

Broken Lives: What I've Learned From Homeless People

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Welcome, Centering, Kindling, Opening

We are here
on a cloudy morn at the edge of spring,
to worship, to celebrate the fullness of life
in the midst of our complex, varied lives,
and to hold ourselves accountable
to the visionary ideals that we claim.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Praising, Ingathering, Greeting, Affirming, Singing, Offering (JAM) and the Sequence for the day:

And so, after a mild winter, the first few surprisingly warm days leading to the spring equinox: wet and shaken by thunder; shuddering with daffodils, magnolia, and forsythia, bright gifts from a distant current in the sea, El Nina; our invitation to step out instead of staying in; and this month, the lovely natural sacrament appropriately lifting up the history of women round the world whose lives are often hidden by cultures like seeds under winter ground, but who dare to blossom fully by budding and opening into the everlasting spring of courage, truth and self-naming: Verdana Shiva, the present day Gandhi of India; Artemisia Gentileschi, artist in the days when she was the only woman painting; Hypatia of Alexandria, woman of reason in an era of unreason; Mary Wollstoncraft, articulate champion of the rights of women; Sojourner Truth, born into slavery, who stood proud in the pulpit of the Universalist Church of Akron and shook her fist, saying "And ain't I a woman?" Wu Zetien, first woman to be emperor of China (Tang dynasty), and to establish an historian of women's history; Queen Ravalanona who freed the slaves in Madagascar; Aung Saa Su Kyi of Myanmar, Gabriela Mistral of Chile, Toni Morrison of the USA, Wislawa Szymborska of Poland, Rigoberta Menchu of Guatemala, each of whom lived lives of peacemaking or art that crowned them with the Nobel Prize, flowers blossoming boldly, in every color, all of them, the living and the dead, in a garden of truth where it is always, always spring, and where the awed silence before such beauty and blooming sounds quite a lot like this:

silence

Many springs have come and gone in our lives; many chapters have come and gone in the book of our lives; and the present spring contains all former springs, and the present chapter is built on all the ones which have been written before. Mindful of this truth, we remember now those we love, those who have loved us through our days, those with whom we struggle, which often

shapes who we are, and those whom we dearly miss. Whispered aloud or guarded in the silence of our hearts, we name them.

naming

All music in the end announces the spring of the spirit, the possibility of transformation, the presence of hope and the summons of beauty. Bless us now.

First Reading comes from what scholars call *Trito-Isaiah*, that is, chapters 56-66 in the *Scroll of Isaiah*, which we now know was written by three different authors over a period of a hundred years. This third and latest section is often considered to be the most poetic in its critique of society in 520 BCE, or is it 2012 CE? We do not know the author's name.

To all appearances you are a nation busy, busy, busy at worship. You go about bragging that you are law-abiding and God-fearing. Yet there you are, driving your employees much too hard. Your bottom line always seems to be craftily-gained profit. You engage in your moving religious rituals, but then you also bicker and fight among yourselves as if they meant nothing. Listen, worship is fine, but *this* is the kind of religious celebration *I'm* after: to break the chains of injustice, to get rid of exploitation in the work-place, to free the oppressed and to cancel their debts so they can finally move forward. I am interested in you sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless into actual homes...maybe your own; putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, and yes, being available to your own families as well. Do all this, and the lights will turn on in the gloom of the times, and your lives will be turned around at once. If you get rid of unfair practices, blaming victims, or gossiping about other people's mistakes...if you are generous with the hungry, and start sharing yourselves with the down and out, your lives will be bathed in sunlight, your shadows will vanish, your own actions will pave the path before you.

The Second Reading comes from the most recent issue of *StreetSpeech*, the paper that many of Columbus's homeless sell on the street. They pay 25 cents per issue and sell it for a dollar, although many give more. I often find the articles informative, moving, educational and prophetic, and I urge those of you who work downtown to always seek out the woman or man on the corner. The author of this article is Katherine Carroll.

At a coffee shop in the Short North, a man starts falling asleep in a chair, nodding off over a cup of coffee. I recognize him as a regular panhandler in the area. It's cold outside, and I wonder where he slept, or if he slept at all. Twice in 10 minutes he is told that he cannot sleep there; he must wake up or leave. I closed my eyes in sympathy—surely they would not feel so comfortable asking the same of me. Though I often dress like a hobo, I'm a regular, and it's reasonably obvious that I'm economically privileged.

