

*by law of grace*

*a journey with the people of the streets  
a personal experience*

*by a neighbor*



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*“...let there be no cry of distress in our streets...”*

*psalm 144,4*



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## Foreword

*By Law of Grace* has become for us a bridge.

We met Heidi a couple of years ago, when she began joining us for morning prayer in our neighborhood prayer house. She would walk through the door with her limp, bright blue backpack hung over one shoulder, her head lowered slightly, perhaps a tissue in one hand, and would flash a warm smile to us before taking her place in silence. She came with a quiet, unassuming spirit and a bright attentiveness, and we were drawn to her. Over the next months, we began to know Heidi as a person, but we knew nothing of her writing. We would soon discover the treasure that would be imparted to us through her.

We are a small Christian community who share life together just a few blocks away from our city's primary homeless shelter. Most of the people walking through our neighborhood live on the fringes of society. Some are addicted to drugs or suffer from mental illness. Others have been released from prison. Many have endured so much emotional trauma that they seem unable to live stable lives. We've learned over the past several years that our sincere concerns alone aren't enough to cause us to actually reach out to our most marginalized and hurting neighbors. What does it really look like, practically, to show love to a man who is talking in circles to himself, or a woman who is screaming her brokenhearted rage? How can we soften toward shaking a dirty hand or hugging sweat drenched shoulders? What places in our hearts need to change and grow? The stories shared in these pages have shined a bright light on our honest questions.

At one of our evening gatherings, Heidi shared two excerpts from the journal she kept. These were short vignettes of her interactions with "the people of the street," who she had begun spending time with. The portraits were honest, searing, without rose-colored glasses, and yet gentle and so very human. We wanted to hear more – would she share more? How many were there? Would there ever be a way for us to share these insights with others?

In the weeks to come, as Heidi slowly consented to share what would later become this manuscript in full, we found ourselves more and more challenged and humbled. We don't want to only "love" from afar, unwilling to draw near relationally. But we need help! We need a bridge; examples of how to take steps of love. *By Law of Grace* has become that bridge for us. It has given us fresh eyes to see that these "others" are so

much like us, in all of our brokenness and desperate need. Heidi has lived deeply into her own experience of life and extends that same permission to the reader – an amazing gift. She invites us to be where we are in the process of knowing and loving others, to be willing to admit that we are in need of growth. As she has taken one step after another toward the hearts of these “people of the streets,” our hearts have been pierced and we’ve seen more of Jesus. In all our brokenness, he has drawn near.

## The Apprenticeship to Jesus Community

## Preface

Phoenix is a city of cars, and built as that. Habitual walkers, therefore, “people of the street,” are noticeable - those who don’t own a car, who ride city buses if they can afford it, who wait at bus stops along the road, often with little or no shade, often for a long time, in the heat. The poor, including old, disabled, ill, and especially, the homeless.

It was lucky for me, then, to have given up my car some years ago - “doing America on foot,” as I called it, opening up an entirely different perspective - as this made it easy to get in touch with this population in a spontaneous and immediate way, as I wished to do.

This wish had started in me years before, building slowly: a desire to live among the poor in a neighborly relationship. It turned out to be a long course of learning, not least about myself as a white middle-class person.

One impacting period of initiation came when I chose to live for a few winter months in a vast apartment complex in a fairly poor neighborhood of Sunnyslope in northern Phoenix, in 2010, finding this a surprisingly challenging as well as rewarding experience. My neighbors were mostly Mexicans and some white people.

Six years earlier, I spent two months in a very poor black ghetto in Wichita KS, in a small Christian community called to an experiment in interracial living in a cooperatively and communally administered apartment building. My involvements there, a daily experience of “crossing over” regarding boundaries of class, race, culture, and religion, became a model experience for me.

In 2013, I became acquainted with the Phoenix downtown neighborhood called “Woodland Historic District”, just south of Van Buren Street and between the high-rise business world at the center of town to the east and the state government center to the west, both areas highly distinct in character from the old residential Woodland area. Young people had begun to move into this neighborhood to buy and restore some of the old, quaint, charming houses. A few blocks had become very pleasant by the time I arrived, with nicely kept front yards.

