

Homelessness: Reflections of Fragmentation & Despair in Our Society

Author: Rachel Elizabeth Michalczyk

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Homelessness:

Reflections of Fragmentation & Despair in Our Society

Rachel Michalczyk
Boston College
Arts & Sciences Honors Program
Advisor: Professor Susan Michalczyk
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Table of Contents

Introduction: 3

Chapter One: 6

The Perceptions We Have

Chapter Two: 25

What We Have Come From

Chapter Three: 35

A Different View

Chapter Four: 44

Am I A Do Gooder, Or A Good Doer?

Conclusion: 53

References: 55

Introduction

"Sometimes we think that to develop an open heart, to be truly loving and compassionate, means that we need to be passive, to allow others to abuse us, to smile and let anyone do what they want with us. Yet this is not what is meant by compassion. Quite the contrary. Compassion is not at all weak. It is the strength that arises out of seeing the true nature of suffering in the world. Compassion allows us to bear witness to that suffering, whether it is in ourselves or others, without fear; it allows us to name injustice without hesitation, and to act strongly, with all the skill at our disposal."

(Salzberg, 2004, p. 130)

When I first began volunteering at Pine Street Inn, a homeless shelter for men and women located in Boston's South End, during my sophomore year, I became deeply concerned about the problem of homelessness and initially believed that with so many volunteers and professionals committed to addressing and eradicating the problem, a solution could be found. Now after three years of weekly volunteering with several other BC students, and after researching the topic for my thesis, I have become more keenly aware of a more profound and disturbing dimension of homelessness. No longer simply about those in need of temporary assistance, or representing only a small proportion of an addicted and unhealthy population, homelessness has fixed itself as an accepted and acceptable part of our culture. My experience over the years of having had the opportunity to speak with countless men from various backgrounds has taught me numerous lessons about the human spirit, the complete randomness of life, and the essence of the meaning of homelessness. Sadly and perhaps ironically as well, most Americans never glimpse the reality of homelessness. For most Americans, homelessness has lost any human dimension as it has taken on the appearance of a formalized institution, a cause to be supported. As homelessness has become a permanent fixture in our society, America has incorporated the inequality into our daily routine of donations and feel-good volunteering, in an attempt to alleviate any sense of guilt or responsibility. As more shelters are built, as more people volunteer and donate money and services, homelessness takes on a life of its own, distant and distinct from the individual faces I see each week at Pine Street.

Seeing some of the same men for several years has led me to reflect on the issue of homelessness in relation to my previous and current perceptions of who falls into this category. As I reviewed the research on this topic, I saw more clearly that it is society's attitudes towards and perceptions of the homeless as an impersonal cause that prevents us from eradicating homelessness. My personal understanding of the crisis of homelessness has changed drastically

since volunteering at Pine Street, and because of. In reality, as society continues to categorize the homeless as the problem, it only perpetuates the stereotypes and contributes to increasing the division between the “haves” and “have-nots.” In order to address the crisis and effect positive change we must look to our own humanity and without judgment, look clearly into the faces of the homeless, in order to understand and see them as human beings. By doing so, we could possibly shift the status quo and put an end to the cycle of homelessness, and re-integrate all members of our fragmented society: weak and strong, healthy and ill, wealthy and poor, educated and uneducated, in order to restore balance and equality.

Chapter One:

The Perceptions We Have

8.142

"All I have is sweat and drudgery,
While he's there, sitting at his ease.
He's great, respected in the world,
While I'm the underdog, a well-known nobody.

8.143

"What! A nobody without distinction?
Not true! I do have some good qualities.
He's not the best, he's lower down than some;
While, when compared with some, I do excel!"

(Chodron 2005, p. 325)

Declaration of the Rights of Older Persons

Preamble

At the first United Nations World Assembly on Ageing in 1982, some consideration was given to human rights issues, and in 2000, Mary Robinson, United Nations Commissioner on Human Rights, emphasized the importance of protecting the human rights of older persons. However, no official United Nations document has ever identified and specified what these rights are and why they are important.

In April 2002 the second United Nations World Assembly on Ageing will be held in Madrid, Spain. As a nongovernment organization in consultative status with the United Nations, the International Longevity Center–USA, in collaboration with its sister centers in Japan, France, the United Kingdom, and the Dominican Republic, will highlight this critical subject.

The International Longevity Center–USA proposes that the following Declaration of the Rights of Older Persons become the basis of action as well as discussion at the Assembly and beyond.

This Declaration comes at a time of misery and chaos for many older citizens of the world who have lost children and grandchildren in armed conflicts, who are often homeless and destitute, who suffer from malnutrition and ill health, and who live in societies that cannot provide them with the basic necessities of life.

It comes at a time of global disharmony in the context of powerlessness and attendant rage, shaped in part by vast divides in education, wealth, and longevity as well as ideology and theology.

It comes at a time when the United World Assembly on Ageing meets, with the goal of creating bridges to intergenerational cooperation and mutual respect between developing and developed nations.

May this Declaration, which concerns societies as well as individuals, serve to advance the struggle for human rights. We must not simply bear witness. We must compel change.

Declaration of the Rights of Older Persons

Whereas the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world,

Whereas human progress has increased longevity and enabled the human family to encompass several generations within one lifetime, and whereas the older generations have historically served as the creators, elders, guides, and mentors of the generations that followed,

Whereas the older members of society are subject to exploitation that takes the form of physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse, occurring in their homes as well as in institutions such as nursing homes, and are often treated in cruel and inaccurate ways in language, images, and actions,

Whereas the older members of society are not provided the same rich opportunities for social, cultural, and productive roles and are subject to selective discrimination in the delivery of services otherwise available to other members of the society,

Whereas the older members of society are subject to selective discrimination in the attainment of credit and insurance available to other members of the society and are subject to selective job discrimination in hiring, promotion, and discharge,

Whereas older women live longer than men and experience more poverty, abuse, chronic diseases, institutionalization, and isolation,

Whereas disregard for the basic human rights of any group results in prejudice, marginalization, and abuse, recourse must be sought from all appropriate venues, including the civil, government, and corporate worlds, as well as by advocacy of individuals, families, and older persons,

Whereas older people were once young and the young will one day be old and exist in the context of the unity and continuity of life,

Whereas the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other United Nations documents attesting to the inalienable rights of all humankind do not identify and specify older persons as a protected group,

Therefore new laws must be created, and laws that are already in effect must be enforced to combat all forms of discrimination against older people,

Further, the cultural and economic roles of older persons must be expanded to utilize the experience and wisdom that come with age,

Further, to expand the cultural and economic roles of older persons, an official declaration of the rights of older persons must be established, in conjunction with the adoption by nongovernment organizations of a manifesto which advocates that the world's nations commit themselves to protecting the human rights and freedoms of older persons at home, in the workplace, and in institutions and offers affirmatively the rights to work, a decent retirement, protective services when vulnerable, and end-of-life care with dignity.

(Butler, 2002)

“I am a product of a society that teaches us that aging is a desperate fate. We are taught to celebrate the magic of childbirth, to marvel at the early years of growth, to delight in the joy of watching a child develop. But all these positive descriptions of growth seem to fade after a while as new stages take their place, and we are left with a sense that maturity merely signals failing

youth, and that to grow old is to become irrelevant. The underlying assumption is that health and vitality also disappear when we age.”

“The old should be venerated, and yet this goes unpracticed in the United States.”

“From the moment of birth, we begin the process of aging, obvious but rarely acknowledged, and whether daily or as we make specific passages from one stage to another, we all grapple with the aging and look for answers.”

