

“Homeless at Hanukkah”

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Today is the 5th day of Hanukkah, the Jewish celebration of the light. A festival of a new time symbolized in the eight candles of the Menorah. Hanukkah is a festival that commemorates the re-taking the temple in Jerusalem which as the story goes had been dark in the eyes of the Jewish people for a very long time. In 167 BCE it fell into the hands of the Syrian Greeks. The Greeks had chosen to operate a gymnasium in the temple which for them was their religious worship. Since they ruled at that time, they got what they wanted. For over two hundred years there was a protracted guerilla war. Finally the Jews did re-take the temple and reclaim it for themselves as their religious center, and their spiritual home.

This story tells of temple lights that were lit, lights which symbolized the end of a deep homelessness of both the heart and body. This estrangement from home and hearth would eventually become just memories in the cracks of the Temple’s Western or Wailing Wall which is all that remains of the temple today. It is to this day the symbol of the

end of a long and hard journey, a symbol of Sanctuary and of an end to homelessness.

When the candles of Hanukkah are lit, this story comes alive with light, and community. Not as a documentary intent on making history of a myth about a war weary bunch of fighters who find a reawakening of faith in the shelter of the temple walls, but a story of the light within us all. As each winter season grows in its darkness, we Unitarian Universalists, along with the Jews, can be touched with this rich and wonderful symbolism. And if there was ever a time the light of heart and the melodies of winter's songs were needed to help sustain us, consider our current history. The Homeless at Hanukkah are on the rise, their light is dim, their oil low. And not just in this season but throughout the year.

Homelessness is a growing reality in our world, not a shrinking one. Since the end WWII, humanity has been impacted more and more each year as wandering souls without a home increase. In countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh the numbers of homeless are now impossible to even estimate. Many African nations as well have rapidly growing populations of homeless wandering from one area to the next. Even Brazil has difficulty in estimating their homeless populations as they

become one of the fastest growing economies on the planet. And in parts of Europe the homeless have not only grown to huge numbers but are subcultures of their own who have taken action on their own and created whole squatting communities in deserted and unoccupied buildings.

And it seems that we will continue to see these numbers grow until something shifts, until our leaders and visionaries find some way to better deal with these rapidly expanding populations and inaccessible economic systems.

This may mean new leaders, this may mean more compassion and less greed for us all, things which to date don't seem to be in the cards in any significant way. Yet it seems to me looking closely at economic systems and the way we do them, and tax them is important. In the name of economic stability, we continue to grow this estranged under-culture which has no hope of respite or sanctuary from homelessness if we continue in the ways we have.

In our own self-proclaimed “more economically and socially advanced” country we have now defined through the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development the “chronically homeless”. They are;

“an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.”

Under that definition of homeless there is now another burgeoning sub category. It is street people, that segment of the homeless population who spend the majority of their time on the streets in urban areas. This is a category of a population that once was reserved for other countries that we now have growing here. The legal definition of ‘street people’ varies from country to country and among different entities or institutions that deal with this population. The closest thing we have ever had to this here historically was the hobo, in the depression, but they were not urban, generally living in hobo villages on the outskirts of communities.

There is yet another subdivision of this population that is growing as well. It is what we call the “working homeless.” This population is a real indicator of the severity of the problem and the connection to an inaccessible economics.

The “working homeless” population has ushered in yet another group with dramatic increases: “the homeless family.” Which in most cases are actually working homeless families? By its very nature this category

has also led to growing numbers of “street children.” In fact in 2002, research showed that children and families were the largest growing segment of the homeless in America.

With or without definition, homelessness goes on and on. No city is exempt: from New York to Boston, San Francisco to Las Angeles, Oklahoma City, Kansas City are all dealing with unprecedented numbers of people in these splintering categories of homelessness. We tend to look to the traditional service agencies to deal with this problem and hope that they can compassionately and effectively help move at least the working homeless into more secure and supportive kinds of living situations. But sadly these agencies are grossly underfunded, overburdened and for the most part seen as some kind of socialist menace by much of the population.

But like the Jewish festival of Hanukkah celebrating its community, it lies on the spirit and commitment of the religious community as a whole to be the beacons for those that still wander the streets and under the freeways and in the remote parts of our community parks. For if we do not act, who will?

It seems poignant to me that in this time of religious celebration of light, community, sanctuary and the rebuilding of home, we at this Unitarian Universalist congregation should start our second annual hostel for homeless women in Marin. Although we join in a collaborative effort with many other religious communities in the county to help here, tonight will mark the first Sunday that we will shelter and feed homeless women this winter. We will continue to do this each Sunday until the immediate winter's edge is passed and until we find better ways to handle the causes of homelessness.

We, meaning you and me and our institution here, the UU Congregation of Marin, who starting this Sunday open our doors to those in need, and in doing so step up publicly, saying that homelessness is absolutely wrong, a disgrace, in a nation such as ours.

As we care for others less fortunate than we are, we need to remember also our responsibility to build a better community for all. And like the churches in the Civil Rights era, religious institutions are going to be the creative, active force on the front lines. Our congregations will be the guiding light for effective and long term collaborative efforts to help people find their way home again, to find a sense of belonging to the wider community.

I have told people over the years that the reason one should come to church is not because of how it may serve you, your needs, your family, but rather because we are charged by an ancient and inherent set of values, to hold places sacred and open in the service of others. If there is any definition of religion that is worthy, it is to be there for the other, to be bound back to that which is greater than you.

If we come to church to be in the service of the other, if we see and support our religious community as a set of values (and not a club to fulfill our own personal wishes or needs) then we must step up and help fill such needs in our community as we do today. Joining in this effort to provide homeless shelters here in Marin, we will strengthen and deepen the experience of this liberal religious community and all that we do here. When we can enter into our religious life with a perspective of service, all the needs we may bring with us will be filled beyond our expectations. Our lights will shine brighter!

As we give of ourselves we can rekindle faith that people can work together to make this planet home of ours, a place of hope and potential, a place where love and care abound...a place where the gift of learning surpasses the acquisition of things, where inner character is the template

of our lives, the place where we start, not where we try to go or admire from a distance.

Yes, the homes others seek may well begin with us. If we can come to understand the gift we are, the gift to one and other and to the world, then we can come to be a part of the evolution of a sustainable and exciting time and future. And I know of no other or better place than this temple on the hill, to begin and sustain this work. Here within these walls of memory and hope let us be for the other, for the one and for the all, we can certainly find more than enough oil to light our way into a more caring and vibrant future for everyone.

So be it.