It seems my last column struck a nerve.

In case you missed it, I wrote about my recent encounter with a homeless man on Greene Street. He approached me outside my daughter's dance class, dropped some familiar names, told me a sad story, won my trust and sympathy . . . then asked me for a ride to the Comfort Inn.

I'd hardly had time to begin my reply – a gentle, apologetic "no" – before he brushed me off rather violently, turned his back on me, and walked away. I was left with a mix of guilt and anger. Had I done the right thing? Was this man who he appeared to be? Did it matter?

I've learned a lot since writing that column – the first being... *y'all actually read this thing!* I tend to think of this page as something like a private diary that just happens to be left unlocked . . . on the off chance that somebody's curious or bored. I suppose I want people to read it, or I wouldn't put it "out there," but I don't like to dwell on that notion. If I see someone perusing this page – in a restaurant or coffee shop or whatnot – my face burns and I long to flee the premises. (Are all writers like this, or just the ones who let their souls run buck naked over the page?) Or, sure, I get feedback. Enough to keep me writing, anyway. But never, in the dozen-plus years I've been penning this column, have I received anything approaching the response to this piece. So many emails, phone calls, comments on our website and Facebook page . . . People coming up to me at parties, even . . .

Almost everybody has a version of this story to tell. That didn't surprise me much, really. (Live long enough, and you'll probably be approached by a homeless person.) What *did* surprise me was that so many people had the exact
same
story to tell . . . with the same plot and the same main character. As it turns out, my friendly,

sweet-faced, just-down-on-his-luck drifter is actually a seasoned and somewhat notorious grifter. Over 20 people in Beaufort (and one on Hilton Head) contacted me to say they'd had an encounter (or several) with the same man. They recognized him from my description of his appearance and his MO, which doesn't vary much.

Most of our local churches are familiar with my drifter, as are the folks at the USCB Center for the Arts and the downtown Library. He has been known to approach people at the St. Helena's Post Office, on private doorsteps in The Point, on the sidewalks of Pigeon Point, and in any number of area business establishments. As far as I know, he's never hurt anybody physically, but he has taken advantage of many a kind heart and stolen from them for their efforts. In fact, he is currently in jail for the umpteenth time for this very behavior.

Someone told me he's a drug addict. Someone else said he's a sociopath. Several used the phrase "professional con man." Maybe he's all three. Who knows? I keep wondering if he's read my column. (I don't think we distribute at the County Jail, but maybe we should.) Does he know he sent me spiraling into a mini existential crisis? If so, how does he feel about that? Is he laughing at me? Does he feel any remorse? Any shame? Does he feel anything at all?

Damn. I'm still obsessing over this person.

Despite all the responses I got from folks who'd met this man, most of the responses came from people who hadn't. And those ran the gamut of opinion. Most agreed I'd done "the right thing" by refusing to put a strange man in my car. Some scolded me for even considering it...

"There's kind. And then there's stupid. You wouldn't want your daughter to do this, would you? So no. Common sense rules . . ."

"What would I do? Frankly, I'd have dismissed him sooner than he did you. Decades of urban life and frequent business travel to many many cities has made me pretty hardened to the panhandle class . . ."

"Ted Bundy was really good looking with a twinkle in his eye . . ."

Some of my readers had a little more compassion for my drifter – and empathy for me, in my dilemma. Some gently suggested that maybe I could have done more:

" . . . I believe you acted appropriately. However, another possibility was available which could have kept you safe and a man in need able to reach his destination. Since you were willing to contribute something to ease his plight, but he didn't want money, why not offer to call him a taxi and pay for the ride to the comfort in - surely not more than 5 or 10 dollars . . ."

Some offered me advice about where to send my next drifter . . .

"I am involved with the homeless, jobless and those in need weekly. Plant the Seed Ministry feeds individuals and their families every Saturday in the parking lot of the Atlantic inn. We feed 10 to 40 people each week. We offer friendly conversation and prayer as they eat their lunch or take a lunch to go. Beaufort has many community minded individuals working diligently to help resolve this issue . . ."

Several readers contacted me right away to let me know my drifter/grifter is now in jail, charged with "Exploitation of a Vulnerable Adult and Financial Transaction Card Fraud." I guess I should be glad I got away with nothing more than a case of self-doubt and something bordering on a crisis of faith.

You see, Easter is upon us, and if I believe what I say I believe, then I can't just lounge around in the comfort of the words, "You did the right thing." I can hear them 100 times over – and I like hearing them, I really do – but if I grow too comfortable with those words . . . if I just wrap them around me like a warm, fuzzy bathrobe . . .

I received one response to "The Incident" that, for me, stands out from all the rest. It's the one I keep coming back to and can't seem to forget:

"I know your struggle all too well. I won't be so quick to assure you that you did the 'right' thing.

You certainly did the safe thing, and safety is important. You may have even contributed to this man's healing if what he needs is people to stop enabling his destructive behaviors. But that deep conviction that somehow your love fell short is difficult to shake off. Perhaps this man was 'shaking the dust off his feet' as Jesus told his disciples to do in those towns that would not receive him. The first Christians didn't have the luxury of being middle-class, so today we middle-class Christians have to wrestle hard with Jesus' command to love our neighbors and our enemies, even when they are not worthy . . ."

Even when they are not worthy. That's the true challenge of Easter, isn't it? In my last column, I described this man's abrupt dismissal with the words, "as if he were brushing a speck of dirt from the universe." But "shaking the dust off his feet" is exactly what I meant. And exactly how I felt.

And despite everything I know now, that feeling hasn't left me. I think I'm grateful for that.