If you do not have a home—and if you do not have money either—where can you go? In Columbus, since April of 2010, when records were first kept, up to 66 people have been turned away from shelters every night, because there is no room. This number may in fact be much higher, as those who do not “qualify” for shelter are not counted. Though extra beds are added in the winter, this does not guarantee access. There are those who, for a number of reasons, rarely make it into the shelters at all.

The Columbus shelter system turned away 13% of single adults seeking shelter through diversion in 2009. This year, new policies require shelters to divert 30% of those who seek to stay there. Though the intent is to divert individuals to other resources or to stay with friends and

family, most people go to shelters as a last resort, and many may end up on the streets, or in an otherwise unsafe situation. Where can one sleep, in the absence of money or the good fortune of supportive family and friends, if not the shelter? Legally, nowhere.

Poverty is systemic; it results from social and economic policies. Rising poverty and homelessness have coincided with cuts to low-income housing subsidies in the early 1980s, funding for mental health and education, and increases in government funding on law enforcement and prisons. There is no secret to lowering poverty rates—they were lowered in the 1970s as a result of social programs, and most Western democracies continue to have much lower poverty rates than the United States. The official poverty rate rose to 15.1% in 2010, and census data reveals that almost half of all Americans live beneath 200% of the poverty level. Meanwhile, the richest 5% of the population own about 62% of privately held wealth in the United States, while the bottom 80% of the population hold only 15% of the wealth, according to studies by Edward Wolff, an economist at New York University.

Rather than providing adequate support to make up for poverty and inequality by providing jobs, income, housing, or equal educational opportunities, governments have ignored or rationalized the circumstances that they have helped to create through neglect, by individualizing its causes and encouraging our national culture of blaming the victim.

Sermon

A couple of years ago, I was part of a community memorial service held at Trinity Episcopal Church right across from the Statehouse. Ministers, priests, rabbis, pastors and imams joined together to remember all the homeless folks in Columbus... who had died that year. We rose and spoke their names. We lit candles to sign the inherent dignity of their lives. There were a couple of folks who spoke before me, clergy, social workers, etc. When it was my turn to speak, I started out like this: "When I lead a memorial celebration at the congregation I am privileged to serve, I open the service with the same ritual every time. I put these words in the order so that the people of any beliefs and no beliefs can recite them together in a moment of unity. The words are simple, but insightful. They were written by J. Donald Johnston, a Unitarian Universalist minister: *In the presence of life, we say no to death.*

In the presence of death, we say yes to life.

Earlier today," I continued, "we were in the presence of death. We named the names of homeless people who have died. I was deeply moved, even though I knew none of these people personally.

But I do know people who are homeless and who are still living. And thus I especially now want to say yes to life."

I was glad to be part of that service down at Trinity for many reasons. I live in a comfortable loft downtown, my "home"; but those without homes have never been far from me. I see homeless people every single day when I am in town. Often, if I am walking, I try to greet them as persons, not some example of a category called "them." For example, I buy our local Columbus newspaper on homeless issues, StreetSpeech, for a couple of bucks as often as I can. Lately, I've been buying copies from a fellow named William, who is twenty-something, well-groomed, and apparently rather clever with computers. He carries his whole life in a backpack the size of a small Volkswagon. I stop to talk with him a few minutes each time, find out how life is going.

He works the night shift at a Sunoco station on South High, and doesn't make enough for both rent and food together. I haven't seen him in the last few weeks, but I know he is still producing word puzzles for the StreetSpeech paper so he is out there somewhere.

For many years, my friend Warren lived at the *Volunteers of America* shelter, or at Faith Mission, in between apartments. A felon in his youth, it's difficult for him to find a job, despite his good work skills, since his record follows him like his shadow. Only one temp agency was able to get him work. Before he moved to Pittsburgh to try his luck out of state, I often drove him back to the shelter from his temp factory job because the busses don't run at night in Columbus, and he used to get out at 11 PM. What's a person to do?

My friend McCoy lived in the shell of a camper trailer in his grandmother's back yard for many years. He has been looking for work for years. Oh, I help him to find work. He does well. "Best check-out clerk Giant Eagle ever had," I overheard his boss say aloud one day. After a few months, his boss had to let him go because no one ever told him when he was growing up the central merchant truth that "the customer is always right." In the trailer-home in which he was raised, if someone tried to con you in some way, you resisted in no uncertain terms with clear, loud naming of the injustice. You can't do that at Giant Eagle. When several customers tried to pull a fast one on him, assuming he was in a cashier trance and wouldn't notice, he refused to give in. I understand his sense of justice very well. But how's a person who was raised in an environment so at odds with the merchant world of modern America supposed to learn those lessons before he's fired?

