

Heart for the Homeless
A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By Judy Alberda

Delivered on July 24, 2022

What would you miss most if you were homeless? I'll give you a few seconds to think about it. I know what I would miss most - my bathroom! Cleanliness, Privacy. Personal care items at my fingertips. A homeless woman I know of uses a 5-gallon pail for a toilet. It is in the woods. It is shared. It has kitty litter in it.

The current politically correct term for homelessness is "an individual experiencing homelessness" or an "unsheltered person". I'll continue to use homeless for brevity and familiarity.

I'd like to tell you about the Heart for the Homeless Team. It began about 4 years ago. There was a congregational survey taken. Which aspect of community service is of most interest? I checked homelessness and all those that shared that interest met. I was persuaded to be the chairperson and Barbara Gaiser said she would help. At the first meeting, everyone was asked to select a stone with an inspiring word on it. That word would act as a focus for their efforts going forward. Mine said "uplift". I keep it on the kitchen counter as a daily reminder and inspiration.

We've done several projects over the years. The first one was making personal care kits using donated hotel shampoos and lotions, small towels, combs, toothpaste, socks, etc. These were donated to City Gate Church downtown. We have had a kitchen collection and a linen collection, most going to Rapid Rehousing. Rapid Rehousing is for homeless people but primarily focuses on families with children. They want to spare the children the experience of being unsheltered so they house them in hotels until housing can be arranged. Agencies that do that are St. Vincent DePaul CARES, local Catholic Charities and Lee County Human and Veteran Services. Other agencies do it when funds become available. We recently participated in a St.

Vincent DePaul CARES event at our congregational building. Greg Monk works there and we helped supply household cleaning items as gifts to celebrate with the people who had just obtained housing after being homeless. Many of you donated items for that. Barb McFarlane and I sat and talked with two different women at that event. We chatted with them about their new home, and in my case, health problems she was experiencing. Barb's lady had two teenagers and they all rode bikes for transportation. One bike wasn't working well so Barb arranged that a bike be provided in good repair so the lady could get to her job at McDonald's.

Our bike collection has been very successful. You've hopefully noticed the sign by our main driveway - Leave a Bike for a Homeless Adult. There has been a very good response from the neighborhood and some from the congregation. There have been 120 bikes donated in the last year and a half. We take them to All Souls Episcopal Church in North Fort Myers which has an extensive homeless program, or to the Sheriff's Department for inmates being released who don't have a car. In both places they are repaired and given out according to the plan of each agency. Sometimes we call Robert Hippert of Lee County Bicycle Ministry. His team of volunteers repairs them and distributes them to various agencies. He picks them up and his team of volunteers repairs them and donates them to various agencies. They have collected almost 1,800 bikes over several years.

School uniforms is another project we have taken on. A uniform consists of a polo shirt, any color with no embroidery; skirts or dresses; pants or shorts - navy blue or khaki. Ainsley Babcock has donated her outgrown uniforms each year. She'll be in 8th grade this year so it will be her last year to wear a uniform. I usually shop for used uniforms at a Kiwanis Thrift shop where they have a uniform section. If you want to buy new ones, they are available at Kohl's, Target and Penny's, or online at these sites. The uniforms are taken to either Colonial Elementary, 807 students or to Wedgewood Academy, 583 students. All K-5 schools. These schools have the highest percentage of homeless students in Lee County, according to the Homeless Student Liaison. These are Title I schools which means they have a high poverty level.

Several of us have participated in the Homeless Service Day. It is arranged by the Lee County Homeless Coalition, called LCHC. The first one we attended was held at the City of Palms stadium. As you approach the stadium, there are people in line who have arrived early. Many are in wheelchairs or using walkers, with many bundles of belongings with them. City officials and LCHC staff hold an opening ceremony with short talks and a prayer. The day is basically a give-away event with items provided by area churches and social service agencies. The people line up and a volunteer is paired with one or two clients. We accompany them through the series of tables and stations. They can select blankets, sleeping mats, tarps, backpacks full of items, snacks glasses, shoes and socks. There's a place to get a haircut, get vaccinations, even their pet can get shots. A free lunch wraps up the day.

Our team has had 5 speakers come in for adult education or just for our team.

Why am I so interested in homelessness? It's hard for me to admit and it evokes feelings of sadness, regret, guilt and shame, but my 22 year-old granddaughter is homeless. Her mother is one of my four children, my adopted daughter from Korea. I was there when Tracy was born. She was the unplanned child of an unmarried couple who broke up soon after her birth. She was a bright pretty little girl and she spent a lot of time with me and Greg, overnight and weekends. After I retired, I picked her up from school everyday while her mother worked. She had a lot of instability at home when her mother dated different men but Mom was always there for her. I took her many places to let her know what was available in the community - museums, libraries, gardens, music instruction, choir, church, flying to Texas to visit relatives and college performances.

Seventh grade began a downhill trajectory from which she never recovered. In 6th grade, she developed alopecia, an autoimmune disease that causes hair loss. It thinned at first, then just left tufts. She started wearing a wig, which we were able to get free from a wonderful organization in Detroit called Children with Hair Loss. They provide a human hair wig each year up to age 21 which could cost up to \$1,000.00 each. But she didn't follow directions in caring for it such as not sleeping in it so it didn't look very nice toward the end of the year. She

wouldn't even let her mom see her without the wig. Once on a school bus trip another student pulled her wig off. She pretended it didn't bother her but it was devastating. I truly believe the hair loss is still part of her problem. She dropped out of school in the 10th grade, eventually going to an alternative school and getting her GED. She lived at home for awhile, getting a job, then quitting. Conflict at home regarding employment and other issues broke the relationship and she became a drifter. I volunteered at HQ, an center exclusively for homeless teens and young adults with wrap-around services. I hoped to connect her with the organization to get guidance but she refused to meet with them. I even took her in to meet the staff but she never returned. She just will NOT seek help from those whose life career is to guide her to success. I don't even know where she is now other than in Michigan. I can't well on it too long. I have 6 other grandchildren that are doing well, from 3rd grade to age 22. All are doing well.

