

A Place to Call Home

A Sermon Delivered on January 10, 2010
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Home is a place where, when you have to go there,
they have to take you in.”
-- Robert Frost*

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Meditation: a poem entitled “Dressed in Doubt” by Robert Roberg, a member of a writing workshop at a Nashville homeless shelter (from *An American Mosaic* by Robert Wolf)

I the pilgrim
dressed in doubt
set out one morning to see God
and I didn't see him in any of the
rich new churches where the people
dress like movie stars
 nor in the dusty tomb-cold cathedrals
 (the last place he'd be seen dead in)
nor in the womb-warm roll-in-the-aisle joints

I didn't see him in the trees at Mission Park
I didn't see him in the green sky
or blue grass
nor in the faces of babies
or the laughter of children
I saw God in the night alley
behind the Chinese restaurant
digging thru the trash
with wild hungry flaming eyes
and wonderously crippled hands

Reading: by Anna Kossof from *Homeless in America* (p. 15)

What does it really feel like to be without a home? No one who is fortunate enough to have a home can truly imagine what it is like to be without one. It is the most precious thing that we can have, yet we assume that we all have a place to call our own, a place we can lock and where we keep our material possessions and special belongings, a place to go home to. Home is a place we take for granted, while hundreds of thousands of people across the country go to sleep on the sidewalks, in public rest rooms, in bus depots, in makeshift homes on highways, in church basements temporarily turned into shelters, and in public shelters that house over a thousand people, offering nothing more than a sea of beds placed next to each other. The homeless have no permanent beds, few clothes, and no kitchens in which to prepare their food. The children have few toys. Most of all, they have no place to call their own, no place to put their few belongings.

From the very beginning of time, people have waged war for food and shelter. In the most primitive societies, they have struggled to meet these most basic human needs. It is astonishing that in the [twenty-first] century, we are still struggling to meet these needs.

Reading: by Alice Baum and Donald Burnes from *A Nation in Denial - The Truth About Homelessness* (p. 12)

There is no single way of describing homeless individuals, even though the term “homeless” suggests that there is a single defining characteristic, that is, being without a home. The homeless population includes single men, single women, and families, most of which are headed by a single parent, usually a woman. The homeless are white, African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. They are refugees and aliens, parolees, runaway youth and children, Vietnam veterans and other traumatized individuals, a few elderly people, and former hippies and flower children. They live in cities, suburbs, and rural areas. They are alcoholics, drug addicts, and mentally ill persons; some suffer from a combination of all three of these problems, and many have other serious medical problems. Some are victims of domestic violence, others are victims of other people’s alcohol and drug habits. Finally, some are homeless because of an immediate economic crisis or a disaster over which they have no control...

Reading: by Scott Russell Sanders from *Staying Put - Making a Home in a Restless World* (p. 29, p. 30, p. 32)

The word *house* derives from an Indo-European root meaning to cover or conceal. I hear in that etymology furtive, queasy undertones. Conceal from what? From storms? beasts? enemies? from the eye of God? *Home* comes from a different root meaning “the place where one lies.” That sounds less fearful to me. A weak, slow clawless animal, without fur or fangs, can risk lying down and closing its eyes only where it feels utterly secure. Since the universe is going to kill us, in the short run or the long, no wonder we crave a place to lie in safety, a place to conceive our young and raise them, a place to shut our eyes without shivering or dread...

However leaky or firm, whether tar paper or brick, the shell of a house gives only shelter; a home gives sanctuary...

The longing for a safe place to lie down echoes through our holy songs and scriptures. Abused and scorned, we look over Jordan, and what do we see? A band of angels coming for to carry us home.

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Last week, when the winter storm that had been moving eastward across the country finally reached Urbana/Champaign, I was filled with a renewed appreciation for the big old house we call our home.

Schools were closed, meetings were canceled, and many of our daily routines were jumbled up. The treacherous road conditions forced us to re-evaluate which of our daily activities and obligations were essential, which could be adjusted to our home-bound situation, and which could be put off for a day or two.

As I mulled these questions over in my mind, looking out of the window to judge the impact of these few inches of snow, one thought returned to mind again and again: “I sure am glad to live in a nice warm home.” And as I felt a renewed and deepened appreciation for the home I call my own, I couldn’t help but wonder what it must be like for those who don’t have a home, those who are homeless.

