

The Hundred Story Home, September 29, 2019

Thought to Ponder at the Beginning:

Once homeless people are housed, they're just people. Homeless is an adjective that defines an extreme situation, not a human being's character.

– Kathy Izard, *The Hundred Story Home*

Opening Words & Chalice Lighting *Just Now*, by W.S. Merwin

In the morning as the storm begins to blow away,
the clear sky appears for a moment, and it seems to me
that there has been something simpler than I could ever
believe,
simpler than I could have begun to find words for,
not patient, not even waiting, no more hidden
than the air itself that became part of me for a while
with every breath and remained with me unnoticed,
something that was here unnamed, unknown in the days
and the nights, not separate from them,
not separate from them as they came and were gone,
it must have been here neither early nor late, then
by what name can I address it, now holding out my thanks.

Meditation *The Great Ball of Merit*, by Joanna Macy

Relax and close your eyes. Open your awareness to all the beings who share with you this planet-time ... in this town ... in this country ... and in other lands ... In your mind's eye behold their multitudes ... Now let your awareness open wider yet to encompass all beings who ever lived ... of all species and creeds and walks of life, rich, poor, kings and beggars, saints and sinners ... See the vast vistas of these fellow-beings stretching into the distance like successive mountain ranges ...

Now consider that in each of these innumerable lives some act of merit was performed. No matter how stunted or deprived the life, where was a gesture of generosity, a gift of love, an act of valor or self-sacrifice ... on the battlefield, or in the workplace, hospital or home ... From these beings in their endless multitudes arose actions of courage, kindness, of teaching and healing. Let yourself see these manifold and immeasurable acts of merit ...

Now imagine you can sweep together these acts of merit ... Sweep them into a pile in front of you ... Use your hands ... Pile them up ... Pile them into a heap, viewing it with gladness and gratitude ... Now put them into a ball ... It is the Great Ball or Merit ... Hold it now and weigh it in your hands ... Rejoice in it, knowing that no act of goodness is ever lost. It remains ever and always a present resource ... a means for the transformation of life ... So now, with jubilation and gratitude, you turn that great ball ... turn it over ... over ... into the healing of our world.

Sermon The Hundred Story Home (c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

My childhood house had thick woods behind it, where I played happily as a child.

When I was 5 or 6, I built a little house there, consisting of branches strategically piled against a large rock. I heaped armfuls of oak leaves on top of those branches, leaving an opening where I could crawl inside and be in my own little space, all by myself.

My real home was right within eyeshot. So while I was in my little house, I could see home, *real* home, just up the hill a ways. Mom and Dad weren't too far away. I could easily reach home by climbing out of my little house and heading up that hill.

Only when I was much older did I begin to see houses that looked a little like my childhood escape house: Houses made of cardboard, or tarps set up under a bridge, or just sleeping bags laid out near the heated air of subway vents. Only when I was much

older did I understand that for some, such constructions weren't for play, and returning home wasn't a simple matter of climbing out of a rickety, tenuous construction and heading a short distance up the hill to one's real home.

There is no easy going home from such a place.

I take up the topic of homelessness today because Brunswick is engaged in a community read of the book *The Hundred Story Home*, by Kathy Izard. In that book, Izard describes how she and other community members in Charleston, South Carolina, raised \$10 million to build housing for people who were homeless. Izard describes both the process for creating the housing and her own inner, spiritual journey that evolved during the project.

Izard herself lived in a financially secure family. Her exposure to the homeless population began to develop when she started volunteering at a local soup kitchen. But she was no stranger to hardship. Her mother suffered severe bipolar disorder at a time when it was little understood. For large swaths of Izard's childhood, her mom was hospitalized. Later, when Izard started working in the soup kitchen, she met many people who suffered from mental illness, and she came to understand that, without a good support system like the one her mother had had, such people fall through the cracks.

