

Dear “F”,

We are both active in searching for “real” solutions to poverty through political action (passing petitions to raise minimum wages, keeping Basic Income in the minds of policy decision makers, etc.) but I understand laws to be the skeleton of a solution, whereas the flesh and breath is in changing how people see each other.

At times I cynically view my work here as a selling of indulgences to guilt-burdened society, or working for a band-aid non-solution. But I also realise that, as with any friendship, it is often a two-way street, and that friendships can fail, people can lose hope, or refuse help that is offered. I continue to do my work because there is nothing else in place. I see you almost every day at the soup kitchen, and when I am discouraged by seeing your discomfort go so long without lasting help, I find re-centering in reading over these words:

Agape Table Welcome

We are the people of Agape Table. Yes, we are a charitable soup kitchen, but we are also a community of friends.

Please know that what we cannot afford we do not offer, but what good cheer we can give, we give gladly.

If at times we separate ourselves from you, it is because we are working with some other good

person here.

We believe good is present in every person and strive to create a peaceful atmosphere.

We gather for a meal each weekday morning and require only that we treat each other with respect.

We hope to encourage that which is good in each other, and are patient with our neighbours’ difficulties.

We believe in equal treatment for all. We try to remove distractions and dangers.

Please understand that those of us who choose to be a danger to others will have to leave until ready to return in safety. We encourage trust, rather than react to fear.

We represent no formal common faith or specific religious affiliation. Instead, we cooperate with our diverse friends, both individually and collectively.

We aim to be a hate-free place; all are free to express themselves and their beliefs whether by their choice of clothing, actions, or words.

We do not put pressure on people to hold a particular belief.

Whatever we are led to say from a place of kindness or need, can be said without giving offense, believing that truth has many aspects, and that love is large enough to hold them all.

We try to do what we say as we are able. We are all learning.

Many of us have been drawn to Agape Table by the commitment to welcome all people coming here.

Perhaps our approach may

be helpful and meaningful to you.

We welcome you and invite you to be with us at Agape Table.

So while you visit here with us, we would have you enjoy the blessings of a home: acceptance, nourishment, safety, dignity, and peace.

I want to affirm your dignity, and to respond as a friend would to your emotional and spiritual hunger as well as to your physical hunger. I welcome you to our table in an attitude of hospitality. I do not require you to prove your need, or demand that you change anything about yourself. Please feel welcome to decide your own needs for food or fellowship. I want to make this a place where you have the freedom to grow, to enter into relationships and, if you choose, to deal with the pain in your life. In these relationships we seek to extend the support and challenge that frees people to grow. I know our visits over coffee have certainly helped me grow.

“Community” is a place of belonging, a place where we come to know each other, in our strengths and in our weaknesses. Many people come here who have been rejected by communities — by families, workplaces, churches, and neighbourhoods. They leave feeling unwanted. They may not have many places where they belong, where

LETTER TO “F” BY KEITH BARBER

they are known.

I am so sorry to hear about your sister's rape and hanging, which was discovered on Saturday. I hope your father will let go of his misplaced anger toward you and see how wonderful you and his other remaining

children are. I tried to find the safe house; it was too well hidden for me to find. I found out later that I walked by it three times when I was looking for the funeral. I miss her too, and the world seemed empty to me when I heard. *

Keith Barber attends Winnipeg Worship Group, and runs a Soup Kitchen in Winnipeg's Core area. He is in the middle of composing the "Agape Table Welcome" to put up on the wall for everyone to see as they come in. If you want to suggest any changes, he is open to revisions. You may contact him by e-mail at: «Keith_wb@hotmail.com»

Homeless, But Why?

By Bryan Dragon

The reasons people find themselves homeless are so various that I hesitate to try addressing the root causes of this widespread problem in our society. I have some insight into the cause for the brief period in which I was once homeless, and that's probably the best basis for my attempting to speak about the problem, in general.

I was in a bad way emotionally at the time. I was young and discouraged and more than a bit afraid. I had no job and was stealing food. Friends gave me a place to live; someone even gave me space in his office to work on a project. Somehow, it wasn't enough. The aimlessness of my existence bothered me terribly, but I didn't know what to do about it. Of course, I didn't lack for advisors — and very good advice they gave, I'm sure, for someone else like me, or like them. Then, one day, in the midst of all this, I read something that made me more scared than I already was.

It was an interview with the writer, William S. Burroughs, in a campus underground newspaper. Burroughs was two generations older than we were, and his opinion held some weight. We had recently changed presidents and were in the middle of a war. In the interview, he confided that we could expect it to become nuclear, with the useful side effect of turning the country into a police state. I spent the rest of the week at the point of tears, breaking down from time to time, and talking with almost no one. A grad

student found me crying at a table in the student's union one evening and asked me what was wrong. He was the editor of our own campus underground, "The Mother of Voices." I didn't know where to begin, so I told him I was all right. I had dropped out of classes the previous spring, and was simply hanging around the place, putting in time. At the end of the week, I tried a mescaline pill that my house-mates reported as ineffectual — just a good marijuana high.