* * *

Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children are homeless in this country. USA Today recently estimated 1.6 million people live in emergency shelters and transitional housing. The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty says about 3.5 million people, more than a third of them children, are likely to experience homelessness within a given year.

According to the National Coalition on Homelessness, two trends are largely responsible of the rise in homelessness in the course of the last two decades: a growing shortage of affordable housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty. In these tough economic times families with children are among the fastest growing segments of the homeless population. In rural areas single mothers and children are the largest group among the homeless. Half of the women and children who are homeless are fleeing domestic violence.

Among the homeless living in shelters, about a quarter suffer from some mental illness, but most can live in a community with appropriate support. Approximately a third struggle with drug or alcohol addiction. Veterans are a substantial part of the homeless population.

Alice Baum and Donald Burnes tell us there is no single way of describing homeless individuals. But despite their diversity, the homeless do share one important and distinctive characteristic: They are almost totally alienated from other people and society’s helping institutions, institutions that paradoxically sometimes seem to dehumanize the very individuals they are trying to help.

* * *

Last October I was invited to a meeting of a group that calls itself the Faith Coalition Supporting Safe Haven. Safe Haven, perhaps you read about it in the news, is a local self-governed homeless community, that was formed last year. It began with a group of homeless folks who pitched up their tents behind the Catholic Worker House in downtown Champaign last May, hoping to find safety and a sense of community.

Safe Haven members soon learned, however, that their tent community did not meet Champaign zoning and city codes. They tried to find alternative locations. One was a campground in Mahomet - but that stay was short-lived. Though rules had been established that prohibited Safe Haven members from soliciting from other campers, some panhandling did occur. So Safe Haven - a group consisting of ten men and women at the time - moved to New Covenant Fellowship in Champaign for a few days, then to a private residence. Finally Saint Mary's Catholic Church allowed Safe Haven to stay temporarily in their parish center, as they continued the search for a permanent location.

When I joined the Faith Coalition in October, I found a group of community members representing seven different local churches, as well as three residents of Safe Haven, and a few students discussing possible long-term solutions for Safe Haven. A community service organization of architecture students called Freedom By Design had taken on the task of designing and constructing so-called micro-housing units as a potential solution for Safe Haven. They envisioned inexpensive 8'x8'x8' units, each of which would provide shelter for two individuals, with bunk beds, a desk, and shelves. They imagined each unit might cost \$2,000, and hoped that the proto-type they were building could serve as an example that would spur a community fundraising effort to build more. I saw the architectural drawings, and I was impressed.

The Faith Coalition was also in the process of developing a concise and updated list of community resources for Safe Haven residents, which included shelter, food, clothing, transportation, medical and mental health, as well as employment services.

But perhaps the most pressing concern was to find another location for Safe Haven itself, since St. Mary's parish center was initially offered for thirty days, but those thirty days had long passed. At St. Mary's Safe Haven had grown to 36 members, including folks like Billie Creek, a 44-year-old mother of three who lost her job as a home health-care worker in March and had to move out of her apartment in October, but was unable to find space in local shelters. Or George Headley, who is a registered sex offender. He lost his job at Solo Cup Company when his employer found out about his background, and since he didn't receive enough unemployment to keep up with the rent, was evicted. Mr. Headley wasn't able to find space in local shelters, because they have strict limits on the number of sex offenders they can house.

A solution for the winter was found through involvement of the Empty Tomb, a local Christian Service organization, and Restoration Urban Ministries, a local shelter.

Restoration Urban Ministries, which is located in a former motel at the corner of Mattis and Bradley Streets in Champaign, had 17 unused rooms that were in need of renovation and repair. Empty Tomb agreed to renovate the rooms, and Restoration Urban Ministries agreed to house Safe Haven in those rooms for the winter.

In recent weeks the Faith Coalition and Safe Haven have been in conversation with the city of Urbana about steps that would need to be taken in order to create a small community of micro-housing units. Some critics fear that Safe Haven's plans would lead to the creation of a shanty town of unsafe and unsightly shacks, reminiscent of the Hoovervilles of the Great Depression. The editorial board of the News-Gazette wrote, "Micro-shelters - which violate virtually every national and international housing code - are not the answer. They'd be unsafe, they'd place the city government at risk in case of a fire or some other tragedy, and they'd open the door to all kinds of requests from landlords for other variances to health and life-safety codes." (Dec. 27, 2009)

These are, of course, valid concerns. So the latest conversations among Faith Coalition and Safe Haven members revolve around city codes, which will likely require the micro-units to be a bit larger and more expensive than initially envisioned, and the question of how Safe Haven could become more formally and legally organized, perhaps as a non-profit. There are many questions that need to be answered and much work that needs to be done.

