help avoid a rousing by a cop. There's the physical contact, the magnificent privilege with which they honor me by allowing me to touch them. How sacred is that? In their lives, the only time another human touches them (outside the lucky few who manage to maintain ANY sort of relationship in the face of tremendous obstacles) it is to violate them, to rob them, to beat them, to rape them, to arrest them. I take this gift of theirs to me very seriously and regard it as a holy offering. In return, I help them feel "normal." I create an environment where not only do they feel safe for a few minutes, but where they are reconnected with "normal" life, where they are reunited with their own childhood, young adulthood, connectedness, with a time of everyday social intercourse.

For me the Pinaud is a key charm in the game. Matt, a regular customer and close friend, and I laugh and call it "magic" powder and that's not far off. It comes in a squeeze bottle, now plastic rather than the traditional metal of our childhood. It's still the same tall shape, with the same debonair man in tophat and tails (the "Clubman" in the full version of the name-Pinaud's Clubman Talc) and that same

green color, as distinct as the blue of a Tiffany's box. Most important of all, it has the same smell that it always did. As I apply it to the back of their necks, brushing away the hairs, relieving the itching until their next shower, the smell turns our outdoor bench, with the roar of the nearby freeway into an indoor shop of decades ago. I know that this is happening, as much as I know anything in my life. Maybe it IS magic powder.

My Dilemma

Writing this is a challenging experience for me. Although I have been involved with the homeless for five years and have never regretted a minute of the time I've given, I haven't examined my actions all that deeply. I came, I saw, I pitched in. I saw a need, I saw that I could help and I felt good from the first instant I got involved. The more time I've given to it, the better I have felt in practically every aspect of my life. The more love I put out, the more love surrounds me and the more my capacity to love has grown. So what could be wrong with doing something that seems so right?

Still I ask myself: What am I doing? How much should I be getting involved? Am I actually helping these people in the long run? There are many citizens who resent the work we are doing, saying that by serving meals, even one a week, we're making it easier for people to live on the street, that we're just delaying the day when these homeless get back into society. Shouldn't I be spending my time trying to get them job skills, trying to convince them to give up their lifestyle and freedom, if there is any freedom in living hand to mouth and trying to stay one step ahead of the cops?

One of the most enduring themes of science fiction is that of time travel. The quandary is always how can you change history or change the course of events? If one thing is changed then the whole world or future is changed (or destroyed.) Am I meddling in lives? How much am I

supposed to get involved? I tend to side more with the old Jewish saying "To save one life, is as if to have saved the entire world."

But am I saving lives at all or am I just stroking my own ego? I can take some comfort in the words of one wiser than me, when I periodically recognize that no one is going anywhere fast.

Improvement makes straight roads, but the crooked roads
without improvement are the roads of genius.

William Blake

And what am I doing to my own family as I spend more time with the homeless, time I could and should spend with them, time they are coming to resent, especially as I am now taking the extra time necessary to write a book about the homeless? It's not enough that I give the homeless the heart of the weekend, now I have to spend my week writing about them?

And what about me? Is this what I need in my life, is this the best thing I can be doing for my own self, even beyond the damage I might be doing to my family? What about me? Shouldn't I be spending all this time finding my own creative voice to say nothing of trying to prepare for my own retirement or material well-being?

Your Guide

Who shall say I am not the happy genius of my household?
William Carlos Williams, Danse Russe, 1917

Who am I? I've grown up in a land and era of plenty and I've always felt alienated. When I was young, I was the boy from a city family in a three-room country schoolhouse, I was the

only ethnic kid. In high school I was the hippie in a throwback town of greasers. The Viet Nam war and all its governmental lies confirmed my suspicions of authority and nothing I've seen since has made me feel any more comfortable. This land of plenty means plenty of consumption and waste and plenty of dread for me. I agree with most of John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*, that there's a monster, that it's man against the monster, and that men made it but they can't control it. Is it any wonder that I play on the side of the homeless?

How difficult it has been to make my peace with this culture, where I feel our only value to the system and to our government is as consumers, proven by the fact that we're the only developed country without national health insurance, where we're encouraged and practically forced to amass great personal debt, where our president embraces legislation that makes it impossible for the little guy to declare bankruptcy, where there's the steady, intentional erosion of public education, with ever-increasing stratification of society, where the platform of one of the two political parties is thinly disguised racism, where I've rarely seen any public behavior that remotely lives up to what we've been taught our country stands for.