Her interest in working with homeless people led her to read *Same Kind of Different as Me*, by Ron Hall and Denver Moore, the story of how Ron and Debbie Hall asked Denver Moore, who had been homeless for 30 years or more, to live with them. The book inspired Kathy Izard so much that she invited the authors to come speak in Charlotte.

Kathy's life was changed when she gave Denver a tour of the soup kitchen. She thought Denver would be impressed ...by the kitchen itself, the vegetable garden on the grounds, the photographs of the soup kitchen's soccer team and the artwork created by homeless

people displayed proudly on the walls. But he trailed along behind her, silent.

“Weren't we helping?” Kathy wondered. “All of our art, soccer, and gardening programs as well as our services were designed to build relationships... and restore...dignity. Most cities just had soup kitchens and limited services, but in our 13 years [we] had developed extensive programming, far beyond this basic first aid response.

Yet Denver had not asked a single question, made one comment, or expressed a word of admiration about our innovations.

Frustrated, I turned to leave. That's when Denver finally spoke. Motioning to the stairway in front of us, he asked, “Can we go upstairs now?”

I was beyond frustrated. Angry even. I couldn't believe Denver was finally showing interest when there was nothing to see.

“There's nothing up there. Just offices.”

Denver looked from the stairs to me and then back again. All these years later I still hear his question, and the ones that followed it, as clearly as I did that day.

“Where are the beds?”

As I started the long, complicated explanation of how Charlotte has several shelters, Denver's dark face silenced me. Clearly, I wasn't getting his point.

“You mean to tell me you do all this good in the day and then lock them out to the bad at night?”

His accusation gutted me.

Denver patiently allowed my discomfort. He watched me silently wrestle with my new awareness before he quietly asked his next question.

“Does that make any sense to you?”

Of course it made no sense. I was flooded with shame.

Denver's next question would change the trajectory of my path forever...

“Are you going to do something about it?” (pp 71-72)

She did do something about it, becoming the director of a new initiative called Homeless to Homes, which created housing for formerly homeless people. Moore House, as it is called, is comprised of very small apartments, central meeting space, and, critically, various kinds of counseling services right on site to help people get their lives back on track.

The community is based on what is called “Housing First,” which holds that the solution to homelessness is, well, *homes*. The Housing First model claims you cannot expect people to find jobs, get treatment for addictions, find medical care, or go to school when they don't even have a place to live. But if you house people – not simply shelter them but *house* them – you can then give them medical care, counseling, and addictions recovery programs. Chances that folks will get off the streets permanently are much higher in such settings. Sometimes this model is called “permanent supportive housing.” (p. 81)

Housing First.

I know that's a stretch here in Brunswick, where it's hard to find housing even if you have money. But consider this: If you give someone who is living on the street keys to

even the tiniest apartment, they are no longer “homeless,” living with all the stigma that label engenders. They are just people.

And consider this: “Housing First” or “permanent supportive housing” is exactly what we are doing for the influx of asylum seekers that have come to Maine in the last few months. Many, many many people have worked hard to find them homes and to offer them support so that they settle successfully here.

First Parish Church, in collaboration with other institutions in Brunswick (like this one), is bringing Kathy Izard here to talk about her experience. You have a couple of opportunities to hear about Kathy Izard's odyssey on Tuesday.

- *The Data and Logistics of Housing the Chronically Homeless and Innovative Housing Solutions* October 1, 2019, Noon – 1:00 PM, Bowdoin College, Daggett Lounge.
- *Trust the Whisper* Tuesday, October 1, 2019 7:30 PM First Parish Church, Sanctuary

In addition, you can participate in a facilitated book discussion (Kathy Izard will not be present at the discussions):

- October 8 and 15, 2:00 – 3:30 PM, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church
- October 9, 6:00 – 7:30 PM, here

Homelessness is a live issue for us in this region. Brunswick's Tedford Shelter turns away roughly 350 individuals and 225 families per year, because of inadequate space to house everyone who needs shelter. Most Maine towns have nowhere to house their homeless citizens. There's a shelter in Lewiston and one in Portland.

