

Reaching out to others makes a difference

Bum died. His real name was Norman “Jake” Springer. But he called himself Bum. He died April 15. His life came due the same date our taxes came due.

I did not attend his Memorial Service although 500 other people did.

Joyce Letke mailed me a copy of the service. What moved me so deeply was that, included in the brochure, was a copy of an article I had written about him in 1997.

I had met Bum on a weekend retreat. I tried to persuade him that he was anything but his name. But he insisted. “If your car was open, I would have slept in it. If you had money in it, I would have taken it. I was a bum!”

As with most addicts, Bum’s addictions were rooted in a sense of personal inadequacy.

“My brother could take an airplane engine apart, put it back together, and the plane would fly,” he said. “I couldn’t screw in a light bulb without breaking it. He was handsome, had all the women, and made a lot of money. He was everything, and I was nothing.”

Then, at age 38, the man who had everything blew his brains out.

“I remember standing at his coffin, and my family coming by and saying: ‘We could have understood if you had killed yourself. Your life’s a waste.’”

It was then that Bum realized his brother was also into drugs and alcohol. Shortly afterward, Bum’s nephew, at age 18, also killed himself.

So Bum decided it was time for him to do it. He got a gun, loaded it, put the gun to his head and squeezed the trigger. Just then the phone rang. It was his sister calling him to thank him for being there when her son killed himself.

“She kept going on and on, praising me, but I couldn’t hear it. I kept saying to

myself, 'Would you please get off the line so I can kill myself,'" he said.

Finally, she hung up, and Bum picked up his gun again. He put it to his head, squeezed the trigger, and the phone rang again. This time it was his brother-in-law. He said to Bum, "Who you been on the phone with? I've been calling you for the last half hour. We're down here at the bowling alley. There's only three of us. We need a fourth. Get down here."

So Bum put his gun down and went bowling. Since that moment, Bum has ministered to countless people through Alcoholics Anonymous.

"All those young people hang around me," he said. "They say I'm an inspiration to them. I never thought I'd inspire anybody."

On the 25th anniversary of his sobriety, he told the group that he wanted a little respect. He insisted that they call him "Mr. Bum."

Mother Teresa said, "Most of us are not called to do great things, but to do small things with great love."

Notice, it wasn't a sermon that saved Bum's life. It was a phone call and an invitation.

Each person reading this column has done untold good without ever realizing it. You may literally have saved lives by smiling at a stranger, holding a door, complimenting someone, praising someone, noticing the person no one else noticed, inviting someone to be part of a game, or to join you for lunch.

Little things can mean everything!

And if you struggle with feelings of inadequacy or inferiority you are in great company. If we are to believe the writers of many of the lives of the saints, many of the greatest saints thought they were not worth much. They even thought of themselves as great sinners. That's why the kingdom of heaven is so wonderful. It's when all the Bums come marching in.