

Virtue in the Invisible

Larry Chan

Topic of Essay: Ren

Queens College, City University of New York

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“Homeless Veteran

Hopeless and Defeated

Please Spare some Change, Sorry if That’s Too Much to Ask for”

Walking down midtown, the sound of cars and conversations are drowning. Crowds engulf you and while you are aware people surround you, they are invisible as you develop tunnel vision traveling from point A to point B. It is only natural that you mind your own business. It is far easier to simply ignore those around you, for you are too busy to stop a moment and notice the people around you who need a help. However, virtue can be found in the moments when you go out of our way to extend your hand to help those that need it.

Stemming from Chinese Confucian values, Ren is a concept that exists as one of the foundational pillars that virtue rests upon. Ren translates to a meaning along the lines of “humanity,” “humanness,” “goodness,” “benevolence,” or “love” (Stefon). One way to think of ren can be that it is the virtue of caring for others (Wong). It is said that, “Ren manifests itself when a virtuous person treats others with humaneness” (Stefon). Ren is a valuable characteristic that helps a community flourish. If we do not care about our neighbors, how can we possibly function as a unit? However, it feels as though this ideology diminishes as we head deeper in the 21st century. In this increasingly individualistic world, ren is a trait that is direly needed, which can be seen in the way that we treat others.

Homelessness is a pervasive issue. Over the course of the city fiscal year 2017, 129,803 different men, women, and children slept in the New York municipal shelter system; this figure does not even include the thousands of unsheltered homeless that sleep on the city streets (Coalition for the Homeless). Homelessness is an issue that hits close to home for me. When I was young, my family and I were homeless. We eventually moved to subsidized housing, “the

projects,” in Harlem where I lived for over 10 years. I have always been sympathetic towards the homeless and underprivileged, they are humans that deserve to be treated with humaneness, as ren dictates. Recently, where I currently live in, I saw flyers and a mob of people protesting a homeless shelter being built in the neighborhood. It angered me that people are not more compassionate. While I understand and appreciate the concern they have for the community, on average, studies show that supportive housing facilities that service the homeless and other vulnerable populations rarely lead to higher crime rates (McCoy). Events like this only further stigmatize the homeless and lead them to devalue themselves as humans. Many homeless people end up in the position they are in, not because of their own actions, but because of unfortunate circumstances. Most people, if any, do not choose to be homeless. I have met many homeless people that were great and have once been part of that community myself. It is my hope that people will find it in their hearts and adopt the virtue of ren to help these people in need, instead of casting them aside to the shadows.

As a sophomore at Queens College, I had the pleasure of participating in a program called Big Buddy at Queens College. In the program, we mentored homeless children by taking them on outings where we explored the city and attended culturally enriching events. These kids that live in shelters, over 22,000 in New York, have been called “invisible children,” because they go by unnoticed by society, living in conditions unsuited for any child (Elliott). These children are at risk and need our help. I am glad I had the opportunity to contribute, even if only a little, towards this cause.

When I was young and homeless, I had been in a similar program where I had a mentor too. Joining Big Buddy, made me feel that I came a full circle and allowed me to pay my gratitude forward. I recall one day, after the program, I bumped into my old little buddy and he

shouted “LARRY!!” and rushed me with a hug, it was one of the more satisfying moments in my life. I felt I had made a connection and a meaningful impact in this kid’s life, the same as my mentor had done for me.

Continuing my walk down midtown, I notice a man sitting with a sign that says something along the lines of “Homeless Veteran [.] Hopeless and Defeated [.] Please Spare some Change, Sorry if That’s Too Much to Ask for.” My heart sinks. I have a few dollars in my pocket, but I do not want to part with it because I want to use it to buy some cart food. I continue walking, but the words resonate within me, and it does not sit well. The feeling of hopelessness and defeat, no human should ever feel that way. I turn and walk several blocks back. As I approach the man, his posture and demeanor are even more apparent than they were when I was at a distance, they spell the words on the cardboard he has in front of him. I peer into the paper cup in front of him, the only thing in it is a lighter. This makes me angry. I thought to myself: “why has no one given him any money? Over a hundred people must have passed since I was last here. Maybe he transferred the money already, but he seems frozen.” I take my wallet out and prepare to give him some change. As I do so, I recall advice given by Pope Francis when giving to others, “[...] the way of giving is as important as the gift. You should not simply drop a bill into a cup and walk away. You must stop, look the person in the eyes, and touch his or her hands. The reason is to preserve dignity, to see another person not as a pathology or a social condition, but as a human, with a life whose value is equal to your own” (The New York Times Editorial Board). This way of thinking is not easy. It is not my first instinctual response, it can be hard to gaze upon the homeless, much less make eye contact. Even going out of your way to help someone can be difficult. However, I know it is necessary. I pause in front of him and crouch

down a bit, I put a few bills in the cup and wait for him to look up. He looks up, we make eye contact, and I give him a smile. He smiles brightly back and says, “thank you so much.”

Reflecting on the event, there are a few things that strike me. The first is the lighter, it did not occur to me initially that it could be indicative of drug use, however, I do not regret giving him money. I refrain from judgement and align myself with Pope Francis’ response when he was asked what if the person uses the money to buy a glass of wine, “If a glass of wine is the only happiness he has in life, that’s O.K. Instead, ask yourself, what do you do on the sly? What ‘happiness’ do you seek in secret?” (The New York Times Editorial Board). The most important thing I took from that event was the man’s response. It may be just conjecture on my part, but the smile and thank you did not feel it was solely meant for the money I gave him. To me, it felt as though he was thanking me not for the money, but for acknowledging him as a fellow human being. This exchange is what *ren* means to me, to treat everyone with respect, dignity, and humaneness; if we all follow this principle, perhaps, the world may be a brighter place.

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