This is not to say that I don't love life and love people and don't see beauty all around me and am not grateful for every breath I breathe and every friend I have and every opportunity I've been offered. The last ten years have been a wonderful, challenging, learning time for me. They've been about changing from being frustrated at not having and getting what I wanted to learning to want and be content with what I have. Is that settling for less or is it seeing things more clearly?

I don't feel I'm necessarily well adjusted. Scratch that, I'm still a freak. Maybe this is what draws me to the homeless. One of my favorite songs, one that's given me much comfort

over the years, is one that I think many of the homeless would identify with. It's by the Beach Boys.

I Just Wasn't Made For These Times

Brian Wilson/Tony Asher

I keep looking for a place to fit
Where I can speak my mind
I've been trying hard to find the people
That I won't leave behind

They say I got brains
But they ain't doing me no good
I wish they could

Each time things start to happen again
I think I got something good goin' for myself
But what goes wrong

Sometimes I feel very sad
Sometimes I feel very sad
(Can't find nothin' I can put my heart and soul into)
Sometimes I feel very sad
(Can't find nothin' I can put my heart and soul into)

I guess I just wasn't made for these times

Every time I get the inspiration
To go change things around
No one wants to help me look for places
Where new things might be found

Where can I turn
when my fair weather friends cop out
What's it all about

Each time things start to happen again
I think I got something good goin' for myself
But what goes wrong

Sometimes I feel very sad
Sometimes I feel very sad
(Can't find nothin' I can put my heart and soul into)
Sometimes I feel very sad
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I guess I just wasn't made for these times

I do yearn for simpler times, times when man was more in tune with the earth, with the seasons, when we were more connected. I strive to be here now, to live in this moment and think it might be easier in simpler times. I feel that the third world will save us, after we've destroyed our world. After we've used all our oil, the donkeys will save us. We'll be saved by the countries that have never forgotten how to till the land or what a growing season is. Mexico will save the United States and Baja California will save Mexico. The homeless will save us.

Men's Work

My barber area is a men's area, how we talk, how we laugh, this is men's work. Women are always welcome and most Saturdays we give at least one woman a cut (about right when you figure there are 10 men on the street for every woman) and there are girlfriends hanging around, making sure that Big Mike (another guy who often comes and cuts hair along side me) and I do the right thing, but this is clearly a men's zone and that's just fine by me. Just as a traditional barbershop is a place for men to gather and talk freely, so is ours.

My search for peace, meaning and hope in my life has led me to men's groups and they've been very helpful to me. This is a hard time to be a man, not that all times aren't hard, for both men and women, but the past forty years especially

has been a confusing time for men, at least for thinking, feeling men. As the world and old orders change, there are so few role models, there are no road maps for my generation. How few older men could we look up to and emulate? When we said, "Don't trust anyone over thirty," we weren't talking about women.

As women have stepped out in recent decades and addressed so much inequality that was centuries and millennia out of date, men's roles have also changed. But there has been much less talk, less consciousness-raising, less awareness of the emotional needs of men.

Am I saying that these men are on the street because of the women's movement? No, not at all. Am I saying that they are the victims of changes in the past decades? I don't like to think of them as victims, I don't see them that way, but in many ways they are on the street as a response to changes they don't understand.

In this post-industrial, post-initiation and post rites of passage era, who tells us what a man is and how to become one and what a man needs to feel full? Certainly the media doesn't help. It's been generations since Father Knew Best. The adult male on television these past 20 years has been a buffoon at best, more often a thuggish lout, one who is continually outsmarted or one-upped by his spouse and children. He is depicted as an emotional zero, unable to articulate the feelings he isn't supposed to have.

One thing a man needs is to feel that he is needed and that he is useful. This is especially hard for the homeless man. Some men take care of this need by volunteering at various programs. Others will take another under their wings and care for him.

But on the street, as in the culture at large, there is little solidarity among men. Competition for the scraps is more

the rule. The homeless have lost so much of the means of expressing themselves creatively as men. I recognize this and I like to think I can help them feel better about themselves in a way that only another man can. I like to think that is one of the services I offer them.