(Friedman, 2006)

The Average Perception of the Homeless

Alcoholic

Dirty

Lazy

Male

Panhandler

Alone

Worthless

Mentally ill

Uneducated

Unemployed

Lost

Helpless

Destitute

Alienated

Street

Grocery carts

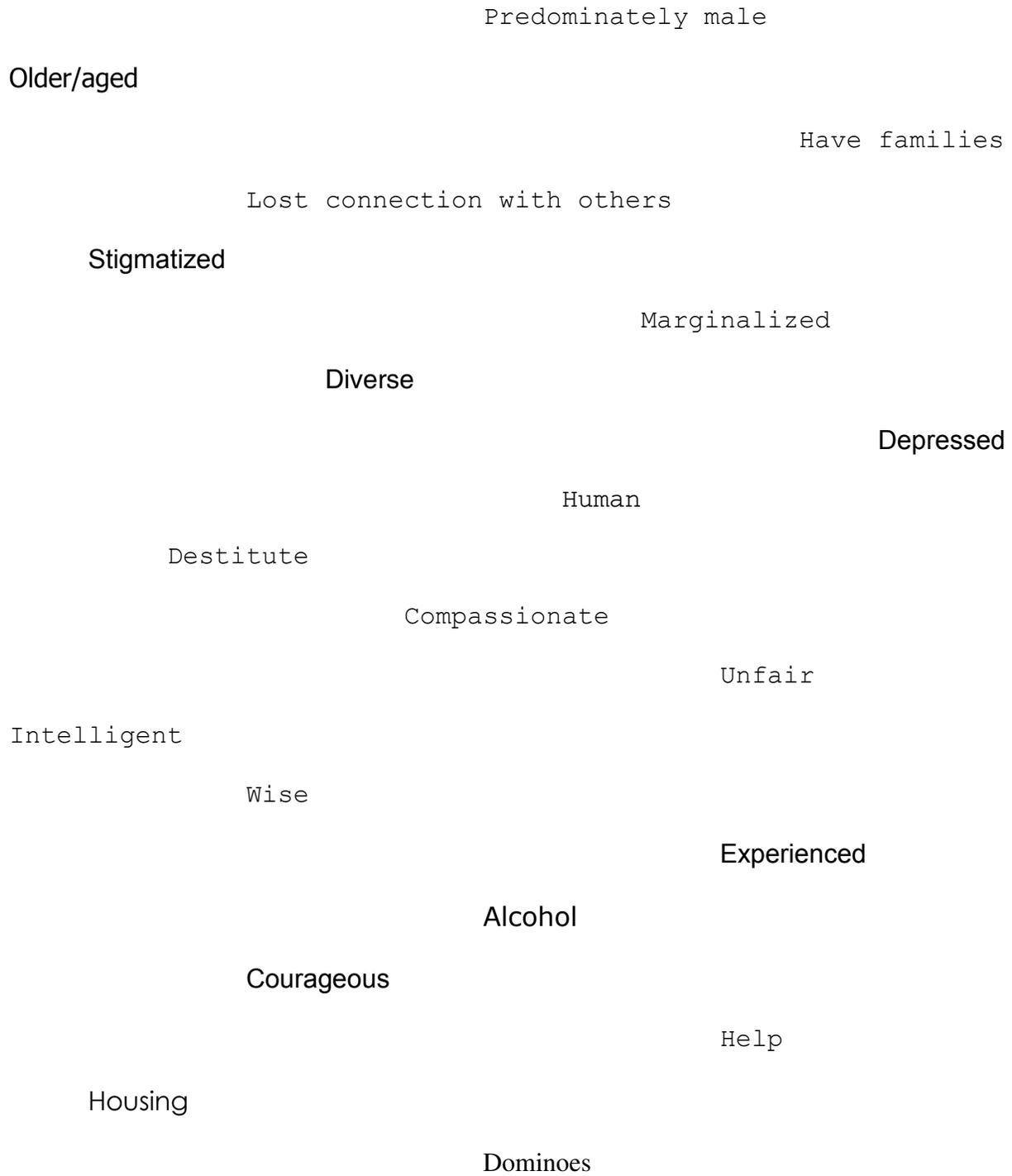
Drugs

Unkempt

“Welfare” cases

Asocial

The Volunteers Perception of the Homeless



My Perception of the Homeless after 3 Years of Volunteering at Pine Street

Individuals

Diverse

Depressed

Substance abuse

Marginalized

Kind

Stigmatized

Caring

Human

Hopeful

Different paths

Life experiences

Resilient

I am a 43-year-old man; I have three children who are living with their mother. Although I am in a homeless shelter, I still support them financially. I am currently waiting to be placed in a permanent apartment; however, I have been waiting for several months.

I have been having some health problems, and have been in and out of the hospitals in the area. The doctors do not know what is wrong with my arm. They tell me to take over-the-counter painkillers, but the medication doesn't provide sufficient relief. My arms are swollen and have been for days. It is difficult to walk and get around when I'm in so much pain, yet my body is all that I have to get around, so I have to deal with the pain the best I can.

I feel good even though I may not seem to have much and right now I am in a homeless shelter, I am still helping my kids and I get to see them every once in a while. I love my kids more than you could imagine—anything they want I want to give them, especially around the holidays. I am able to support them because many years ago I was in an accident and received a decent sum of money. Thinking of my kids, I put this money safely away for them. I wanted to keep it for them and I made a choice not to use any of it for my own selfish reasons. I believe that this was the best thing I could have done for them. Even though I am constantly struggling to make money, I know that they are provided for and do not need to worry about a place to live.

Walking along the streets in most cities today, it is not uncommon to see several homeless people sitting by the side, as others pass by ignoring them. For the average person, unacquainted first hand with a homeless person, it is easy to view these marginalized members of society as somehow deserving of their place, especially as our society clings to the myth of the “self-made man” and the reassuring motto of “where there’s a will there’s a way.” The underlying message is that individual failure indicates a defect or problem with the *person*, not the system, underscoring the American ideal of self-help. Timmer, Eitzen, and Talley (1994), in their study of *Paths to Homelessness* focus upon society’s willing acceptance of the stigma and stereotypes of homelessness as a way to place blame and responsibility on the victims and justify the injustice of the social structure. Viewing the less fortunate as the problem removes responsibility from those in society who are more fortunate.

In our society, we tend to emphasize the rugged individualism that formed the American Dream and the success stories that emerged from such a philosophy. Rarely do we examine and criticize the system as a whole when looking at the issue of homelessness. As a result, the homeless have evolved into a blight upon the community, as they lose their individual identities and individual humanity and become the subjects of stereotypes and blame. In the end, both those wanting to help and those in need are left feeling powerless and hopeless.

Although my understanding of the homeless was not as judgmental or extreme as some who see the homeless as less deserving of basic needs or less than human, for the most part my perception was equally inaccurate and impersonal. My views changed drastically once I began volunteering at Pine Street Inn. As I met and talked with a vast array of men who are homeless, I gradually recognized the complexity of the issue. The evidence clearly demonstrated the crisis of homelessness, not as the fault of the individual, but rather as the fault of a badly damaged and ineffective system. All of the men with whom I have spoken over the past three years have had

unique experiences and unfortunate circumstances that have resulted in a range of stays at Pine Street as brief as a few nights and as extended as several years. I see each man as an individual, with his own path to homelessness; however, I see a similarity between the men in the way that society views them. Unfortunately due to a society's preference for watching reality television and living vicariously through experiences once removed from personal encounters, not many take the chance to talk openly with the marginalized, and therefore the fortunate members of society rarely change.

In the 1980s, homelessness began to increase rapidly, as shelters became more commonplace. Seen as a quick fix, an instant and fairly simple solution, shelters emerged as the temporary and safe alternative to the blight of poverty in America. Americans started pouring funding into the shelters and other programs in an attempt to alleviate the problem; however, decades later we are still grappling with an ever more profound crisis of homelessness. Ironically, it seems as though Americans contribute to the shelters in order to feel better about themselves, to alleviate their own feelings of guilt and frustration with the system, without actually addressing the real problem. Americans choose not to deal with the root causes of homelessness or with the system that has helped perpetuate homelessness over decades. Our society has a tendency to push away those who are not seen as worthy or productive members, such as the elderly and the homeless. We leave our elders in nursing homes and the homeless in shelters. As we put them "out of sight," we automatically place them "out of mind" as well and in so doing provide ourselves with false comfort so that we are able to continue our privileged lives. I believe that if we truly want to end homelessness, we need to look beyond the shelters and stop placating ourselves with the notion that if we give some money around the holidays we are helping to end homelessness—although in the short term we may be helping to provide a meal, in the long term we are merely helping to fund institutions. Society's failure to address

homelessness as the symptom of an even more devastating problem—the deliberate creation of a sub-culture that explains away and distances the real cause—inevitably perpetuates the disparity between the “haves” and the “have-nots.”

