

From one perspective, this is an honest little anecdote about learning to see the “Other” as a human being. I respect the author’s openness in acknowledging their initial pulling back from the man in the church and their ultimate acknowledgment of his humanity.

What bothers me about this story is the lens through which it is told: i.e., a likely privileged, possibly physician, upstanding member of their church, turning their gaze on the outsider. Unlike the man described, the author probably doesn't sit on the outskirts of the church pews but right in the middle where no doubt they belong and feel comfortable.

Unfortunately, for me, the point of the essay is how hard the author strives to recognize the humanity of this individual. But in doing so there is a certain unconscious condescension leaking through that bothers me. The man reminds the author of his father, but his father seems "better," more acceptable because he is not contaminated by "the drink and the smoke." There is also something offputtingly clinical about the way the author offers diagnoses based solely on the man's appearance. Is this really justified? It's also a bit of a reach for me to conclude that the man is mentally ill because he has poor hygiene. Maybe it's hard for him to access washing facilities. Maybe he is a manual laborer and his fingernails are ungroomed because of his work.

What is perhaps unintentionally built observation by observation is a stereotype of a socially isolated alcoholic/smoker. BUT - the good church people have compassion for the man. The minister doesn't withhold communion from him because his fingernails are dirty! The author bravely decides to shake his hand - if he has to. I appreciate the author's truthfulness, and can relate to their ambivalence, which frankly I would likely be feeling myself in similar circumstances. But that is because of the way our lens of privilege defines our world and it is problematic lens indeed.

Finally, the author discovers that the man in the church has a fine tenor and knows the hymn. I think this is supposed to have the effect of showing us that he is not "Other," he is one of “us.” But why did it have to take a whole essay to get there? My uncomfortable feeling comes from the fact that, in the final analysis, the man with the voice and the fingernails is just a prop to show the author's evolution from negative judgment to somewhat reluctant acceptance. He's a better Christian at the end of the story than at the beginning and of course that is a good thing. But the story becomes smug in being all about the author's evolution. There is really little concern or caring for the man himself, the vehicle by which the author can become an improved person. Who is this man beyond fingernails and tenor? Is he just enjoying a moment of communion with his God? Is he in fact in need of help? I would have been more interested in a story about two people becoming better acquainted.