

## Fred the Barber on the Virtue of Charity

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

Charity is one of those cardinal virtues the sisters emphasized in Catholic school, along with faith and hope. But of the three, charity is the curious one. It seems to me faith and hope are intrinsic to the individual, and, if present at all, should be active most of the time. But charity gets switched off and on, depending on circumstances and my fortune. If I am choosy about my charity, am I only partly charitable? If I avoid the fellow with the cardboard sign, am I uncharitable, or am I more charitable by not enabling him?

It was time to visit to Fred the Barber, who, unknowingly, helps me navigate through these philosophical pickles. It started when Fred helped me figure out the meaning of life. In a diatribe, he told me, "Life is what happens when you're sweeping up the cuttings. Maybe a tip if you're lucky." It wasn't in his words, but through him I saw the answer, that the meaning of life is to search for the meaning of life.

I walked in, Fred stepped out of his own barber chair, put the *True Detective* magazine on the rack, took his place behind the chair, and called "Next!" I was the only customer. I took the chair, he wrapped my neck, pointed to an ear, and said "You got to take 'em out." I'd forgotten the hearing aids were there, but with Fred, I wouldn't need them anyway.

As he combed and clipped and talked baseball, I took a breath, and asked, "So, Fred, what do you think of charity?"

"Charity is for losers, Mack. Those big outfits, they show crippled kids and women crying, and make you feel guilty for making a decent living while they pay their executives in the millions. Got no use for 'em."

He continued clipping, but quietly now. He loosened the tissue and shaved my neck the real barber way, with a razor. As he reached for the tonic, I sensed him thinking.

"You know, Mack, I keep this kind of quiet, because it's my own damn business. But I know there's guys out there hurting. I was, once. Sometimes they're drinkers, or druggies, or just down on their luck. I got no beef with any of 'em, but I ain't giving 'em money neither.

"But if one approaches me, or I come across someone with a help-me sign, man or woman, I hand them a card with my shop name and address, and tell them to stop by on Thursday night at closing time for a free haircut. It's dignity, man. That's all I'm giving them, a little dignity so they can walk with their head up. Don't cost me nuthin' 'cept a little time."

And that is the reason I go to Fred the Barber. I paid his price, added a ten-dollar tip, and, for the first time ever, reached out and shook the guru's hand.