

Getting to Heaven

By Margaret Slavin

June Etta writes to remind me to write an article about my travels: “Since one is in some ways homeless when one travels in the ministry, I wonder whether you might want to write under that theme?” And then she says, “I hope that you are comfortably settled in at home now, as the weather cools and winter is turning up.”

And yes, I am at home, settled in. The weather cools and winter is turning up. The man and his daughter who were living here in my apartment have found a roomier place. Although that means I have to find another cat-loving tenant for January, it is a blessing to be at home here by myself.

I write to June Etta to say this: I love telling stories from my travels, but I have a problem, or challenge: I know some homeless people, and also some others, such as the people who were living with me here, who belong to the very poor. In my city of Peterborough, we were slow to open the barrier-free shelter which is needed each winter for those who are mentally ill and/or addicted and who cannot be welcomed at the other shelters. In what was then late November, those people were still sleeping outdoors.

I can wax as poetic as the next person about the state of homelessness that we all have forever, wandering with a spiritual emptiness we sometimes fill but often lose again. But what people experience who slept outside in boxes those miserable November nights is not poetic. It feels crass to put an article about my journeys among the warm beds and hearts of Friends into this context.

June Etta agreed, and asked me more, and our exchange pulled this statement out of me, with some

memories: During the time I was home this past summer, I watched the man who lived here try to bend his universe to one simple request: he wanted to take his kids camping for a week. He had no vehicle. The park that could be reached by bus got flooded out. He needed to buy hotdogs and marshmallows and pop, to rent or borrow one big tent or else one for the girls (daughter and the inevitable friend who had to go, too) and one for him and his son, but it would be a crisis if that meant he'd have to pay for two campsites. He needed

a camp stove. Nothing came easily. Nothing was to hand, and nothing whatever could be solved by throwing a little money at it. There was no money. Eventually they got away, but all the way it was nip and tuck. I live on very little, but I have always been able to think, especially where children are involved

— okay, I'll call a cab, or else I've had a friend who owned a car.

This is what I really think: we Friends are wonderful, complex, aware and kind people. But most of us do not have a direct understanding of what it is to be very poor. We just don't know. We still tend towards the moral and condescending attitude, toward one another and toward “those less fortunate than ourselves.” If we could forgive one another better, then perhaps we could look and see the human beings among us who have no business being on our streets. We put them there with our laws. There are no homeless in Denmark, which I have visited. It is unnecessary. Each person on the street is a result of policies that specifically and intentionally put them there.

I don't usually give money to street people — in the past I had a system for sometimes giving food. But today in the sleety rain, I give fifty cents to two guys

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who are sitting against buildings downtown. One, an older man, I partly know from a few times when I helped out in a shelter. I'm fairly certain he won't use my money for drugs — maybe for booze.

The other is younger and says he is new in town. He mentions the Warming Room, the shelter which should open December 1. "I have to wait a whole week," he says. I say that I really regret this. "Ma'am, please pray for us." "I'm already doing that, fella."

He looks a wreck, and probably does spend the fifty cents on street drugs as fast as he can. But maybe not.

Then I see Lawrence, a wonderful Peterborough character who is among the very poor, who often begs on behalf of others. I am about to put a loonie into his bucket when I see he is shaking a Salvation Army bell and I just can't, because of the Sally Ann's beliefs about homosexuality, and the way this plays out in real lives. I feel a stop. I pass by.

In Vernon, I met a Friend who knows much about these issues. Here is a story from my quaker.ca journal last June:

Shirley Lewis is a person who has thrown herself into many, many useful social actions all her life, and is able to go on doing it and yet to question herself, which I appreciate. Recently, she told us, she decided that the thing she could do about the Vernon homeless was to make cinnamon buns.

Downtown she went with her fresh-baked buns, and located a couple of actual homeless people, sitting by a building — a girl with stringy hair, and a man. Girl took her bun, man also grateful for his.

"Can I have another one?" asked the girl.

Shirley said, "No!"

At this point in the story Shirley cracks up, letting us know that this reaction on her part revealed her whole action as Lady Bountiful.

The way Shirley said it was, "I won't get to heaven for this!"

But, still with more buns in hand, she trekked on down to the shelter and inquired, "How many people come through here in a night?"

"100."

"Well!" says Shirley, "I knew that was it for my project! I can't make a hundred cinnamon buns."

So much has happened these past few days, not least meeting this intelligent, funny woman who could, if she wanted to, take this skit on stage, laughing at ourselves for our attempts to be of help to those we see as less advantaged than ourselves. And catching our mixed motivations.

As one Friend said at Western Half-Yearly Meeting, there can be no them without us — it's really us and us.

Which has something to do with growing Meetings. *

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