



A Matter of Letters



Mark O'Brien



Photo by [Ben Hershey](#) on [Unsplash](#)

My friend, colleague, and LinkedIn connection, [Kimberly Davis](#), recently wrote a series of two short posts about her experience with a street person some years ago. The most important parts of that experience were what she learned — specifically about herself and, more generally, about all of us.

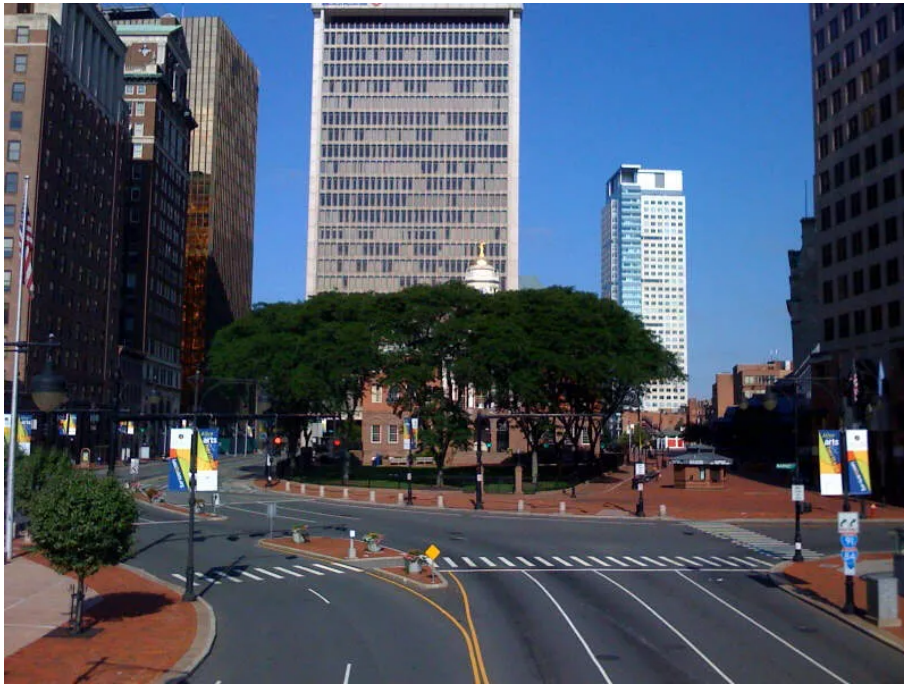
From the second post in her series:

When we do something that's incongruent with who we are and what we believe, we feel it ... we can't hide from ourselves. Even if we have a host of reasons to excuse our behavior, reasons don't alter facts. Inside we know the truth. When we're in breach of our own integrity, we start to mask ourselves off and hide. We dissipate our power and lose the ability to truly connect with others.

Kimberly's story reminded me about my own experience with a street person. And it inspired me to share it here.

To Each His Own Integrity

On a Monday afternoon in 1991, I'd left the office in which I worked in downtown Hartford, Connecticut, to get a cup of coffee. Over the weekend immediately prior, I'd seen *The Fisher King*. While the coherence of the film left much to be desired, the resonance of its mythological references and archetypes had greatly affected me. (I'm a [Joseph Campbell](#) devotee.) On Monday, I was still haunted by much of what I'd seen.



West on Central Row toward Main and Pearl

As I crossed Main Street from Central Row, angling north across Pearl Street and up Main toward Asylum Street, a homeless person approached me. He was a young man, mid-30s perhaps, dressed in dirty, dark blue twill work pants and an equally dirty and tattered blue plaid flannel shirt. He hadn't

shaved for a week or more. His hair was unkempt and stringy. His eyes were steely blue. And they never left mine.

As he approached, clearly intending to accost me, I prepared myself for one of the typical stories: *My car broke down. I need gas money. I need train fare. I need money for food. I need to feed my family.* I wasn't sure what he would say. But I was positive it wouldn't be the truth. He stood in front of me and stopped. Though there was room to walk past him, I stopped, too.

Still looking me square in the eye — with something in them that looked like serenity, rather than the angst, agitation, and desperation I was expecting — he said: “I'm trying to find the difference between *should* and *shouldn't*. I think it's a matter of letters.”

He didn't ask me for anything. I'd never given so much as a penny to a street person. I gave that young man a five-dollar bill without thinking twice or taking my eyes off of his. I felt as if I were looking into the eyes of the Robin Williams character in *The Fisher King*. And I thanked *him*.

Laura Mikolaitis

Let There Be Light

I had no idea how I could go back to work. I couldn't even imagine walking into the coffee shop and being composed enough to order a cup. So, I did neither. I turned south on Main Street and wandered aimlessly but thoughtfully for an hour or so.

I certainly couldn't explain to anyone what had just happened. How? To whom? If you don't believe in life-altering moments and your life is altered in a moment, how do you explain that? Answer: You don't. You just accept it and adjust.

I had no idea who he was. I didn't know his story. I couldn't know what misfortune had befallen him or why he was on the street. I couldn't presume to judge him. Most important, I couldn't imagine what it felt like to be without family and friends, without shelter, without clean clothes, without a shower and toiletries, unable to be sure when and from where my next meal would come — to be without the dignity and self-possession of all of that.

And that young man surely had no idea who I was. He likely had no knowledge of *The Fisher King*. He couldn't have known how it affected me. He couldn't have known I'm a writer, a student of words, and a lover of language. He couldn't have known a subtly profound play on words would freeze me in my tracks, rivet my attention, and alter me profoundly. He couldn't possibly have known any of that, could he?

Maybe this is a better question: Could it possibly be accidental that, of all the people that young man might have approached that day, I would be the one to be blown away — to be changed in an instant — by a turn of phrase so clever as to qualify as some kind of linguistic philosophy?

No.

There are no accidents. There are only signs. Sometimes those signs are people. It's our job to be awake enough to heed those signs, those messengers, to learn lessons from them, to make responsible decisions based on those lessons, and to live our lives according to what they teach us.

I'm trying to find the difference between *life* and *light*. I think it's a matter of faith.

Compassion

Language

Homeless

Philosophy

Faith