Over my past three years as a volunteer at Pine Street Inn, I have had the opportunity to talk with many men and get an insight into the heart of homelessness. I no longer see it as something that happens to “others” but rather as something that can affect anyone at any time in one’s life—“I can say I know the world inside out, as you may see—that each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it” (Camus, 1991, p. 253). Some of the men whom I have talked with have been at the shelter for years, unable to break out of the cycle or unable to get the appropriate help that they need. Also, some of the men whom I have talked with are older, and their skills are no longer what the job market desires, leaving them with few options and forcing them to remain guests of the Inn.

I believe that homelessness is merely one avenue in which the flaws of our society are manifested. How much longer can we continue creating more shelters while we ignore the homeless man we walk past on the street? Perhaps we feel as though we are helping with our donations; however, donations have been given for decades, and we are still nowhere close to solving the crisis. A major flaw in our society—taking away an individual’s sense of self when that person does not fit into the so-called influential or contributing roles in society—devalues all of society. Our society contains within it numerous extremes, and the gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” continues to grow wider especially in terms of the young and the old, the rich and the poor. When our society deems someone unworthy and less than perfect, we push them away to nursing homes and shelters so as not to be forced to deal with them creating a system reminiscent of More’s *Utopia*. The creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* exemplifies this belief of viewing others as sub-human and refusing to change this opinion when he states, “I

have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless and in some degree beneficial; but a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friends, they behold only a detestable monster” (Shelley, 1983, p. 128). Our perceptions of the old and homeless cause us to constantly view them in a negative light. In a somewhat hypocritical message, we profess care and respect for all members of our community and yet we undermine their value, as we scrutinize through analysis the actual benefits of the elderly, the weak, and the disabled. Should we not return to the categorical imperative of the 19th century philosopher Immanuel Kant (1993) and remind all participants, especially the strongest members, those with greatest authority, ability and wealth, of the inherent preciousness and value of each individual and the fundamental equality that all members of society merit? Our hypocritical response to “all men are created equal” highlights a major flaw in our society—we are taking away peoples’ identity and self-worth. Because a person does not fit into the roles that society feels are important, that person is made to feel invisible and nonexistent. The way in which so many of us can walk past a homeless person and never make eye contact is cruel, and never allows for the important human connection.

Because our culture treats both older individuals and homeless individuals harshly, society considers those falling into these categories as inferior and undeserving as well as unproductive detriments to the greater society. As the homeless population ages, the number of individuals who fall into both categories of being older and homeless continues to rise. During the 1980s at the beginning of the crisis, the average age of the homeless population was quite young—28; however, this number has risen about 10 months each year, with the average age today reaching 42 (Culhane, 2005). The increasing average age of the homeless will require society to review its current analysis of the increasing older population. As government restricts finances and as the economy weakens, the tendency to blame these groups intensifies and

resentment is fueled on both sides. Aging is a natural process, and as our society continues to age and life is prolonged, the amount of elders will also continue to rise. Although homelessness in the United States increased dramatically in the 1980s, during the 1990s, Kisor and Kendal-Wilson (2002) found that specifically between 1994 and 1997, the older homeless group had a rapid increase of 20%, and today it is noted that, “Elders are one of the fastest-growing sectors of the Massachusetts homeless population. One out of every five elderly residents of the state has an income below the poverty line, and half of that group are homeless” (Pine Street Inn, 2006). Often we see it as their problem, forgetting that we will all one day be older. As Kutza and Keigher (1991) noted, one of the newest groups rising in the homeless population is that of elderly females, a bittersweet acknowledgment of the impact of the feminist movement and the so-called equality that emerged for both sexes. In addition, the number of older women living below the poverty line is much greater than the number of older men living below the poverty line, most likely resulting in even more older women becoming homeless in the future (Kisor & Kendal-Wilson, 2002).

The elderly homeless suffer on two counts in a contemporary society that prides itself on material success and youth. Old age and homelessness are shunned by most Americans and symbolize our deepest and darkest human fears and insecurities. Due to their age, this group is even more vulnerable while living on the streets as well as in shelters, and their options and opportunities to reenter society are much more limited than for younger homeless individuals (Kutza & Keigher, 1991). Some of the older homeless have deliberately chosen to live on the streets and in shelters, rather than lose their dignity by being forced into nursing homes or other long-term care facilities, a heartbreaking predicament that the distorted American mentality has created (Rich, Rich, & Mullins (Eds.), 1995).

Homeless men usually outnumber homeless women by about three to two, and yet they are less likely to utilize valuable services than homeless women, who are often encouraged to use these services more consistently (Kutza & Keigher, 1991). Kutza and Keigher (1991) offer the following explanation of this aspect of cultural bias: our society wants to protect women, therefore women wandering the streets are more often picked up by police officers and outreach workers than homeless men would be. It has also been suggested that women utilize more social services because the social services have been geared toward women and children and not directed toward men (Cohen, 1999). Although the gender differences have not been fully explained, for the most part, older men and women arrive by different paths at homelessness, starting at different ages—men usually report becoming homeless in their mid-forties, while women report becoming homeless in their mid-fifties (Cohen, 1999). Perhaps the disparity in the statistics results from their differing lifestyles and degrees of marginalization—men tend to remain homeless longer than women (Cohen, 1999). Some older women, with the death of the spouse who had handled their finances, are forced into major changes and crises of security (Kutza & Keigher, 1991). In our society today, older women remain the most adversely affected and most vulnerable, due to poverty and ill health. This is a major cause for concern because this group of older homeless women is growing at alarming rates (Duffy, Bissonnette, O'Brien & Townsend, 1996; Rich et al., 1995).

Our society treats aging as something that should be feared and avoided at all costs, another reminder of the hypocrisy surrounding our cultural bias against aging. We must not allow ourselves to grow old, a myth often accepted and perpetuated in the numerous advertisements for products that claim to make one appear younger and more youthful, disguising one's actual age. Perhaps it is this fear of aging that forces us as a society to find comfort only when our elders are safely hidden away in nursing homes. Although at some level

we are aware that as we age our bodies and minds begin to change, despite our material wealth and possessions, we prefer to distance ourselves from the reality of aging and align ourselves with the culture of youth. Homeless or not, older adults struggle significantly at various times during their lives, and those who are homeless suffer even more adversely, often requiring more assistance for chronic illness (Rich et al., 1995). For the marginalized of society, the stressful conditions of living on the streets and in shelters significantly damage all aspects of their physical and mental health. Inadequate nutrition coupled with the harshness of life on the streets and in shelters can cause a person's physiological age to be more similar to the chronological age of someone twenty years older (Cohen, 1999; Hecht & Coyle, 2001; Rich et al., 1995). Usually many government benefits are based on chronological age rather than physiological age, resulting additional hardships for the homeless, who on average age prematurely. When talking about homelessness and older adults, researchers and health care professionals use the age of 50 as a base to correct the disparity, in spite of the overall delay in aging in mainstream society today.

Homelessness among older Americans continues to increase despite the rising number of institutions designed to deal with the crisis. Although more people are becoming aware of the issue, it seems that homelessness has become a permanent fixture of daily life. In both the public and private sectors, successful marketing has turned individuals into statistics, usually gaining interest around the holidays when people donate money as a means to appease the conscience.

In an attempt to combat the painful effects of homelessness, it seems at times as if society has redesigned the concept of homelessness into something more acceptable and by extension, more tolerable. Modern technology and advertising enhance the noble goals and righteous aims of religious and social minded individuals so that everyone can lend a hand to those in need. Ironically, the result is even stronger marginalization of the homeless and an ever-greater

perpetuation of their struggles. As Kant (1993) wrote in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, “A fourth man finds things going well for himself but sees others (whom he could help) struggling with great hardships; and he thinks: what does it matter to me? Let everybody be as happy as Heaven wills or as he can make himself; I shall take nothing from him nor even envy him; but I have no desire to contribute anything to his well-being or to his assistance when in need.” The attitude of living solely for the self prevents us from seeing the connection between ourselves and all other human beings, creating a divide that is perpetuated in our daily lives by thinking and acting with only ourselves in mind.

In my research, I have attempted to address the disconnect between the reality of homelessness and the reshaped concept it has morphed into over the recent decades of the twentieth century, a carefully honed fabrication that divides and distorts humanity’s basic value.