Among these people were those of the A2J community (*“Apprenticeship to Jesus”*), a small group of young people who together earnestly seek to live in the Way of Jesus. Keeping separate residences, some with family, and working in their professions, they were meeting three early mornings a week for collected communal prayer and fellowship. As an ecumenical Christian community, they practiced this in various forms

to accommodate different styles of worship. I found the group ably led by its inspired founder, Ryan Thurman. The place of prayer was a little house they had rented for this purpose, its door open to all neighbors as well as those passing by on the street. This little house, with its spiritual and social activities and a large community garden, became a healing presence in this very mixed neighborhood.

I was pointed to this group immediately after “dropping” into this downtown area shortly before Christmas 2012, by a friend who had offered me a room in his house on West Monroe Street. Soon after my arrival, on one of my first neighborhood walks, I became aware of the many homeless people wandering these streets, and I soon wandered into a crowd of them such as I had never seen or thought possible in this country. This amassment of homeless persons was due, it turned out, to the presence of a large, sprawling facility in a desolate area a few blocks south, called *Central Arizona Shelter Services*, or *CASS* for short. I hadn’t been aware of its existence. The experience struck me so hard I knew I would have to attend to it in some way. A2J, itself charitably concerned with the life of the neighborhood including homeless persons, became the spiritual anchor I needed in this undertaking.

It was mostly in the following winter, 2013/14, that I seriously dedicated myself to this new acquaintance with “street folks” on a daily basis. The first three months I roomed outside of the area, visiting Woodland (and the A2J community) almost daily. For the second three months, A2J offered me a unit in its four-plex on 13<sup>th</sup> Ave near Van Buren, which was inhabited by people connected with the community. This residence became an important part and help in my further experience - again, both challenging and highly rewarding.

Another important facet of this winter’s experience opened to me through my discovery of another amazing Christian community concerned with the poor, *Neighborhood Ministries*, located further west at 20<sup>th</sup> Ave and Van Buren. These people minister, very actively and with amazing dedication, to the inhabitants, especially children, of some of the poorest and most endangered neighborhoods in Phoenix, mainly Hispanic. I got my foot in the door of this organization by taking a class with the community’s inspired founder and leader, Kit Danley, on “Mystic activists,” a participation that impacted me deeply. I came to know in this community, more than ever before, the power of the link of sustained communal prayer with organized social activism.

To cope with this intense experience of a “world” new to me, I needed to journal daily. The following text is a collection of (mostly short) accounts of observations, encounters and dialogues with homeless and other street folks pulled from this journal. In the last section, I share, with some trepidation, spiritual openings and meditations that began to

occur in me toward the end of my Woodland time, a help the Spirit gave me, I felt, to find an inward place for these experiences.

Why share these “tales?” Yes, there has been a desire for it, and I have been experiencing joy in actually putting together this little book. I desire that these people and the lives in which they move be *seen* – ultimately, not as something horrible we should avoid or “get rid” of, but as a part of the population at present, and a condition in which, it turns out, Life moves, Light shines, Grace works.

I was encouraged to this manuscript by core members of A2J after I read a couple of these “stories” to them. The way I heard their response convinced me that God had a hand in it. I may not have found the courage to carry out the project without their heart-felt support.

Heidi Blocher



Part I

*initiating experiences*

*breakfast at McDonald's*

December 11, 2013

It's only two days since I arrived in Phoenix, and already my "ministry" (but I would rather not call it that) seems to have begun. After attending A2J morning prayer, I went for breakfast at McDonald's on 7<sup>th</sup> Ave and Van Buren, arguably one of the busiest, noisiest intersections - including Grand Avenue, crossing diagonally - in this huge city.

Yes, *McDonalds!* Not a typical choice for me! The breakfast, too, was huge. The clerk gave me the wrong order - hash browns, pancakes with syrup, scrambled eggs, bacon, biscuit, you name it - but I have to say, I found it delicious from first to last! I believe not only in worshipping with those I am sent amongst, but also occasionally eating at their table!