A couple of days later, I was on the street in a city about two hundred miles and one state west of the university town where I had been living. A patrolman gave me a ride to the police station when he learned that I answered to the name of Adah and had no identification. My sojourn in the city jail was something straight out of the old sit-com "Barney Miller" and would be very funny in hindsight if I had not been acutely sensitive at the time to my own disorders and to those I saw around me. I spent the first night listening to men in adjacent cells banging on the bars, shouting at each other, threatening to kill each other. It was very painful to hear their despair and their terrible passion. The next day I went into the larger, more modern county jail, where several of us shared a cell, and there I started to recover a bit of equilibrium. I had to talk a bit with the others, and probably through that conversation, I started to recover hope in the normalcy of things that looked scary from the outside, but whose bite wasn't fatal.

I wasn't in jail nor homeless very long. Two weeks later, I found a job and then a room in a boarding house. I had reached a small, west coast town where a room wasn't hard to find, and this was a time when work was readily available. I went back to the fatalism that had sustained me till then.

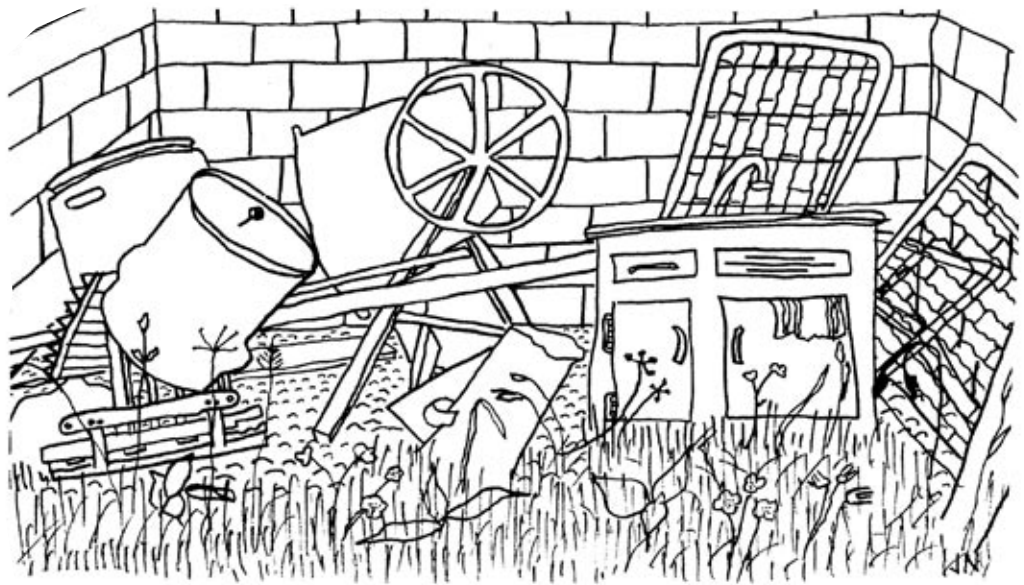
Whether my experience points in the direction of the root cause of homelessness is of course debatable, but few would disagree that hopelessness has a lot to do with why some people become what social workers call the hard-core homeless — the people whose plight concerns me most in the much larger problem that the term homelessness constitutes. I'm addressing in particular the perception, which is nearly universal in and out of professional circles, that a large percentage of these people are mentally ill and, by inference, inevitably a social problem that has merely been exacerbated by cuts to social and medical care. I suspect that financial anxiety had a lot to do with the disorders that put many of those people in mental care facilities to begin with.

If the term mentally ill means a kind of illness, like hepatitis or tuberculosis, I would agree that many people who are sitting on the sidewalk looking discouraged are indeed sick. But most of the people I have met who answered to that description were, in my judgement, normal people, simply under strains beyond their ability to support. How are any of us able to judge what it will be that will push another, who may be in most ways a reasonable person, over the edge into a hopelessness that produces bizarre

behaviour? Stable personalities come with stable circumstances, as I see it.

What can Quakers do to promote hope and stability in the world? Perhaps we ought to be a little more hopeful about the world, as a start. If we don't feel hopeful ourselves, we will simply infect others with pessimism, whatever our intentions might be. People are far too pessimistic these days. It's no wonder that sensitive people get discouraged. For instance, we're too anxious about money, and hence resentful about taxes. I'm as bad as anyone.

It's important for us as Friends to be aware that the prevailing attitudes of the wider society are very contagious. As Friends, we also should not lose sight



Drawing by Janet Numm

of the vision of a spiritual unity that unites everyone. The temptation to regard the dispirited and unkempt as something other, to put them in a separate category, should be recognised for what it is: a falling away from the light into a darkness and poverty of another kind, which lives on self-congratulation. None of us is free of this problem. In terms of this struggle, the spiritual life, we are all just hanging in there. *

Bryan Dragon is a member of Yarmouth Monthly Meeting, who resides in France.