In 1987, the government attempted to address the crisis with the creation of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, the first piece of legislation that recognized the multiple and long term needs of the homeless. A crucial reinterpretation, the McKinney Act acknowledged that homelessness is more than merely a problem of housing, as it implemented related programs from seven federal departments, providing mental health care as well as job training and substance abuse treatment (Rich et al., 1995).

Such an honest assessment of the underlying meaning behind the stigma of homelessness seemed to indicate a positive shift in the status quo. Unfortunately as the government began to face the disconcerting reality of the complexity hidden within the term of homelessness, the McKinney Act, insufficiently funded from its beginning, was never able to achieve success. Over time, as funding was reduced, what had seemed to be a moment of conscience raising and a heightened awareness of the plight of Americans living in poverty and without assistance due to societal structures, faded into government irresponsibility. The old assumptions about

homelessness resurfaced as the failure of the McKinney Act was reframed within accepted stereotypes of the homeless—alcoholics, mentally ill, and addicts.

In order to understand and implement policies to deal effectively with and eventually eradicate homelessness, both government institutions and society must shift the focus from placing blame on the victim. Continued blame of the homeless for their unfortunate condition, permits our fragmented society to absolve itself of any guilt over a failed system.

Homelessness then, especially homelessness among the older population, becomes a metaphor for an underlying flaw in our value system today. As a culture, youth-oriented and success-oriented, American society over the past two decades has chosen to accept the myth fostered by advertising and the media. In an attempt to obtain and reach such an extreme and unrealistic definition of happiness and success, American society has metaphorically transferred all the negative attributes of human existence—aging, failing health, financial disgrace—onto its most marginalized members. Similarly, in very concrete terms, without a permanent address or telephone, it is more difficult for one to stay in contact with others and to have a more stable life. Not knowing in which shelter one will be able to find a bed results in a disrupted daily schedule. Homelessness translates into loss of the self and permanent invisibility. With advancing age, the risks of marginalization increase. In a society conditioned to buy new, rather than repair the old, the natural outcome of viewing objects as disposable and useless has simply extended itself to the next level, perhaps the highest level: human beings.

I am a 65-year-old man. I am not originally from this country, but have been here for about twenty years. I came by myself, leaving my family, in search of the “American dream.” I have worked in the past, but now I am retired and too old. I did very well when I worked, but at one of my last jobs, my boss did not like me because he thought I did too good of a job and that I was trying to take his job. That was not true, but it caused us to have some problems and I eventually quit. Now I do not think I could even find work if I was not retired. My body is old and I am not as quick as I used to be. After all, who would want to hire someone as old as me and without much physical strength? Sometimes even walking is difficult for me.

I have been living in the shelter here for several years on and off. I used to have an apartment, but I allowed some of my friends to come in and now I have lost that apartment. That has happened to several people I know who also had apartments. I hope that I can put my name back on the list for permanent housing. I do not think of myself as an alcoholic and I am not in any of the programs offered here; however, sometimes I do go out and drink and when I come back to the shelter my friends and other guests tell me that I am not acting right and that I should behave. I do not think I get angry when I drink, but my friends have told me that sometimes I yell and get frustrated when people do not listen to me. When I am sober, I do not act like that at all. Most of the time, I am a perfect gentleman.

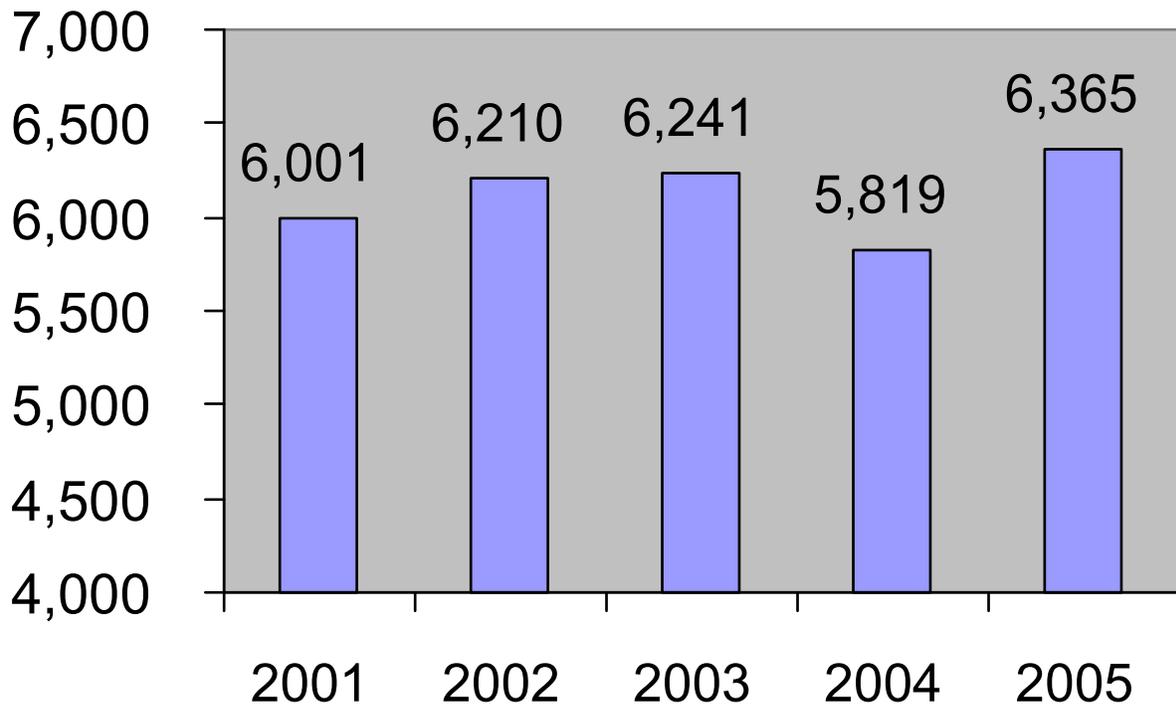
Chapter Two:

What We Have Come From

"If you knew, as I do, the power of giving, you
would not let a single meal pass without sharing some of it."

-- The Buddha (Salzberg, 2004, p.193)

Total homeless in Boston



	2004	2005	Change
Individuals in shelters	1,913	1,716	Down 10%
Individuals on streets	299	261	Down 13%
Total members of families	1,875	2,325	Up 24%
Members of families in shelters	1,412	1,704	Up 21%

(Burge, 2006)

I am a 35-year-old man. I am an alcoholic. I have been in and out of programs, and am currently waiting to enter another program, once I have enough clean urine tests. My favorite pastime is writing; I am hoping to go back to school and study something along the lines of creative and artistic work. I have begun picking up small writing jobs for friends and others who have become familiar with my work. This is helping to get me some money, which I hope will assist me in leaving here and getting established.

I am not usually over here at Pine Street. Usually I am in one of the other shelters with more programs, but I relapsed and now have to wait to be readmitted. I have to prove that I really want to stay sober, but sometimes it's difficult.

I have been in and out of relationships lately, nothing lasting too long, but some of them have been serious. It is difficult living in a shelter and being part of a program all the while trying to be in a relationship. Here in the shelter everyone surrounding me is male, except for the few female volunteers and staff, and since we cannot have any one of the opposite sex on the male side of the shelter, maintaining a relationship is complicated.

Maybe when I get back into a program things will clear up a bit for me. I think I should focus on my writing now and on working through a program. I love writing and believe that through it I will be able to leave the shelter system. I am trying to focus on "one day at a time," but it can be a challenge sometimes, especially when I'm around others who are drinking or have been drinking. When I'm in a program it's a little easier because everyone's going through the same thing, but when I'm in the shelter or on the streets I'm surrounded by others who are not trying to stay sober or who have relapsed.

