



## **HARLOW AT THE DUMP**

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**Page 31-32**

I had just chucked my rubbish into a dumpster when I spotted an older, white-haired man wrestling a walker out of his gray Volvo station wagon. I've never seen anybody at the dump using a walker, or crutches either. I thought maybe he had just recovered from a serious accident and was about to toss his walker into the trash.

His wife probably asked, "Where are you going, dear?"

And he would have snarled back, "I'm takin' this damn thing to the dump."

When the man turned, I realized that he was Harlow Fenwick, who sometime sits near me at the weekly Men's Breakfast. Slightly stooped, thick glasses, large hearing aids stuffed in each ear, he wore a bright red flannel shirt and clean khakis. Harlow has suffered from arthritis for years and is far beyond the need for a cane.

When the walker was planted on the ground, he dropped a shopping bag stuffed with empty cans into the handlebar basket. Shoulders hunched, bent at the waist, he jerked toward a long maroon dumpster perched atop a wooden platform. He couldn't lift his feet; they scraped along behind the walker.

"Harlow," I called out, "let me help you."

He recognized me as a breakfast buddy, and we shook hands. After some hesitation, he allowed me to dispose of the cans, then a bundle of newspapers.

I noticed a pile of scrap wood in the Volvo. “I’ll take that for you,” I said.

He shook his head. “You go on, I’m used to doing this myself.”

I waved goodbye and drove to the ‘Take it or Leave it,’ and dropped off three old puzzles, a broken lamp, and a bag of mismatched golf clubs. A few minutes later, I saw the Volvo by the burn pile. Harlow had just set the walker next to the rear hatch and was filling the basket with wood scraps. When it was full, he trudged toward the pile.

Harlow’s wife must fret when he goes to the dump. Not only does he have to drive there safely, he must navigate to the various disposal stations by himself. It was obvious that he didn’t arrive expecting help from others. A friend told me later that whether its minor chores around the house, trips to store, or visits to the dump, he always refuses help. I don’t think he’s just stubborn or obstinate—he’s persistent, tenacious.

Harlow’s behavior, his determination to do it by himself, is an important adaptive feature of *Homo sapiens*, honed by millions of years of evolution. But it’s a mistake to assume that going it alone exclusively characterized our ancestors. The 2009 issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* carried a series of articles that described many instances of prehistoric hominin compassion. In one, Pleistocene hunter-gatherers cared for a child with a severe brain deformity. Despite the child’s condition, it was not abandoned at birth but survived for five years. In a series of modern experiments, Frans de Waal, a Dutch Primatologist and Ethologist, demonstrated that the roots of our empathic behavior run deep. His found that capuchin monkeys, elephants, and chimpanzees, could cooperate, be compassionate, and had a

sense of fairness. He concluded that these traits were not given just to humans by God. We inherited them from our vertebrate ancestors; they are on our DNA.

I watched Harlow hobble back to the Volvo, handlebar basket empty. He stowed the walker, then using the car body for support, slid toward the front door. He didn't wave when he zoomed past.

Whether they struggled alone or in groups, our ancestors succeeded because they had resolve. And they cared. Our species is not without hope. I'll tell Harlow at the next Men's Breakfast.

I wonder if he'll be interested.

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Miller, A.C. [Harlow at the Dump](#). April 2018 Issue of *Front Porch Review*.