Now the Green Books. We should all know the importance and availability of the Green Books. They are a publication of the Lee County Homeless Coalition - LCHC. Their mission statement is - Let's make homelessness rare, brief and one time. The book lists most of the available resources in Lee County, including those for low-income people. It lists ways to avoid eviction and help to pay utilities. On p. 2 of the Green Book is a phone # to call for Coordinated Entry. The applicant is to call the # and be interviewed on the phone. This gets them registered in their system so any agency they contact will have all their information. They are directed to contact the agency that best meets their needs. There are Green Books on the table in the community room for you to take, hopefully finding a place you would like to volunteer. Regina keeps Green Books in her office to give to any needy person who stops in to seek assistance. She gets a couple a week.

We don't see as many people on street corners asking for money. A new law was passed making that illegal. Homeless people are on their feet all day walking. Their socks wear out. Laundry opportunities are limited. I carry socks in my car to give out. (show) I carry men's regular, large and women's. I have passed a LOT of socks. One man took off his shoes right in the median where he was holding his sign and put them on. Another said he had been praying

for new socks. I recently saw an article online - 27 rules to survive homelessness. Rule 12 is - Try to keep your socks clean. A fresh pair of socks goes a looong way.

First let me say that 90% of the homeless people I have seen are white. Now, the McDonald homeless. Husband, Greg and I, go to one of 7 McDonald's almost every morning about 10:30 for a snack, conversation and scrolling through Facebook to find something interesting. Occasionally, I notice a person or a couple that comes in and sits down and just sits there without ordering anything the whole time we stay there. When we are ready to leave, I ask them if they need money to get something to eat. If they say Yes, I give them some money and a Green Book, pointing out the contents and the # to call. One day a young woman came in and sat. As we were leaving, I asked her if she needed money for food. She said, No, I'm just having a hard time. I'm pregnant and my parents kicked me out. I said what I hope were comforting words. I didn't have pregnancy help information with me at the time but carry it now. Not all community resources are in the Green Book.

Even in Hollywood, Florida, where we went on vacation, we went to a McDonald's in a poor part of town. There was a middle-aged black lady sitting in a booth alone. Her foot was propped up as if it were sore. She looked like you would expect a homeless person to look and it appeared she had been sitting there awhile. She had a cup of coffee. As we finished our snack, I exhibited my white supremacy behavior by sitting down beside her without asking her permission. Afterward I was remorseful in assuming that would be acceptable to her. But I was trying to demonstrate to the other customers and staff that she was not untouchable but approachable. Anyway, she was startled to see me but gracious, saying she liked my watch. I pointed out that it was coming apart on one side and things are not always what they seem. We talked a little. She said she would accept some money for food. She said she was having a hard time right now and we agreed that things change and there's hope for better days ahead.

Even at Hollywood Beach, where there is a boardwalk - a 2 mile paved sidewalk along the ocean with condos, hotels, shops and restaurants, a vacation hub. A homeless lady was there I had seen her on other trips. She washes herself at the faucets used for people to rinse the sand off

their feet. She wore a billowing raincoat-like garment that completely hid her body as she washed. I had seen her earlier while taking a morning walk so next time I walked I took her a few items - some snacks, Kleenex packet, lotion, money. She was vigorously brushing her teeth underneath this billowing garment. I've never seen anyone brush their teeth for so long! I decided to wait until she was done. Finally she gave me this sign. (up-raised middle finger) which as we all know is the international sign for "Come back later!". I continued on my walk and came to a Little Free Library. I picked out a book something about black girls. I brought it to her along with my other items. This time she was chatty and friendly. She said that she used to have an apartment and a car and that her family helps her some. She spends a lot of time at libraries and loves to read. She said that the U.S. government is spying on her and their surveillance system knows her location at all times. She went to the Supreme Court about it but didn't get any help. So you see there was paranoia there that interfered with her regaining a standard lifestyle.

So how, then should we perceive and what attitude should we endeavor to cultivate toward the homeless? The Zen Buddhist teacher, Norman Fischer, speaks of radical connectedness - the recognition that ourselves and others are not fundamentally different. We try to embrace all beings in compassion. That includes people with different political views, religious beliefs, the rich, the handicapped, the estranged relative. It doesn't mean that you go to unreasonable lengths to meet their needs yourself because you have the resources. Never take an individual or a family into your home, for example. There are literally thousands of people that work in the social services field and you may want to familiarize yourself with those resources. We may be effective or ineffective in our efforts but we can try.

I've been reading a book called "The Five Invitations" by Frank Otaseski. What resonated with me is the idea of our natural tendency to render judgement, which leads to an either-or mentality - a black or white way of thinking. A more compassionate and holistic approach is a both-and way of meeting life. It is not helpful to operate in the binary mode of thinking - good or bad, right or wrong, accept or reject, for or against. The word ALLOW is a word that releases us from the whole idea of comparison and preference. Judgement is harsh, aggressive habit

that closes off our access to other capacities. Discernment; makes space, helps us to have perspective and allows more of our humanity to show up. It helps WISDOM to emerge. WE often confuse acceptance with approval. Acceptance is a loving act of an open heart. It's a recognition of our common humanity. We're all waves of the same ocean. Even if you find yourself unable to physically assist a homeless person, think to yourself on behalf of the person.

May you be free from suffering and its causes.

May you be peaceful and happy.

May you be loved.

Namaste