Much of the research and statistics on the growing problem of homelessness in our country today indicates that a sense of complacency and extreme judgment has entered into our understanding of the reasons for the existence of the homeless. As a result, the tendency toward blaming the victims has re-emerged as a means of society's coping with an end result of frustration and failure to alleviate the problem. As the concept of homelessness evolves into increasingly more structured organizations and assumes the face of another worthy "cause," it replaces all connectedness to the individual human beings who often through no fault or desire of their own, suddenly need assistance. Soon those hoping to offer assistance and those in need get caught up in a destructive cycle of hopelessness and despair. Overwhelmed by insufficient and inconsistent financial support and limited human resources, both sides lose patience and dignity. Those of us who have become friends with the homeless understand that our views and beliefs have forever been changed, similar to Camus' (1991) description of being plague-stricken— "...it's a wearing business, being plague-stricken. But it's still more wearying to refuse to be it. That's why everybody in the world today looks so tired; everyone is more or less sick of plague. But that is also why some of us, those who want to get the plague out of their systems, feel such desperate weariness, a weariness from which nothing remains to set us free except death" (p.253). Those of us who have befriended the homeless wish to see them out of the shelters and into their own private permanent housing; we wish for others also to see them as the individuals that they are. Complicating the tense situation of the issue of homelessness is the allocation of funds: sometimes adequate, at other times not or ineffectively dispersed. As the number of homeless Americans increases, a correlation emerges with a similar rise in the number of shelters and community outreach programs. In order to break the cycle of expansion, it is essential to consider the underlying causes that repeatedly undermine any long-term success in limiting the crisis of the marginalized.

By acknowledging the multi-layered meanings within the term, and by reconciling the actual condition of homelessness with the powerful symbolism that it has assumed, it may become possible to meet the challenge of eradicating homelessness. Over the past few decades, as concern for the homeless crisis in America has grown, so too have the attempts to diminish the dignity of the individuals. The stigma of being homeless may cause one to be viewed as a “cause” or “charity-case” without any human dimension.

The lack of affordable housing remains one of the major structural reasons why homelessness increases steadily today (Timmer et al., 1994). Many Americans have seen cities and towns gentrify, changing what was once low-income housing into housing for the middle and upper classes (Timmer et al., 1994). This gentrification has caused problems for many, and has put landlords in charge of providing affordable housing, as opposed to the government (Duffy et al., 1996). Lack of housing coupled with a decrease in the job market work together to trap people in homeless situations. Studies indicate that if our society does not increase the availability of low-income housing within the next few years, the population of older homeless individuals will continue to increase, and may rise to uncontrollable levels (Hecht & Coyle, 2001).

When looking at the issue of homelessness, many tend to look solely at the individual factors such as substance abuse and mental health problems, while ignoring the structural factors that work to perpetuate homelessness (Hecht & Coyle, 2001). Although mental illness may be a factor for some becoming homeless, for others, “living on the street is probably as much a cause of mental illness and substance abuse as it is an effect” (Yeich, 1994). The surrounding environment has a strong effect on the well-being of older adults, which is why living on the streets and in shelters can lead to more mental health issues for older adults (Kutza & Keigher, 1991). Some of the structural factors are a decrease in jobs for unskilled workers, a decrease in

affordable housing, changes in social policy, and deinstitutionalization (Hecht & Coyle, 2001). In our society, structural changes have been made which could increase the number of homeless individuals. For example, the poverty line has been increased and low-cost housing has been significantly decreased (Yeich, 1994).

Studies focusing on the older homeless population look at and take into account a variety of complicated issues, which interact and constantly affect one another. For many, premature aging causes a decline in health, leaving the homeless in need of additional services usually reserved for much older adults (Rich et al., 1995). Although the young and old may have some similar health problems, they are manifested in different ways, an important distinction when making a psychological diagnosis (Rich et al., 1995). Fortunately, for those over the age of sixty-two there are services and sources of income available, although these resources and incomes are usually much less than the cost of housing which can inadvertently lead to becoming homeless for someone depending solely on social security or other small supplemental incomes, and thereby magnify the problem (Rich et al., 1995). Those who are between the ages of fifty and sixty-two are most adversely affected, often lost in a system that only accepts their chronological age, without respecting the damage of premature aging. Though their physical health may resemble that of someone twenty years older, they are not eligible for the same services and resources, and therefore once again are more susceptible to homelessness (Kisor & Kendal-Wilson, 2002). Because of the severely compromised physical health of the homeless, the term “older homeless” refers to individuals who are age fifty and older (Cohen, 1999). The combination of living at or below the poverty line along with having health problems increases an individual’s chance of becoming homeless (Rich et al., 1995). In fact, statistics show that roughly fifty-percent of older-home owners live below the poverty line and account for forty-percent of the prescribed medications, demonstrating the high degree of vulnerability in this

population (Rich et al., 1995). Particularly at high risk and frequently ignored, the older homeless often have to deal with extensive medical issues such as coronary artery disease, respiratory illness, and tuberculosis (Rich et al., 1995).

Another complication in dealing with the plight of the homeless comes from the fact that not every homeless person is the same or spends the same amount of time in a shelter. Based on the amount of time spent in shelters, the homeless have been divided into three groups—transitionally, episodic, and chronically. The transitionally homeless account for the majority of shelter users, about eighty-percent (Culhane, 2005). The individuals in this group, “are likely to be homeless only once over a three-year period, and only for an average of three weeks at a time” (Culhane, 2005). The remaining twenty-percent is split evenly between the episodic and the chronically homeless. The individuals in the episodic group, accounting for around ten-percent, “move in and out of the shelter system four or five times over the course of a three-year period, averaging a total of 90 days; they stay for 10 or 15 days at a time, then leave for five months at a time, before returning” (Culhane, 2005). The third group, chronic homeless, also about ten-percent of the homeless population, “tend to stay for very long periods of time; some never leave” (Culhane, 2005). This is the group many usually think of when they hear the term “homeless,” and which many base their perceptions on.

While volunteering at Pine Street Inn, I have talked with men from all three groups; however, the majority would most likely be considered chronic because I have consistently talked to them over a period of three years. The men I see week to week tend to be middle aged or older, whereas the younger men whom I occasionally talk with are usually gone within the following week or two. This disparity between age groups has forced me to reflect upon the factors that contribute to homelessness and to reflect on society’s misperceptions about this population.

As I began reflecting upon my research and my personal experience of volunteering, I started noticing the ways in which our society views and treats those who are older and those who are homeless. Advertisements, products, and popular culture tell us that we must look young in order to succeed—youthfulness is praised while growing older is shunned. Seeing people age can cause society to panic. People also tend to assume that aging contributes to negative behavior, most evident in complications due to alcohol addiction and deterioration in mental health. Inevitably, this can lead to problems. For instance, the symptoms of alcoholism are often confused with physiological changes that naturally occur due to aging, which can lead to older homeless alcoholics being more often ignored than younger alcoholics by a prejudiced police department (Rich et al., 1995). In addition, older homeless adults often have their mental health ignored, for similar reasons of prejudice and judgment, leaving them more vulnerable on the streets and in the shelters.

Perhaps out of self-preservation, contemporary society has made a conscious decision to depict those who are homeless as less than human and deserving of their situation, by ostracizing them in the category of drunks, mentally unstable, and lazy creatures (Timmer et al., 1994). This harsh perception of the homeless is reflected in the way we treat those who are less fortunate. Even the term “marginalized” indicates our control and superior attitude with regard to this group of persons, damaged by cruel circumstances or fate. We feel that if we give to a shelter, we are helping to end homelessness and helping the homeless individuals; however, we are merely helping the shelter system, not the individuals. Acts of violence against the homeless show that our society does not consider them worthy of basic human rights. This can be seen in the recent tragedy of a homeless man’s being beaten and set on fire while sleeping outside in a park (Cramer, 2006). Unable to find shelter for the night, this man found a tree under which he was able to curl up and sleep. However, he awoke to two men kicking him while shouting

derogatory comments at him. Once the two men left, the homeless man fell back to sleep, only to be awakened again by the same two men pouring lighter fluid on him. The two men then lit a match and ran off, leaving the homeless man burning in the park. Fortunately, by taking off some of his burning clothes, the man was able to prevent himself from being seriously burned. Lyndia Downie, president of the Pine Street Inn, commented about this event—“Many of the folks we work with are easy targets. I think sometimes people think because folks are homeless, people don't think that anyone is going to follow up or is going to care. Clearly, it's an act of sheer violence” (Cramer, 2006). It is obvious that the two individuals who did this did not see this man as another human, but rather as something undeserving of life and respect. The acts of violence committed against those without shelter are a sad commentary on our society as a whole. Someone who has lost his home and found a space under a tree is never safe or free from the cruelty and thoughtless behavior of some members in our society. The homeless individual is never free from worrying about personal safety and must always remain alert. The extremely violent reaction by these two men is indicative of the rise in hostility and frustration within contemporary society today. As pressure mounts and funding cuts continue to impact on all areas of daily life, the latent normal tensions and stress of all individuals begins to erupt in a more blatant fashion.

