Charles Baudelaire, “Let’s Beat Up the Poor!” (1864)

Introduction: Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) was a French writer whose works frequently addressed the subject of modern life in Paris. Always provocative, he assailed the boundaries of mid-nineteenth-century French society with his revolutionary and often scandalous satire. In this bizarre urban parable, Baudelaire presents a narrator who has a startling revelation about ending poverty. Baudelaire invokes the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, and two French doctors, Lélut and Baillarger, to rationalize the narrator’s alarming action.

Content: Invite participants to read the text.

Observation questions:

What do you see going on in the text? What jumps out at you?

Interpretation questions:

How does the narrator describe the beggar’s appearance and attitude toward him, a potential benefactor?

In the context of Paris street culture in the author’s era, a beggar would have been considered a “low-life” character. What does the narrator’s “Good Angel” say about the beggar?

What do you think the narrator hopes to accomplish with his shocking action?

What are the results of the narrator’s intervention? What does he give to the beggar at the end? What does he ask him to do in return?

What is the narrator’s definition of authentic charity?

Implication questions:

What message about service does the text hold for you? How does the text help you think about the service experiences you’ve had or about the concept of service?
Glossary:

**Demon**: A supernatural being intermediate between gods and men. From Greek mythology, *daimōn*, rendered in English as ‘Demon’ for the French equivalent, *Démon*. Socrates described having a personal *daimōn* that was an inner voice that gave him direction, though modern interpretations of this inner voice have equated it with the philosopher’s conscience. Christian writers interpreted the word as representing a malevolent spirit, creating the usage of demon as it currently exists in English. Baudelaire is aware of the diverse nature of the term—mediating force, malevolent spirit, guiding conscience—and qualifies his inner voice as a “Good Angel.”

**Lélut and Baillarger**: Louis François Lélut (1804–1877) and Jules Baillarger (1809–1890). Influential French psychologists and medical professionals who wrote significant works of early psychology rooted in the tradition of Western philosophy. In 1836 Lélut published *On the Demon of Socrates*, which examined Socrates’ concept of the *daimōn* from a modern medical perspective, in which he concluded that the Ancient Greek philosopher was insane. This explains Baudelaire’s reference to the certificate of insanity signed by the two learned doctors. This rhetorical device sets up the rest of the story, where the narrator explains the shocking manner in which he treated the beggar.