The crowd of customers was a fascinating mix, most or all at the low end of the social scale, and within that, of *great variety*. I sat and observed for a while. A deranged old woman with disheveled white hair, dressed in a thick, long, black winter coat, came in and busily milled around the place. Eventually she was shown the door, with a simple commanding gesture, by the manager, a young Hispanic woman, but then she came in again. McDonald's, I observed, keeps a neat place, dignified and clean, beyond what I would have expected in such a neighborhood. Someone is wiping tables and sweeping and mopping floors in and out all the time. While the old woman was outside, the manager called to the customers if anyone claimed the battered suitcase with stuff on top standing just inside the door. No one did. She opened a store room to the side, put on a pair of latex gloves, and moved the suitcase with all the bedding on it out the door, without any fuss, as if routinely. Came back in and slipped the gloves off directly into the garbage can. Done. No special act in that place, I assumed, but impacting to an observer from the "other" world. An expression of social separation, if an understandable and at times perhaps even necessary one.

I felt free enough among the folks to spontaneously offer a cup of coffee to the woman at the next table who sat forlornly with a tiny sandwich. She declined, smiling, saying she had had already three cups this morning. When I left, a black man outside, who had greeted me as an "angel" on coming in, offered me a handful of change so I could buy myself some coffee!

I chatted a while with the old woman who had been turned out as she kept cheerfully lingering near the door. Her face seemed remarkable. I commented on her clothes, the fine (though dirty) coat she wore and her black velvet pants - all donated, she said proudly - and then on her truly beautiful blue eyes. (We argued for a while about their exact color.) She said she was staying at the big homeless shelter in the area, "been there for twenty years." I was surprised to feel gratefulness for her existence and presence in my life at that moment. She blew me a kiss as I departed, and I found myself returning it.

Such small encounters! Yet how they lifted my heart! How many smiles and laughs they produced! Including the young Mexican man mopping the outside while the old woman and I were loitering there with her reclaimed baggage. He told us kindly not to bother to move, we were not in his way.

*Fred*

Walking toward the center of town after breakfast, I'm overtaken by a tall, gaunt man with thick, white hair and whiskers, whom I noticed at McDonald's for his gigantic nose. He says he considered buying me coffee as I seemed to be "just sitting there." I love the way the poor take care of the poor!

We are sharing the walk together, freely chatting, with comfortable pauses. He gives me his name in the end, Fred. Perhaps I will see him around again.

***"do I smell?"***

*December 12*

A further, very peculiar encounter this morning, on my way to see a dentist. At the bus stop on 19<sup>th</sup> Ave near where I presently live, a skinny young man of Asian descent approached me: "Excuse me, but could you tell me whether I smell?" To my puzzled face he explained that a fellow at a party last night told him he smelled, and that he has nobody to tell him if this is true or not. I leaned toward him as closely as seemed appropriate, and told him, honestly, no, I was detecting no smell. The young man seemed sane, only terribly anxious. He said he thought he might have a rotten tooth. I noticed a dental clinic just across the street, and warmly encouraged him to have the tooth looked at, or, if he should continue to be plagued by an idea of bad smell, to use a mouthwash.

Whatever exactly I said, it's not why I'm recording this incident. I felt as if there were letters printed across my forehead: "AVAILABLE." The easy warmth and immediacy of my response as it came out, without any worry or question as to what to say or do, made me feel grateful. As if a new door had opened in me.

Barely a week that I've been here. It seems much longer. I decided not to go to any formal worship this Sunday morning, feeling a need to rest - from the long bumpy bus rides around the city, the roar of heavy traffic while waiting for buses, and walking the pavement for long stretches, all of which take energy.

Instead, I found myself in prayerful participation with those who worship at that hour, while sitting in the backyard of my present place among its few drought-struck and struggling trees. A perfect "Arizona day," cloudless and indescribably radiant, the air delicious beyond words, caressing the skin with warmth and cool at the same time. I thought about an old man named Bill I talked with yesterday in the yard of the great homeless shelter called CASS, to whom Nick, a musician connected to the A2J group, had introduced me. I was sitting near Bill on a bench as we listened to Nick and a couple of other musicians play, and asked him whether he preferred cold or hot weather. He smiled. A sane man. "I like the warmth," his toothless mouth formed. Oh yes, he liked the warmth! Even the high summer heat (in which, Nick had told me, the large plastic lawn is crammed full of people, in 110 degrees or more) is better for Bill than cold. But right now is perfect.

*Nick*

I had gone to the Shelter because Nick had announced at A2J that a music festival he had called into life, named "Crying Hearts," was taking place in the yard that day. I thought it might be a chance for me to hang out with the folks, a pretext, and see what might come of it.