I am a 59-year-old man. I have been living in the shelter for many years. I work nearby, yet I still live here. I guess that I do not mind it much; I have a locker here and have some friends. I have always been a religious man and have found several churches in the area where I go, including Cathedral on the Common—a church service and lunch for the homeless in Boston. I grew up in a wealthy town in New England, was married and have several children as well as a few grandchildren. I have sometimes thought of moving in with one of my children, yet have always decided against it for one reason or another.

I would call myself a friendly man. I have become close friends with some of the volunteers over the years, and have seen them off and on, in and out of the shelter. They have all been kind and caring towards me.

I do not seek out difficult situations; I am a peaceful man, yet I have had some arguments with other guests here at the shelter over the years. Unfortunately, some friendships have been lost that way. Sometimes it is difficult to keep many friends in a place like this, but I have a few, and that makes me happy.

I guess my schedule is simple. I come to the shelter after work, see my friends, have some dinner, take a shower, and then go to sleep—it is what I have been doing for a while now, I guess I am just used to it. Although I usually do not mind it too much in the shelter, sometimes I find it to be dirty and germ-filled. I usually think this in the winter when there are many more people than usual and when one person gets sick, it is passed along to many others. I guess this is the life that works best for me, in spite of the occasional problems.

Chapter Three:

A Different View

“The thought manifests as the word;
The word manifests as the deed;
The deed develops into habit;
And habit hardens into character.
So watch the thought and its ways with care,
And let it spring from love
Born out of concern for all beings.”

-- The Buddha (Salzberg, 2004, p.105)

“Homeless shelters face many obstacles. When it’s cold outside, shelters swell to capacity and beyond, causing a strain on the resources of these nonprofit organizations.”

“Perhaps the greatest challenge for homeless shelters managing increased heating costs is deciding what to sacrifice. You cannot simply turn the heat off, and the money has to come from somewhere.”

“Even though more than 1 in 5 homeless parents are working while living in a shelter, there is no community in the United States where a full-time minimum-wage worker can afford a market-rate two-bedroom apartment.”

“The factors that contribute to homelessness may be as diverse as the people it affects, but the result is the same: People are having trouble affording the basic need of housing.”

“Contemplate this sobering thought: Each one of us can be an illness, an accident, or a paycheck away from being homeless. Without family, savings, or other resources, would you know where to go? Could a shelter take you in when you get there?”

(Smyth, 2005)

“Without preventative programs, shelters are overflowing, raising the specter of once again placing homeless families in expensive motels and hotels. The cost of family shelters is also prohibitive; the state pays shelters \$106 a day per family—that translates into \$3,215 per month or \$38,500 per year, far more than the cost of a moderately priced apartment in Boston.”

“There are about 6,200 homeless adults in Boston and 22,000 homeless individuals in Massachusetts. One-half of homeless individuals work full-time but are unable to find housing they can afford.”

“First, under Ronald Reagan, came the creation of homelessness as affordable housing was zeroed out of the federal budget in the 1980s. Three years ago federal Section 8 housing subsidies were eliminated. In 1997, voters in many communities did away with rent control and previously cheap apartments suddenly became high-priced rentals or condos. Now state programs funding homelessness prevention and family stabilization services—the last line of defense for families facing homelessness—are being eliminated.”

(Coard, 2006)

I am a 37-year-old man. I am working to get myself out of the shelter by participating in a job program for a company that has a connection with the shelter. The counselors here like me, I try hard in the programs, and I really want to succeed. I have been practicing my interview and writing skills, to become qualified to get a decent job. Over the years, my usual occupation has been an electrical worker. I am sent to jobs here and there, wherever I am needed on that day. At my last job, the boss stopped calling me. I would try to find out when I was needed, but I never received a phone call, so I just quit. This cycle has happened several times with jobs and me. I hope that this job program will give me an opportunity to work in a different field, although I would still like to work with others. I could not imagine working in a tiny cubicle all day without any human interaction.

Some of the guests here say I have a temper problem, though I do not see it. I sometimes react to a situation, but I believe I am reacting to what others do and say to me. Perhaps I should move to another state, some place warmer, with new jobs and a new life since things here are not going as well as I would like. I still have a few options I would like to try before I move or make a drastic change in my life.

Although many see the issue of homelessness from a humanistic perspective believing strongly that everyone deserves to have basic needs met, there are those who take a more pragmatic approach and consider homelessness an economic disaster at worst, or an economic dilemma at best. The amount of money society pours into shelters could be better used to end homelessness, for we spend more money on providing temporary shelter than it would cost to help someone attain stable and affordable housing. A valid argument and yet what would happen in the interim, if we were to eliminate shelters? Fueling this attitude about homelessness is the stereotypical view of the homeless as the older man, suffering from diminishing mental and physical health and chronically draining on the system, a blanket image used to describe all homeless individuals (Gladwell, 2006). However, this image reflects only ten percent of the homeless population (Gladwell, 2006).

To move forward and break the cycle of the expensive band-aid that shelters have become, the three groups—transitionally, episodic, and chronically—that homeless individuals are classified as, require individual attention. If understood accurately and handled appropriately, each group could receive the resources necessary in order to move out of the shelters and reintegrate into society. The transitionally homeless usually have more support than the other two groups; they need assistance in the form of emergency money and help with job finding (Culhane, 2005). The episodic need smaller, less intimidating programs that are designed to support the individual (Culhane, 2005). The chronically homeless need permanent housing, along with a support network providing access to social services (Culhane, 2005). An important and necessary first step then would be for government agencies and private foundations to distinguish one group from another and then to address adequately, the specific needs.

Dennis Culhane's (2005) research has led him to state that, "The chronically homeless are a very expensive group. In shelter costs alone, New York spends nearly \$100 million a year on its long-term shelter population. Nationally, I estimate that as much as \$2 billion may be spent providing 'permanent housing'—in the form of shelter cots—to chronically homeless people, at a cost of about \$15,000 per cot per year." The emergency shelters that have been set up across the country were not intended to be permanent housing solutions, but rather as temporary shelters for the transitionally homeless, who comprise the majority of the homeless population. Ironically, these emergency shelters have evolved into a form of permanent housing for some homeless individuals.

In Massachusetts, the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program followed one hundred and nineteen chronically homeless individuals over a five-year period. Their data showed that this group had 18,834 emergency room visits, each costing at least one thousand dollars (Gladwell, 2006). Society helps people maintain a minimal level of health, preventing people from dying, yet not helping beyond that. The hospitals stabilize people, yet throw them back out into difficult situations, only to have them re-enter the hospitals later. The chronically homeless are not only expensive in regards to the health care system, but also in terms of emergency shelters. The end result is that these stopgap measures merely allow the marginalized to survive, but never truly live. Basic survival cannot be considered a worthy or final goal.

Dennis Culhane has looked at the issue of homelessness and has noted, "the cost of placing the chronically homeless in permanent housing to be offset, or quite nearly so, by the savings that resulted in other social service systems" (Culhane, 2005). Culhane and others researched this theory, and found that indeed, it is less expensive for our society to place the chronically homeless in housing than to merely continue to fund the shelter systems. "Put another way, of the \$65 million that the city and state of New York spend each year on this

program [New York/New York Agreement], they get \$59 million back in terms of reduced use of public services” (Culhane, 2005). This research supports the belief that the mindset of our society is one of complacency and maintaining the pre-existing institutions as opposed to one that truly wants to eradicate homelessness. Seen in this light, one must question society’s relationship with and need to maintain a homeless sub-culture, reminiscent of Woolf’s (1981) statement that, “Life for both sexes...is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are a babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself. By feeling that one has some innate superiority...” (p. 35). By keeping the homeless in shelters, the fortunate in society are able to feel a sense of superiority in that they have houses, they are not homeless.

