



Are Human Beings Being Human?

The taxi took us right into the heart of Salta with its small streets and row houses dating from the first half of the 20th century. I detected strong Spanish influences in both the atmosphere and architecture of the town, and I hoped the beautiful hacienda accents would be incorporated in the hotel building we were heading for.

To my disappointment, the taxi stopped in the center of the town before a concrete hotel dating from somewhere around the early seventies. However, my dislike for the building's appearance was compensated for by its excellent location: on the corner of the cross-junction of the town's two main streets. The property was dated, yet too modern-looking in contrast to the colonial Hispanic character of the town. Rush hour was over, and the two main streets were almost empty. The sun was slowly setting, already too low to spread its warming light into the streets.

I got out of the taxi and was engulfed by the dry heat radiating from the pavement and facades, which had been bathed in sunlight all day. When I turned around to enter the hotel an old woman, her open hand begging for some money, stood right in front of me. Her deeply wrinkled face was dry and strongly tanned from the sun. Her hair was covered with a black scarf and she was dressed in typical traditional Incan clothing. She had a small hump on her back and was bending slightly forward, her right hand leaning on a stick and her left one asking for some money. I reached into my pockets but could not find any change at all. I realized I had forgotten to get some cash at the airport upon my arrival.

Until that time I had taken note of what the old woman looked like and how she was dressed, but I had never looked directly at her. The hotel general manager gestured me to walk into the hotel and not give her anything. I was astonished by his blatant lack of empathy for the needs of this old woman. She was most likely someone's mother and someone's grandmother. Like all mothers and grandmothers she was the representative of the Mother of all creation, Mother Earth. We should honor the lives and wisdom of these women, and here I was being gestured to walk by this grandmother and ignore her request. I wanted to tell her to wait for a moment, until I could get some cash at the reception desk, but it was then that I looked into her eyes.

Such deep and dark windows into her soul! No, not her soul, but the soul of humanity. I felt like I was looking into the eyes of the Divine. I had no idea how long I stood there, speechless, my feet nailed to the ground. I would *never* forget those eyes!

Suddenly I felt the hand of the general manager touch my arm. It took me out of my trance-like state, and I signaled to the old woman to stay there as I rushed through the hotel lobby to the reception desk. I was focused, and on a mission. "Can you get me ten pesos and put it on my room account, please?"

The dumbfounded receptionist stared at me with a questioning look. My question must have taken her by surprise. Obviously these were not the first words she expected from an arriving VIP upon check-in.

"Can you get me ten pesos and put it on my room account, please!?" I repeated impatiently.

"Certainly, sir!" she finally stammered, crossing eyes with the general manager to make sure she had permission for this. "Would you like one bill of ten pesos or ten coins?"

"Whatever is easiest, but I would like it fast," I snapped.

In no time I had a bill of ten pesos, and I walked outside to give it to the old lady. To my surprise the street was completely empty. I walked around the corner in the hope of finding her there, but the

other street was also totally empty. Where had she gone? There was no way she could have walked down such a long street in such a short time. The stores along both streets were closed, and this certainly did not look like an area where she lived. From the look of her I expected her to live in a small house on the outskirts of Salta, but certainly not smack in its center. I was puzzled and disappointed.

In disbelief I looked down both streets again. Maybe the light had played a trick on me and she *was* walking somewhere further down the street. There was an eerie, silent atmosphere in each direction. This was the crossing of the town's two main streets. It was early evening, and yet there was not a living soul present in either street.

"What is going on?" I heard from behind me.

I turned around and found the general manager staring at me, an inquiring look on his face.

"The old lady," I said. "She is gone."

Still questioning, he responded, "Yes...?"

"I just wanted to give her some money," I explained. "It's wrong when a *grandmother* has to beg like that. I wanted to give her something but had no cash on me. And now she is gone!" I uttered, disappointed. "It's like she vanished from the streets of Salta."

The general manager shrugged his shoulders and opened the door of the hotel for me. I walked in, explained things to the receptionist and apologized for being so abrupt earlier. Then I checked in and went to my room.

I opened the door to a stale-smelling, colorless room with cheap and worn furniture. There was not enough light in the room—a classic problem of most older hotel rooms! I unpacked my suitcase, hung my clothes in the closet, opened my briefcase and put my laptop on the desk.

The first thing I always did upon arrival in a hotel room was try to connect to the internet and download my e-mail messages from headquarters. As was the case in most old hotel rooms, there were no electrical sockets or telephone jacks next to or above the desk. I got down on my knees and found them under the desk.

In this position I also got a good idea of how well housekeeping cleaned the rooms. Right in front of my nose, a few inches under the desk, was a shriveled piece of paper. I picked it up to throw it into the wastebasket when some scribbled letters caught my eyes: "...being human?"

For some reason it made me think about my experience with the old woman, and I opened the piece of paper. Irregular, large letters, written diagonally across the paper, shaped the words, "Are human beings being human?" Some smaller letters at the bottom read, "Want to find out more? Meet me in Ayacucho on March 21st." As it was March 14th, that was in seven days.

I don't know what caused me to keep the piece of paper. Initially I wanted to throw it away, but something stopped me from doing that. Yet I really didn't know what to do with it, so I put it in the breast pocket of my shirt. "Are human beings being human?" What an interesting question!

I realized I did not even know what 'being human' meant. What was the meaning of the word 'human'? Never before had I given this any thought, but I guessed it had its origin in Latin and I made a mental note to look it up as soon as I had some time.

"Where is Ayacucho?" I thought next, not that I was planning to go there. Why would I? There wasn't even a name on the note to indicate its recipient, and of course the question was not directed at me! Still, I wondered to whom it had been posed, and what the context of the question was. "Are human beings being human?" I pondered that thought.

The sound of the phone ringing snapped me back to the business at hand.

"Is everything okay with the room?" the general manager's secretary asked.

"Uh, yes," I stammered. When you're the guest of the house, what else can you say other than that everything is fine, even in the worst of hotels?

“The general manager would like to know if you would want to tour the hotel right now or tomorrow morning, and if you would like to join him and the owner for dinner tonight.”

“I will meet him downstairs in fifteen minutes for a quick tour, and then we can go straight to dinner afterwards,” I replied.

“I will tell him, sir,” she said politely.