He lives on 90 bucks worth of food-stamps per week. He used to drink and do drugs. On his own, on his own, mind you, he got off both and is clean...ferociously clean. You would think that might count for something. It apparently doesn't.

My old friend Todd used to live in his storage unit downtown. Fortunately, the storage unit people knew he did, and didn't mind, so he was safe in the winter storms for a while. Todd suffers from a form of mental illness...he's smart as a tack, observant, but has little impulse control. I met him in a cafe one day when he sat down at my table at the only empty seat, and kept up communication with him. I've had him to my house for dinner many times. He tried to get into homeless programs that might help him stay at a permanent place, but he was never "qualified" enough, whatever that means.

I would think mental illness and living in a storage unit would be qualification enough. Last year, after his mother died up in Toledo, he left Ohio and moved to Texas where he was actually able to get into a program that houses him near Dallas. We still talk on the phone. He is doing well. Lives on next to nothing, but is not starving and has a roof over his head.

My impression is that society would be glad if all these folks would just go away. As if they were an embarrassment.

I am not alone in thinking this. The great poet of the homeless, Julia Vinograd of Berkeley California, puts it this way (*and since I offered you an ironic affirmation this morning, I will offer you another set of words that sparkles with irony*).

The Homeless Are Our Dirty Underwear (*Step Into My Parlour by Julia Vinograd*)

We've got to get the tired men pushing broken shopping carts, the waddling bag ladies with plastic flowered raincoats, and the skinny young kids spare-changing dogfood for their dog and all her nuzzling puppies off the street.

Off the street before the bombs fall. I can't explain the connection but I remember: "Suppose you were run over by a truck and when they undressed you in the morgue and you were wearing that dirty underwear in front of everyone wouldn't you just die of shame?"

So when the bombs fall everyone must be wearing clean underwear, good clothes, looking well fed and happily married in houses with gardens and swings for the children even when it isn't true, hell, especially when it isn't true. It's a matter of patriotism.

We have to suffer to look good enough for death, like dressing for a job. The homeless weren't American enough to live and they're certainly not American enough to die. They're such an embarrassment. Suppose the world ends and there's still broken shopping carts in ruined cities? Suppose the broken shopping carts never go away?

Will they every go away? In America, I am not so sure. There would have to be more changes in our nation than building more Faith Missions.

America, you see, has different classes of people. Classes who do not share the same description. Some have lots of money, some have some, and some have none, and yet all supposedly, are equal citizens of the same country.

Some own the table, some are allowed at the table, and some are told to keep away from the table. The homeless, insists Julia Vinograd in her sarcastic poem, are simply not welcome at the table. They are an embarrassment to those who live in a different class, people with homes, and maybe better luck. It's a question of patriotism, she adds, ruefully. I can only shake my head, sad that anyone has to write a poem like this. But they do...

Our writer from StreetSpeech, Katherine Carroll, tells us that in Columbus OH, as in many other American cities, if the homeless cannot get into a shelter, or the home of a friend (and at least 60 per night cannot), they are going to have to break the law because nothing they choose to do will be legal. This is the most concrete way of saying go away that I can think of, and frankly, it embarrasses me.

I admire what Michelle Miles said this morning. Her affection for Dawson kept her out of shelters where dogs that people love are not welcome. She also courageously brought up her own fight with depression, which is something so many sweep under the rug or feel embarrassed to bring up. I think not bringing it up, and its relationship to homelessness and social inequities in our city and nation, is sheer cowardice, and very destructive to the body politic of our great nation.

The 58th chapter in the book of Isaiah was written by another social poet like Julia Vinograd 2500 years ago. These verses suggest quite clearly that homelessness is not a new phenomenon, but something that has been going on a very long time.

The author also suggests that homelessness is tied up with other issues...injustice in the workplace and oppression of certain groups in society, our banking practices (not many banking

institutions I can think of will follow his advice and simply "cancel their debts"). Clearly, the fight to include all people in the human family has been going on for millennia. Anatole France pointed out in 1894 that homelessness was rife in great Paris, people sleeping under bridges and all. My neighbor in Oakland, Oliver, became homeless and used to sleep under bridges too. Twenty years ago. That homelessness has threaded through history is not, I think, a reason for despair, or to give up. It's only a reminder to keep at it, for the present reality is simply intolerable to anyone who hasn't got themselves drunk on the "hard as nails, take care of your own life first and to hell with everyone else" philosophy lifted up by preachers like Ayn Rand.