Although I believe that our country needs an attitude shift in order to eradicate homelessness, some view the issue as one that follows the rules of a power-law distribution. A noted researcher, Dennis Culhane, and the executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, Philip Mangano, see homelessness in this light. This theory helps put into perspective who the homeless are, and what their needs are. Because there is still a group of homeless who are virtually living in shelters as forms of permanent housing, the current method of helping is clearly not working properly. Mangano has stated before that, “simply running soup kitchens and shelters...allows the chronically homeless to remain chronically homeless. You build a shelter and a soup kitchen if you think that homelessness is a problem with a broad and unmanageable middle. But if it’s a problem at the fringe it can be solved” (Gladwell, 2006). Determined to change society’s perception of homelessness, Mangano is re-framing the concept in a way that provides a glimmer of hope for the eradication of homelessness. He has stated,

“Our intent is to take homeless policy from the old idea of funding programs that serve homeless people endlessly and invest in results that actually end homelessness” (Gladwell, 2006). Perhaps because he has been dealing with homelessness in Massachusetts and across the country for many years, he has come to a deep understanding of the issue:

What we have come to know is that you can't end homelessness programmatically. We have tried for 25 years, and you can't do it. You can't end homelessness locally. We have had several mayors in Boston, for example, who have been very committed to the issue, yet there are more homeless people now than there have been before. You can't end it even on the state level. We have made great advancements in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, yet there are more homeless people than ever before (Larson, 2002).

As the executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, perhaps Mangano will be able to use his experience and knowledge to create a change in the way homelessness is viewed, as well as a possible solution to eliminate homelessness.

As Mangano and Culhane have noted, the power-law theory makes sense economically, but not morally:

There isn't enough money to go around, and to try to help everyone a little bit—to observe the principle of universality—isn't as cost-effective as helping a few people a lot. Being fair, in this case, means providing shelters and soup kitchens, and shelters and soup kitchens don't solve the problem of homelessness. Our usual moral intuitions are little use, then, when it comes to a few hard cases. Power-law problems leave us with an unpleasant choice. We can be true to our principles or we can fix the problem. We cannot do both (Gladwell, 2006).

If our society is able to change its attitudes toward the homeless and remain dedicated to ending homelessness, perhaps we can combine the resources and social services we currently

have, with the knowledge gained from the power-law distribution theory, and come up with a true solution of how to eradicate homelessness. We must begin with a change in our perspective of who the homeless are, for remaining unaware about the individuals who are affected, keeps us in a cycle that will perpetuate homelessness, not eradicate it—“The evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding” (Camus, 131). We must realize that fortunately, many are not homeless for long periods of time, yet we cannot ignore the individuals who have been homeless for many years and who depend on the shelters for “three hots and a cot.”

I am a 47-year-old man. My house was recently destroyed by a natural disaster; fortunately, I have insurance, and will soon be moving in a new house with my son. I figure we can find a bigger place outside of Massachusetts, so we're going to leave the state. Here the prices are just too high for what we want—a nice open field around our house because we both love nature. I will be here in the shelter for only about a month while I wait for the insurance check. Everyday I am hoping will be my last one in here. My son is staying with family members, but I have decided that it is better for me to stay in a shelter since I do not get along well with them. I did not want my son having to live in shelter for any amount of time, so my relatives agreed to let him stay there while I stay here in a shelter. They love him and are taking good care of him while I am working on getting things together for us to move.

I do not understand why people would want to be here in a shelter for any longer than possible, I cannot wait until I leave. I have seen some men here who look as though they live here. Do they not want to leave? Do they like it here? Although I am in a shelter right now, I know that my life is getting better, and with a new house, my son and I will have new opportunities. I am looking forward to leaving here and moving into my house. It will be a new beginning for me and my son, filled with new opportunities for the both of us—a fresh start.

I struggled with substance abuse many years ago, before my son was born. I know that it can cause numerous problems for people, so I have taught my son that he should never use any substance because it is just too hard to quit—I do not want him ever having to live in a shelter. I want him to have all the opportunities I never had, and to learn from my mistakes without going through them himself.

Chapter Four:

Am I A Do Gooder, Or Good Doer?

"When a beggar looks at someone like me, someone who's taken the bodhisattva vow and should not be so unfeeling, he must wonder why I have no empathy. Why don't I do something to help his predicament?"

It must be like that when you live on the streets: middle-class people, with all their ideas about helping others, scoot by without even noticing you're there. Imagining yourself in this position changes the way you see those less fortunate: 'just like me,' this person would appreciate some understanding and kindness."

(Chodron, 2005, p. 326)

“A federal court in California has thrown out a local ordinance aimed at arresting homeless people for sleeping or sitting on city streets, sidewalks, or alleys. The court decision is a rarity because it uses the Eighth Amendment prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment as the basis for its ruling. But the overall message—that homelessness itself is not a crime— is an important judicial statement that other cities should heed closely.”

“But the real solution is not to create more shelter beds to warehouse poor or troubled people. Homelessness was not always a widespread social problem; it grew as the consequence, sometimes unintended, of government actions. Government actions can undo the problem, as well: The creation of more low-income housing; treatment on demand for substance abuse and mental illness; a living wage for honest work.”

(Homeless and sleepless, 2006)

“I am a commuter who walks under the Evelyn Moakley Bridge every morning. For years, I passed a homeless man and his three-legged dog who lived in a makeshift shelter under the bridge. Occasionally, I’d leave items for him in a shopping cart left there. I was surprised recently to see construction equipment and workers tenting off the passageway, tearing down the structure under the bridge, and evicting what appeared to be several people from these makeshift, virtually invisible homes. I wonder who made this call and for what purpose—to relocate these people to back alleys or parks where they might be verbally or physically abused? They had created their own living conditions far from anyone else’s neighborhood. If many of the homeless avoid overcrowded shelters, I don’t see why we are essentially re-creating a problem that they had harmlessly solved themselves.”

(Stevenson, 2006)

I am a 40-year-old man. I was an addict, then I was clean for over a decade. However, I recently relapsed and promised my family that I would get myself into a program, which is why I am in the shelter now. I need to be here in the shelter for a certain amount of time before I can be admitted into one of the programs, but I believe that it will be only a short time until I am admitted. I have to show that I want to be in a program and that I am serious about it, which is why I am doing everything that I need to—I take tests to show I am currently clean and I talk with the counselors.

I used to work around the wealthy neighborhoods in the area and can tell you almost any street name—just ask! My job has changed, but I am still able to support my family. I am not a homeless man, but I am in need of the services offered here at the shelter. Although I guess you could say currently I am homeless because I have left my house and family, I don't feel homeless because I know that I will return to them shortly—I have a way out of here. Once I am in a program, I will be working my way out. I am doing this not only for myself but also for my wife and two children. I do not want them to see me this way, and I feel confident that I can get clean again and be an excellent father. I believe that they understand why I am here and that they know that I love them. I hope to be here for less than two months, for I miss my family already. However, I have promised to stay until I am in a program and until I am clean and ready to go back to my wife and kids. I sometimes visit them during the day, just to say “hello” and to make sure that everything is all right, and to let them know that I will soon be home for good. Progress may seem slow, but in the end I know that my stay here in the shelter will have been worth it.

My experiences at Pine Street have taught me the importance of talking, since at least half of my time at Pine Street is spent merely in conversation with the guests about various topics and ideas. When people are curious about what I do at Pine Street, I explain that although I do help serve dinner, the majority of my time is spent sitting on the benches in the lobby talking with guests who want to talk—being a friendly ear. I do not go straight to the cafeteria, ignoring the men I pass; rather I sit among them and listen to their stories. It is this action of talking that has allowed my beliefs about the homeless to change and that has kept me returning to Pine Street. My relationships with the men at Pine Street have forever altered my perceptions of who the homeless are. I see the individuals behind the term; I know their names; I know them. Though quite obvious, we sometimes forget that everyone wants to be heard, to be listened to, to be valued. Extraordinarily simple, the act of listening, and yet, in that act, dignity is restored.