So where do the people go who don't get into Tedford? None of the options is good.

They might find a friend or family member to house them, but once people reach the point of seeking a homeless shelter, they have usually exhausted all such avenues.

Or they sleep in their cars ... our church has bought gas for families to run their cars for heat during the cold winter nights.

Or tents ... our church has purchased inexpensive tents for people.

Or sometimes hotel rooms ... the most expensive way to address homelessness ... but local hotels have become reluctant to house people for whom churches are paying.

Sometimes they sleep on our church porch or similar locations. A couple of days ago, I found a large ceramic bowl on the handicap ramp with a note attached to it, "I thought you might like a bowl of hot soup." Clearly a neighbor has spied someone sleeping out there and had brought some food over.

And then, just this morning, Toben, who arrived early to work, discovered a woman sleeping on our handicap ramp. She was smoking and had a lighted candle. So, this begs the question: What do we do when our concerns about people overdosing and our worries about building security rub up against our moral obligations to help our neighbors? There are no easy answers here.

Recently, Tedford developed plans for a new shelter ... and quickly ran into a brick wall – two of them, actually. First, they discovered that Brunswick's new zoning plan, developed a couple of years ago at considerable expense to the town, didn't include zoning for homeless shelters. Hunh. That tells us something, doesn't it? Professional planners didn't even consider the need to house people who are homeless. Talk about being invisible!

Tedford also met resistance from a small but vocal group of NIMBY residents who did

not want a homeless shelter in their neighborhood.

Finally in May, the the town finalized new zoning requirements: Homeless shelters must be in *non-residential* zones. Hunh, that tells us something, too, considering the fact that shelters are places where people eat and sleep, which is basically what people do in residential neighborhoods.

In addition, shelters must be open 24 hours a day (in contrast to the current Tedford Shelter, which is open only at night).

Craig Philips, Tedford Director, tells me that now that Tedford knows what is permitted, they are working on seeing their plans through. They are committed to finding a suitable location and creating more emergency housing. He also stressed that Tedford receives a lot of help from all kinds of constituencies in town ... the faith organizations (he mentioned our Concerts for a Cause specifically), schools, individuals, and businesses all contribute in large and small ways to make Tedford a success.

That is all good. I hope a suitable location opens up soon. And/but, when it does, we will still be providing only emergency shelter, not permanent supportive housing. People who get into Tedford are still homeless. People who get into the new shelter will still be homeless.

I do not mean to disparage Tedford's work. To the contrary, I think Tedford is extraordinary. For instance, Tedford supplies case managers that help people get on their feet again. They help their clients find housing. In addition, they work to ward off disaster for people in danger of *losing* their housing. Tedford often calls on our church and several others in the area to help people fill a gap in rent money or to help come up with a security deposit.

But I wonder if there is something more our community could be doing. What if, to augment Tedford's work, we began to move toward a housing first approach to

homelessness?

In her book, Kathy IZARD describes her spiritual journey over the course of her Homes to Homeless work. Initially a doubter, over time she came to believe God was calling her and supporting her in her work. Other spiritual journeys, though similar, may differ. The question is, “what is calling us, and *what are we called to do?*”

For me, the spiritual nature of this kind of work lies in the sentiments of the Joanna Macy meditation we did a few moments ago. Joanna Macy says each being contributes some act of merit – from large to infinitesimal – to our world. To be sure, if our community could find a way to house people, that would be an enormous act of merit. But, even more, I wonder what acts of merit our world is missing out on when we have a whole swath of humanity that spend the day simply trying to secure food and shelter, who live in the cold, on hard pavement, in danger, and afraid.

Often one good turn leads to another. So, what acts of merit might be unleashed when our culture makes it possible for everyone truly to find their way home? I'd love to find out.

Benediction, by Robert Maybry Doss:

For all who see God, may God go with you.

For all who embrace life, may life return your affection.

For all who seek a right path, may a way be found ...

and the courage to take it step by step.'