

Who Am I Talking To?

By Charlie Smith

My friend Robert, his friend, and I walked into Tomasita's, a delicious Mexican Restaurant in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Just inside the door, an Indian man of indeterminate old age sat on a bench as though waiting for a table. He wore a faded, crumpled, U.S. Army field jacket and himself looked, wrinkled, poor and forlorn. As we passed he asked, "would you give me some money"?

I was taken aback and simply walked past ignoring him. I wondered how the restaurant could allow such begging.

The Margaritas and food were perfect and brought back memories of the many fine years I had spent in Santa Fe. My friend was warmer and more appreciative than usual and this added to the evening's pleasure. Finally, it was time to leave and we walked to the door to see the same man sitting there. In the moment, I took pity on him, took out my wallet and gave him ten dollars before he could say anything.

He stood up, faced me, and came to full military attention. He was weeping and tears ran down his face. Then, he saluted me with crisp and full conviction. He held the salute and I returned it. I was speechless as was everyone else. We left the restaurant.

In the very moment of looking at his face, I saw his pride at attention, his tears and utter gratitude, his history, service to his country, his desperation, his humility and embarrassment. I was ashamed at having ignored him in the first place, and ashamed of my preconceptions and bigotry that kept me from experiencing him because of how he looked and my own rules of propriety and tidiness.

How without compassion I am most of the time even when I'm listening professionally.

How every face is a universe of history ignored by my agenda and self-interest.

How big the world really is.

How far I have to go.