Our Social Action Committee supports the efforts of the Faith Coalition in spirit, but is looking for church members who would like to become more actively involved. If you are interested, let them know.

For the members of Safe Haven and the Faith Coalition, this is all a highly educational experience, highlighting some of the nuts and bolts realities of homelessness, and the challenges we face in seeking to address them. But while Safe Haven is a new initiative in Urbana/Champaign, the idea of a self-governed homeless community is not unprecedented.

Those supporting Safe Haven are guided by a model that has successfully been created in Portland, Oregon, a homeless community called Dignity Village. Gaye Reyes, a resident of Dignity Village describes it this way, she says,

"We are a formally mobile Tent City founded by homeless people for those in the homeless community that were sick and tired of living on the streets, under bushes and in doorways. Dignity Village has now grown out of the "tent city" mode and has become a true Village."

Their mission is to "create a green sustainable urban village for those who are seeking shelter but are unable to find it."

Their bylaws say,

“Dignity Village is an intentional community dedicated to helping homeless people resolve the issues and problems that resulted in their homelessness. We do not discriminate for any reason, including age, gender or gender identity, or transgender status, sexual orientation or preference, race or ethnic origin or for any other reason.”

Interestingly, Dignity Village was organized following a “teach-in” held at the First Unitarian Church of Portland in June of 2001, and was possible only through the widespread community support.

Those who seek to be members of the Village need to abide by five rules:

1. No violence toward yourself or others.
2. No illegal substances or alcohol or paraphernalia on the premises or within a one-block radius.
3. No stealing.
4. Everyone contributes to the upkeep and welfare of the village and works to become a productive member of the community.
5. No disruptive behavior of any kind that disturbs the general peace and welfare of the village.

In many ways Dignity Village has been a great success for its 60-some residents and for the larger community of Portland. Urbana/Champaign, however, is not Portland.

Nevertheless homelessness is a real issue in our community. A report to the Champaign city council last November showed that our homeless population has been steadily growing in the course of the last six years. And between January and August of last year, the number of homeless and those at risk rose by 20 percent, from 495 to 594. The thirteen shelters in Champaign County are at capacity. They serve a total of only 300 homeless men, women and children - significantly less than 594.

Providing meaningful help to the homeless, of course, requires more than simply providing a place to sleep. Shelter is important, so are many other human needs - from food and clothing to treatment for mental health and substance abuse issues, from education to employment.

Our local men’s shelter, the TIMES Center, for instance, provides programs that help men save enough money to find housing, as well deal with underlying issues other than economics that might have contributed to their homelessness.

Jason Greenly, who runs the TIMES Center, nevertheless believes Safe Haven might be a good fit for people who don’t mesh with the existing programs. Greenly says, “It may be somebody is not in a position at that time to be able to work a program like this. If there can be a less restrictive program that they can be successful in, then great.” He likes the idea of diversity of services.

Jason Greenly agrees with Urbana city officials, who stress how important it is that a homeless community like Safe Haven have solid community support.

Alice Baum and Donald Burnes tell us,

“[We] must let go of [our] unrealistic expectations that a quick fix will solve a problem that, in one form or another, has existed for a long time. There are no easy answers, but if helping others, especially the most helpless, is a measure of a society’s decency, [we] cannot delay any longer... Concerned citizens need to become advocates for programs that offer concrete help and hope - and the real dignity that comes from recovery.” (p. 185)

* * *

From the very beginning of time, the most primitive societies have struggled to meet the basic human need for shelter. It is amazing that in the twenty-first century we are still struggling to meet these needs.

Every person needs a home. Every person craves a place to lie in safety, a place to raise our young, a place to shut our eyes without shivering or dread, a place of sanctuary. A longing for such a place echoes through our holy songs and scriptures.

May we do what we can to create a country
In which equality and justice are more than a dream
A country in which all people live in safety and dignity
And every person has a place to call home.

Amen.