Where Do They All Come From?

Better to live alone; with a fool there is no companionship.
With few desires live alone and do no evil,
like an elephant in the forest roaming at will.

Suttapitaka Dhammapada 23:330

The Pali Canon (sacred scriptures of Theravada Buddhism)

Why are there so many homeless? Who are they and why do they end up on the street?

In different eras of our history, we took care of people, or at least we took care of people in different ways. Before we were convinced by industry and advertising to break into small, nuclear families (so that many more cars, houses, refrigerators, TVs and air conditioners could be sold) not every person had to run a household, had to have all the skills and ambitions, be competent enough to hold it all together. My wife's Aunt Ethel died a few years ago in her nineties. Ethel was extremely shy and uncomfortable out in the world. Ethel never had to go out and join the workforce, she didn't have to worry about paying the bills on time. Her job in the family was to cook and tend the house and take care of her aging, infirm parents. As she got older, she ran the house for her siblings.

Many of the men I see weekly aren't up to managing all the skills it takes to keep a home going, earning a wage, shopping for groceries, cooking, cleaning, keeping the car maintained and the insurance paid up, getting to the dentist

and doctor regularly, paying the bills, getting the tax return in on time. That doesn't make them less than others. I seriously don't think either my wife or I could keep our household running alone.

Some have drinking problems. Some have drug problems. Some have anger issues, they don't play well with others, bosses, co-workers, wives. Some have disabilities, some have mental illness, some have all these traits. Twenty-odd years ago, some would have been in institutions, but as these have closed due to budget cutbacks and due to our changing views as to what government and society should provide to its citizens, they are on the street, fallen through the safety net that nobody talks about any more.

What they have in common is that they're either unable or unwilling to be the type of citizen our system honors and wants, in John Kenneth Galbraith's words, "The individual (who) serves the industrial system not by supplying it with savings and the resulting capital; he serves it by consuming its products."

Like the Okies in an earlier California, nobody wants them. They're seen as less than human and the community is afraid of them.

The homeless are different from the rest of us. They're not running around like we are, they're not trying to cram some chore into every minute, they're not trying to amass more and more possessions. They have time to reflect and I think sometimes they've come up with better solutions to life's issues than the rest of us have.

To yield is to be preserved whole.
To be bent is to become straight.
To be empty is to be full.
To be worn out is to be renewed.
To have little is to possess.

To have plenty is to be perplexed.
Lao Tse

Debbie Baxter

A coward is incapable of exhibiting love; it is the prerogative of the brave.

Gandhi

Debbie Baxter runs Hand to Hand. There is no way to make that plainer. When I first met her, I called her General Baxter and the name has stuck.

There are so many people in my life I am grateful for, people who bring me love, hope, and fun. Aside from my wife Judie, who has given me a home and a family, who knows me and still wants to be with me, no one in recent years has given me more than Debbie.

She is huge, yes, she is enormous. I say this because I and others worry about her, about her health and ability to work as hard as she does. I can only think that her heart is so huge that it needs a huge vessel to contain it. Perhaps the amount of love she produces and distributes needs a big factory.

Why General Baxter? Because she is a control freak; she has specific ways of doing every little thing and this infuriating trait has been a huge gift to me. I myself have these very same qualities. My career choice has exacerbated these tendencies. Motion picture and television production is all about details and trying to control so many elements. Platoons of people are marshaled to execute the vision (usually) of one person, and for someone so inclined, years of struggle in that industry can remove all sense of perspective. When everybody around you is on the same wavelength, it's hard to tell that you're all crazy. What

makes it even harder is that so many things are codified; efficiency is crucial and it's not like we're re-inventing the wheel on job after job, so we do things a certain way. As soon as someone comes up with a better way of doing something, everybody else picks up on it. Time is money and even a few moments wasted can cost a production dearly.

The first time I worked with Debbie, I bristled when she had me do something that was obviously inefficient and that I myself would have done differently (and better!) I suggested another way and was rebuffed. I don't know why I didn't argue with her, but I had a fortunate insight. I realized that in my work and in my home, I always took it upon myself to lead, to be the one with the answers. I always had to be right. With this work, I didn't have to do that, I didn't have to run the show, all I had to do was do the work, do what other people told me to!! What freedom, what joy!!