Like I said, those without homes have been a part of my life for decades. My acquaintance Devere was temporarily homeless, and needed a place to stay immediately, and so I put him up in my place, and he stayed for two years until he moved to Atlanta. We became the best of friends, and improved each other's lives immensely, despite our differences in almost everything. He changed my life in a thousand ways. I know, I know...you're right: I have no children at home, and so can risk doing such things, as Isaiah 58 suggests. I hardly think it's wisdom for everybody in every situation. But I know I have been changed for the better by the risks I've taken. And I have also engaged with the homeless without taking risks. When my friend Kev was homeless and trying to live in an abandoned bus in a junkyard, he kept on giving me his beautiful watercolors, which he painted every day. I was grateful but I refused to take them unless I paid for them. I knew from talking to him that he was wrestling with issues of shame, and that, by actually paying for his art, I could prevent that shame from shaping his every moment. He now has a good place to live, and flies all over the world for his work, by the way. Homelessness does not have to be forever, which is a hopeful statement. And, I've heard some amazing heart-warming stories associated with at least a few homeless folks...my friend Eric S. for example, who was homeless for a while in Los Angeles, told me recently that when he was spanging (the actual word for holding up one of those signs some homeless people place in front of them) he was approached by a woman who claimed to be an artist who was working in large collage-like pieces of art. Rico, quite hungry, was holding up a sign that said "Visions of a cheeseburger." The artist asked him to sell his sign so she could put it in her next work of art about homelessness. She paid him handsomely.

I know also that not everyone has had my experiences or heard stories like I've been telling. Some people tell me they are frightened of folks wrapped in tarry clothes, demonstrating some aspect, often of mental illness, or smelling of some malt liquor. Or evidencing emotional signs of post traumatic stress disorder...many veterans, male and female, suffer this deeply hurtful malady. Of the 3 million five hundred thousand homeless in America in any recent given year, 15% are veterans. It makes me want to just shake the next person I see with a sign saying "Support the troops." Not till *you* support them when they come home, Mr. Self-Anointed patriot.

I am not the only one who is involved with homeless people personally. As I learned the hard way at the memorial service at Trinity a few years back, we are all involved whether we imagine so or not. We had lit candles in memory, whether we knew the names, or not, of those who had died on the street. And as I often say as a summary of my basic religious idea, each of their lives was just as important to them as our lives in this room are important to us. And that spiritual assertion alone connects all of us in Columbus, in the US, in the world, no matter what.

And also, we are all involved, because no one has a right (at least I don't see it in our constitution) to own the table and keep others away from it. People claim that right, but they

don't have the legal right. The fact that the Supreme Court has made corporations persons does not give them that legal right either, even though corporations like Monsanto seem to have no shame in trying to claim the whole world's food supply – every seed on every farm – as their own.

So to truly memorialize the homeless, we have to do more than light candles. We have to find ways to say no to more deaths on the street. The Obama administration is trying to get all veterans off the street by 2015, off the street and into homes of their own, and with treatment for their maladies. We can support him in that regard for one. We can, when we are able, volunteer to drive food down to Faith Mission on the two Fridays per month when we cook for Faith Mission. There are so many more things we can do in the presence of life, which means, after all, that we say no to death.

But when the homeless do die, we have also to do more visionary things as well. We have to dare to lift up boldly and at every juncture the scandal of how our country is *systematically* stratified into haves and have-nots, the powerful and the powerless, the self-promoting who are dead before they die, and the forgotten homeless, who are alive before they die, but who live in misery.

In the presence of death, we have to say yes to life. In the presence of death, we have to say yes to life. In the presence of death, we have to say yes to life. Amen.

Offertory

Equinox Prayer

spring has now unwrapped the flowers;
and the flowers have unwrapped my eyes
and freshly invited my immense gratitude;
my gratitude has unwrapped my love of the world
and all its people who share these flowers
sometime or another;
and my love for the people with whom I share this world has unwrapped a vision deep within me
which portrays every single one of them,
no matter who they are,
what they have or don't have
what they can do or find hard to do,
what their story is,
what their troubles are,
as free to grow, to bud, to open and blossom
in the garden of truth and spirit,
where it's always, always spring.
o love, seal this vision in my every action.

Hymn: Spring Has Now Unwrapped the Flowers