Brian Braman's (1999) article, "Opting for the Poor: University Mission Statements as a Moral Grammar of Social Conflict" supported my belief in the importance of dialogue in our daily lives. Speaking to others provides one with an opportunity to understand more fully who one is, as well as a providing a sense of connectedness. It is through these conversations that relationships are built and maintained. I believe that by sharing stories and providing an attentive ear, especially to a marginalized and often ignored population, we, the volunteers, help provide the necessary recognition people need. To outsiders looking in at what the volunteers do, it may seem that our most important and significant contribution is serving a meal—preventing people from momentary hunger. As a culture based on extreme doing, we often ignore and devalue that which is at the heart of our existence. However, if I believed that serving dinner were the most important aspect of my volunteering, I would not continue to volunteer, for although providing food is a necessity, it nourishes only the body, leaving the mind and soul forgotten. This is where I feel the volunteers make the greatest impact. We recognize the guests

with whom we talk, as people, as equals, as human beings, which is in opposition to the usual reaction they may receive from passers by while on the streets. Although small, I hope that these acts of recognition will help nurture and restore the self-respect of some of the homeless men with whom we talk. Perhaps the simple act of conversing can be a means of refocusing the concept of homelessness upon suffering humanity, so that we can re-establish individual human connections and relationships. Through this important distinction, reintegration into society can begin.

As we begin to help people regain their sense of self, through conversations and awareness of connectedness, perhaps attitudes may begin to change, and as these attitudes change, perhaps we can get closer to finding a true solution to ending homelessness. For if our attitudes remain as they have for the past several decades, we will never be able to see the homeless as a group of individual human beings who by sometimes unavoidable circumstances, have found themselves living in shelters and on the street. Continuing to see them as a group of others, deserving of their situation and surroundings, inferior to us in every way, fosters greater alienation and discrimination in all of us.

I believe that one of the major reasons why our society is still plagued with homelessness is because we choose to value “perfect” human beings—successful, beautiful, and educated—while devaluing basic humanity. We are still blaming them for their situation, by calling them drunks and lazy. Through my experience at Pine Street, I have met many men who have suffered from substance abuse though not *every* guest with whom I talked had a substance abuse problem. Furthermore, some who do have been actively working to end their dependence on alcohol and other addictions. I also feel that because this group is homeless, we judge and label them more harshly than we would if they were from a different social class. There are substance abusers in every social class, yet we only judge those who are in the lower social classes,

specifically and most often, this means the homeless (Timmer et al., 1994). Ironically, we label these men as addicts, while we hold onto our “healthy” addictions of workaholism, perfectionism and the like. We never seem to acknowledge that each one of us has imperfections and flaws and that each one of us copes with life’s challenges in different ways.

As a volunteer at Pine Street, I struggle with the issue Kip Tiernan wrote about in her article, “Are we Do Gooders or Good Doers?” Specifically this is the issue of what she calls “Politics of Accommodation.” This accommodation refers to the growing number of homeless shelters and our society’s acceptance with it. As Tiernan says, “Accommodation to a Shelter Society becomes Accommodation to a Shelter Industry—the fastest growth industry since designer cookies” (Tiernan, 1988, p. 8). I feel that this acceptance and accommodation is one of the reasons why homelessness is still such a crisis today, for if we believe that providing meals and shelter (“three hots and a cot”) is sufficient, then we will continue ignoring the real roots of homelessness. We tell ourselves that by building more shelters we are helping the homeless; however, in actuality, we are fueling the problem, for more shelters do not get at the heart of the problem, and serve only to perpetuate the crisis by presenting a veneer of success, in an insufficient attempt to address homelessness. Perhaps if we truly desired to end homelessness we would institute more programs designed to help people avoid falling into the trap of becoming homeless. As the shelter industry booms, so too does the rate of homelessness. Yet, no one addresses the irony of the disconnection between the theory and its implementation or the imbalance between cause and effect. In both my research and first-hand experience in this area, I have uncovered extreme frustration and resignation among everyone involved in this complicated issue, and the dilemma of misperception that has resulted in a painfully inadequate system.

In the end, preserving the status quo preserves society's sense of righteousness, by absolving "the haves" from feelings of guilt. Ironically, preserving the status quo also preserves the homeless, guaranteeing a permanent place for those forever marginalized and labeled as outcasts of society. Would it be possible for our society to examine the ramifications of homelessness with heightened awareness and connection so that there can be a natural and honest identification with the marginalized? To be able to see suffering humanity and recognize oneself in solidarity, to see "the other," not as different or less than, but as "equal" and deserving of respect, could be one way of altering the disparity between the "haves" and "have-nots" and re-establishing a sense of self-respect and human worth.

While attending a Jesuit university, I have learned that we are here for others, that is, to be of service to those who need us. However, it seems as though this idea of serving others has been reinterpreted as helping those who have been marginalized and those less fortunate than we. It also carries with it the constant reminder of our differences and our very distinct class positions in society. The "others" who we are taught to help often appear outwardly quite different from ourselves, and often the system perpetuates these differences and the sense of disconnectedness. Over time, this creates a two-tier system in everyone's mind: one of superiority and one of inferiority. In our culture, sometimes this idea of serving others leads us to feeling good about ourselves, rather than about the work we do, in other words, "We get to feeling kinda' good about sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked and feeding the hungry. We feed into a frightening but comfortable theology because we know we are doing good things" (Tiernan, 1988, p. 8). By doing good deeds, we are taught to be proud of and feel good about ourselves and to consider ourselves as good people for helping others. However, becoming caught up in a cycle of doing good to feel good rather than doing good for the purpose of what is right and just, in the end, does more damage to everyone.

Must we preserve the state of homelessness as an industry in order for us to feel good about ourselves? As long as we have a group of individuals whom we consider less valuable or less worthy than ourselves, our small acts of donating to a shelter or giving food to a can-drive can alleviate at least momentarily our own sense of worthlessness. These single acts of kindness stand as reminders of our own fortune, placating us rather than reminding us of the original intent to alleviate poverty and suffering among our fellow human beings. These small acts allow us to feel better about ourselves; they allow us to feel as though we are indeed privileged, yet still compassionate. Unfortunately, the inherent flaw in this system removes the humanity from the homeless and leaves them standing as stereotypes and statistics.

One of the most challenging attitudes that I have encountered while volunteering at Pine Street comes from some of the men toward one another in the shelter. As a female volunteer who comes in once a week, I realize my inability to fully comprehend their situation, yet I still feel unsettled when I hear a guest react with harsh judgment and cruelty toward another guest. Recently while I was talking with a few guests, one of them made some disparaging comments about the feet of another man who was sleeping nearby on the floor. The guest criticized the other man for his lack of cleanliness and began to insist that someone should wake him up and tell him to wash his filthy and smelly feet. The response of another guest who saw this situation with more compassion responded in line with my beliefs. He reminded the others of this man's humanity, and urged that he be treated as one. In response, another guest indicated that if he had ammonia, he would pour it over the man's feet so as to force him to clean himself. The guest who saw this man as an equal and another human being was upset at this statement and replied that no one should pour ammonia on an animal, much less on a fellow human being. As I listened, I realized that these men, though homeless and marginalized, represented a microcosm of society as a whole. I was hurt that these men, who all share a similar bond—members of the

same shelter—could treat each other so cruelly, even in some cases as less than human. I am disheartened and saddened to realize that if even other homeless individuals cannot see the intrinsic humanity in the homeless, and can so easily look upon one another with such strong disgust, what hope is there for the rest of society to understand homelessness and come to terms with the homeless as equally deserving individuals in our society, waiting for us to allow them back.

Conclusion

"This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness
comes as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!...
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond."

-- Rumi (Brach, 2003, p. 73)

My research coupled with my first hand experience has led me to believe that we will not be able to eradicate homelessness until we are able to view all human beings, homeless or not, as our equals. We must change the way we view the homeless and understand that the stereotypes that many use to understand the homeless are based on misperceptions and fear. We must struggle with understanding why we give to shelters and why we volunteer—is it merely to feel good about ourselves, or is it to help fix a structural wrong in society? Asking ourselves these questions and perhaps taking some time to get to know a homeless person may lead to attitude changes, which can then lead to changes in the way our society addresses the issue of homelessness.

"It happens all the time in heaven,
 And some day
 It will begin to happen
 Again on earth—

That men and women...
 Who give each other
 Light,
 Often will get down on their knees

And... With tears in their eyes,
 Will sincerely speak, saying,

'My dear,
 How can I be more loving to you;
 How can I be more
 Kind?'"

-- Hafiz (Brach, 2003, p. 239)

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