But that wasn't all. Seeing Debbie so detail oriented, I could see myself on that impossible path. I began to see that there is an obvious problem with trying to overmanage and to control things: nothing would ever be good enough, there would always be something out of place, something not quite right, or not right enough. Does this mean that instantly, I'm no longer a control freak, that I'm now a fun person to work for? Yeah, right. Probably more likely so in my work with Hand to Hand, less so in my professional life, but I am certainly more aware of it now, and I do make the effort. Thank you, Debbie.

That's just the beginning. What Debbie has, and what I'm so fortunate to see and to be around is her profound love of others, her boundless compassion.

But Debbie Baxter is hardly a saint; rather she's no more saintly than the rest of us. She's so fucking human, so uncertain of herself, doubting her strengths and her beauty, losing her temper, lashing out in fear. But through all this,

she loves these outcasts fiercely, uncompromisingly, unconditionally. She continually comes up with new definitions for the word feeding, constantly creating new services we can provide. I can't do what she does, I can't see another person leading us the way she does, another person putting so much into our mission. I often think to myself that the best thing I can do for Hand to Hand is to take care of Debbie so she can take care of the more than 300 people who count on us.

One of the things I love most about Debbie is when one of us calls the other to ask if he/she thinks it's ok to spend a certain amount of money on a person or a new project (Free underwear for everybody!!) and we each talk the other into spending more, doing more than the original amount that was already "too much." Although we have a budget and it would be a disaster to run out of money before the end of the month, Debbie has taught me that there is no limit to what you can give, that this is one place where inflation and escalation, squander and excess are good words. One of her goals is to model prosperity and bounty and she is never happier than on a holiday when we pull out the stops and bring so much ice cream that everyone cries uncle and can eat no more.

Debbie had been running Hand to Hand for years before I came aboard. I guess I should ask how she got into it, but that doesn't matter to me, what matters is that she does it and does it so thoroughly. I feel it's my duty to remind her that she must be careful to actually do some work at her job as a travel agent rather than spend the entire forty hours making calls for Hand to Hand. If she got fired, we'd all be in trouble.

Since before I first started showing up, Debbie would occasionally bring her grandmother to City Hall. Grandma is now in her 90s and doesn't help us in any physical way, but she's popular with the homeless. Many know her and come

up and talk with her. She's a sweet, sharp, lovely addition to our troop. Sometimes Debbie will pile a bunch of the regular guys into the van and take them over to Grandma's house with several video tapes and they'll make popcorn and watch movies, usually comedies. For years, I thought Grandma was the only family Debbie had.

Then one day, about a year ago, Debbie announces that her brother Glen is moving to LA, that he's going to stay with her (for a short while ONLY) and that he's homeless! I guess I ought to know by now that people drawn to psychotherapy are often the ones most in need of it, that drug counselors are very often ex-addicts, but I was surprised, as I think all of us were, that Debbie might actually have a family connection to this work.

Glen arrives and the two couldn't be more different: he's rail thin and nearly silent. I can't remember Glen initiating a conversation. (Did I mention that Debbie talks a lot and that she is LOUD?) Even after knowing him for a year now, I haven't seen anything physical or emotional that could make me think they sprang from the same loins or lived in the same house ever.

Glen had been living outside Chicago with his wife, Linda and two children. It's hard to get the story out of him but it seems that she wasn't very good at balancing the checkbook, a bunch of bills didn't get paid and they lost their house. This was not a good thing for their relationship, they broke up, she got custody, he lost his job, he got behind in child support, he left the state without making arrangements and he and Linda signed a paper that says he can't return until he pays back child support. It's safe to say that he carries a lot of shame about his kids.

Glen and Debbie living together doesn't work out. She feels so responsible for getting him on his feet, she pushes him to find work, but it's slow going. Glen needs to rest, it

seems that things were quite bad for him in Chicago. He'd lost his job, gotten into an auto accident, broken up with his wife and was estranged from his children. Drugs, alcohol, these were definite possibilities.

Debbie can't let him just be. It really is hard on her to have him in her small apartment. He's not bringing in any money and he eats twice what she does. She starts working weekends to bring in more money to cover the new food bills, as she's never made any excess money. She's been in the same small one bedroom apartment since she moved to LA over twenty years ago and her beat-up car is nearly that old. She's already stressing her large body with all she's taken on and she's getting really beat.

Debbie has a problem. As the three months she's allowed Glen draw to an end, she gets crazier and crazier. She can't let him fail, she can't throw him out and she can't let him stay. Everything she knows about unconditional love lets her down. Although she knows she can't fix Glen, although she knows she can't find him an apartment, find him a job, get him settled, she can't help herself.

She tortures herself about making him leave. She feels heartless, she knows what it's like on the street, how can SHE, of all people, throw her brother out on the street? I go over, I try to negotiate a way to make an easier transition, write up a contract, ask Debbie if she's willing to give Glen an extra month if he can come up with a feasible program that shows effort and the tiniest movement. They agree, but Glen is still not ready or able to put it all together.

When Glen leaves, it's harder on Debbie than it is on him. A few guys help him out the first few weeks, show him the ropes. Melodious Mike (hang on, you'll meet Melodious soon) takes him under his wing, but they fall out after a week or so. Glen's not willing to look up to Mike as the great authority.

Debbie is beside herself. The first time Glen doesn't show up for a Saturday at City Hall, she's out of her mind with fear and guilt. But Glen finds his way, after a fashion, he finds a temp agency that places him a few days each week in truck loading or office moving jobs, he finds a place to sleep under a bridge, and he shows up most weekends to help us either make lunches at the church or distribute them at City Hall. I still cut his hair every month or so. He always has money for (far too many) cigarettes. He's thinner than I wish he was and he's dirtier than most of the guys. I wish he'd wash his hair more often. When hair gets as greasy and thin as his is, it's just a matter of time before he'll start to have real health issues.

Now Debbie's better with it. For a while she was so sick at the thought that she turned him out that it was hard for her to face him.

My Ego

My ego, the way I off-handedly let it drop to people that I feed the homeless, to make myself look better in their eyes. It's no better than namedropping. I act like an expert, but what do I know? What do I know of what they really go through? What do I know about living through the winter rains? How dare I speak for them?

It worries me that I'm spewing out all these words as if I know all about the homeless when what do I know? I see the sunniest side of the sunniest people at the sunniest place. What would it take for me to write with more conviction? I have no doubts about the people I know. I trust my instincts, I trust that this man I see acting generously, with respect for another is not going to rob the other when I turn my back. Even so, I don't want the love and respect I have for these friends questioned because I've only seen them in one setting. It could be argued that I'm describing a

wild animal based on seeing it in a cage for an hour a day, always the same hour, always the same cage, always the same weather.

I need to do more research, if only to have more faith in my own observations and convictions. Do I dare spend whole days and nights with these people I call my friends? Do I have to do that to finish this book? What is at stake for me to do that? I might have to throw all the months of writing I've done away. I'll certainly have a hard time getting anything remotely like approval from my family for this scheme, especially from my younger daughter, who is particularly disdainful of my passion for this work.

and on.

What have you done to your hair?

Just because the homeless don't usually have events to dress up for, because they don't have access to bathing facilities and don't have much in the way of money, doesn't mean that they don't care about how they look. They go to great trouble to look their best and to distinguish themselves from others.

One way this plays out is in the "hair care products" they use. Practically every day, I come across a head of hair that has something unorthodox in it: cooking oil, vaseline, skin lotion, left-in shampoo or conditioner. It seems to be a primal need for transformation. Unfortunately, these products attract dirt and sand and mess up my clippers. I can tell at a glance that hair with a bizarre treatment will be trouble and take up to five times as long to cut. I haven't turned anyone away, no matter how weird the treatment, but I will have them wait until the end, if it looks like it'll be really difficult.

I like MY homeless

Happiness is doing your duty, and the harder the duty the greater the happiness.

Nikos Kazantzakis, Zorba the Greek

I realize that the people I see every Saturday might be a somewhat misleading representation of who is on the streets. Maybe the citizens who speak with such bitterness, anger and fear at city council meetings are more correct by far in their assessment than I am. I know that many homeless people are mentally ill, I imagine that there is a criminal element, I see anger and frustration and there certainly is much, much more out there that I don't see. I do know that the people we see, both week after week or just once, are likely more "socialized", more friendly and well adjusted than the ones who get anxious in such a large group, who are paranoid about coming to City Hall, in front of the police station, and who outright refuse to stand in a line or take a handout. I don't know how I'd feel about helping people who are ruder and shittier. I LIKE the fact that I see gratitude out there, that people are happy to see me, that I am appreciated. Would I still be in service if that weren't the case? I'd like to think that I would, but probably not.

I acknowledge that I don't think I could be truly generous and selfless in this work. I like that it's a safe environment and that I see everyone on his best behavior. It gives me the feeling that I'm actually helping. I don't see most of them when they're drunk and angry, I don't see them sleeping with trash bags covering them in the winter rain. I'm not there when they realize that yet another tooth is going to come out, never to return. I don't see them get arrested for loitering, I only see them 6 weeks later, after they're released, and they're dried out and often healthier,

at least physically. Does that make me a dilettante? I wonder. As much as I love being with these men, calling them friends, what am I doing out of ego and will I ever be able to figure that out? I know I let drop into conversations that I feed the homeless and I know I get an ego charge out of saying it. I know that it makes me feel good to tell other people, so they will likely think better of me, think me more selfless, think me braver. I own that I get that out of it. But that's not the main reason I do it. I know that I enjoy the frisson of danger of being with these men, the danger of flirting with the other, the romance of being with gypsies, of being with the outsiders. While I don't have any desire to get sick, I pride myself on touching their dirty skin and exposing myself to their diseases. I enjoy, if that's the right word, being a tourist in the land of misery.

There but for fortune go I, yeah, there's some of that. And though I don't think about it consciously, I am concerned with my karma. I feel that I'm somehow protecting my family by doing this work, even when I might better serve them by spending these Saturday and holiday hours with them.

Yes, I am doing this for the homeless, I'm doing something nobody else is doing (save Big Mike, now that he's joined us) but I am so much more doing this for myself. These men have given me something I was never able to give myself before, something my brains, my education, my career achievements, my family, my money, my American citizenship never brought. I am able to be myself when I am with them. I am more myself with them than I am at any other time in my life. After years of struggling through meditation and other methods, when I am with these men, I am finally living in the moment. I'm totally focused on not fucking up their hair, on what they're saying, on where they're coming from. What a huge gift that is to me.

I feel more at home with the homeless than I do with my own family. Reading that line should freak me out, but it

doesn't.

Even though they are my friends, I still have an anonymity and separateness from them. I don't give out my cellphone to them unless someone is really sick or in crisis. Is the real struggle to be truly close to people, with your family? Isn't it always easier to be with casual friends? Is this one of the reasons these guys have dropped out of society, an unwillingness and inability to be emotionally close to the people who matter to them? Are we back to a male area? Are the homeless (and am I?) unable to generate the emotion that women demand?

Rudy

Rudy was one of my first customers and I'm grateful to him, but for perhaps an unlikely reason: he's impossibly good looking and has great hair.

When I first started cutting I truly did not know what I was doing and I was frightened, scared I'd fuck up somebody's hair, that they'd be mad at me and that no one would want me to cut their hair anymore. The first few weeks were very tense; I'd hold my breath and wait to hear what the man wanted. If it was down to the skull, no guard, that was no problem; also no problem if he wanted a #2 or #3 guard, it was all with the electric clippers and I could handle that.

But if the guy wanted a real haircut, a trim, if he had been shaped by a real barber and I needed to clean it up, if he had wavy or straight hair and actually PARTED it, if I needed to smooth it all together, then I shook with anxiety. Especially troublesome were men with fine hair, either through age, having Indian blood, or hair damage. Fine hair shows every cut of the scissors (shows every mistake or misstep, in my case.)

Along came Rudy, Latino, suave, mid-fifties, a real ladykiller. His hair was PERFECT. No matter what I did, he would look

great and he won me many customers in the crucial first weeks.

The past few years have not been kind to Rudy, however. Sometimes he'll be drunk on a Saturday morning, he's lost teeth, he's just gotten worn down. He comes by a lot less often, he's not nearly as concerned with the impression he makes. His easy, confident air has been beaten out of him. In his face, he's aged fifteen years in the past three. Now he's starting to look his age, 60.

Contact me if you wish to read more bill@billmegalos.com