I walked more easily into this scene than I did last year, sitting down at an empty metal table near the stage. I was surprised to see how many fewer people were in the yard than outside on the streets and sidewalks, lingering with their stuff, lining up for services, food. Hundreds of people. Moreover, very few of those sprawling, sleeping, dozing, hanging out on the artificial "grass" seemed interested in the offering. A very few only were *facing* the make-shift stage. I felt little connection between the performers and those they were addressing, by their own performers' culture - each group in its own, utterly separate world.

Nick shared with me later that he had been playing and singing for these people in this yard *every week for two years* - by himself. I was so struck by this I slapped him hard on the arm in a powerful surge of joy: "*You have!!*" As I shared with him my impressions of the listeners, I asked him what he, and the other musicians playing that day, were

hoping to do with this offering. Nick said this was a good question. His face, which had seemed to be looking down, from his natural height, on this little old lady out of nowhere with a slightly mocking expression, became open, his eyes pure. I saw that he was sincere in his hope, his purpose, however little defined. That his heart was in it.

*the woman in the flowery sheet*

Nick noticed a woman lying on the “grass”, curled up in a flowery sheet. I, too, had noticed her on coming in, because she had set up a remarkable little domestic display next to her body: with a small purple monkey and a little pink poodle, a small vase with decorative plunder in it, a couple of small books and some greeting cards. I was touched by this care, this sign of feminine “home life” in the middle of nowhere, without walls or roof. Nick felt she needed medical attention, he said he knew her, that he knows many of these people. He said this without bragging, sorrowfully. He talked to the woman, she couldn’t lift her head. He went into the Human Services Center on the campus, to find a doctor. A medical worker in a uniform like that of police came out and, latex gloves on, occupied herself with the woman a long time.

I had not known why I was sitting in that yard, merely observing, feeling no impulse to address any of the homeless. But when I left, I felt nourished somehow - with a satisfaction of a light, uplifting kind. As if God had somehow been present.

*rage*

Walking back to the bus, I suddenly exploded. “*Why don’t we collectively choose not to produce alcoholic drinks, to protect the vulnerable and their families?*” - yelling. It seemed outrageous. It seemed so little to ask of ourselves. The faces coming toward me, of women especially, their ravaged features, the depravity of their clothes and manners - worst, for me, in the young, beyond salvaging, it seemed - it was unbearable.

I felt my *powerlessness*. But then a spiritual certainty came, calming me: I may do nothing, but if I continue to surrender to the Spirit’s leading, I *will* do something.

I had to lose a lot to get this far, and I will have to lose a lot more.

*the woman with the sun-burnt face*

*December 16*

At McDonald’s for breakfast, after A2J prayer, I meet a woman again whom I observed in the CASS yard, with a ruined red face that seemed severely sun-burnt, matted hair, and a crazed expression. A fairly young person. She shuffles around in loose bathroom slippers as many do, without lifting her feet. I noticed her at the Shelter when, sitting on a

low wall on the plastic lawn, she suddenly jumped up, lurched forward, and grabbed a cigarette stub someone had just thrown on the “grass,” still burning, and with an unbelievable greed or desperation shoved it into her mouth as if her life depended on it. (I have read about starving persons in concentration camps throwing themselves like that on human flesh; it reminded me of this.) There was nothing in her at that moment but that need, the need of addiction, no consideration that might have made her pause to examine the stub or wipe it from the previous user’s mouth.

So here she is again, sitting down straight across from me at my little table! She had been on my mind.

I’m sitting at that table because, when I argued with the clerk at the counter about my order (boisterously, though friendly, a little giddy with the sense of the new freedom in me) - “a small coffee and small order of fries”( fries for breakfast –me?) - “sorry, no fries right now” - “so, do you have a muffin with egg?” - “no egg” - “no egg? so what’s that up there on that poster?” - “yeah, biscuit” - “okay, biscuit - with egg?” - “no, no egg” - “cheese?” - “yes, cheese and sausage” - “no, no sausage for me, just cheese - how much?” - “two-fifty” - “so what do I get now for two-fifty?” - “biscuit with cheese and sausage” - “no, no sausage for me - wait a minute”... - turning to the young black woman standing next to me: “You want my sausage? I don’t want it” - “Sure, I want it.” To the clerk: “Okay, leave that, leave that order, I’ll take it.” So the tiny biscuit with cheese appears on the tray, with coffee. “Where’s the sausage?” - “Here,” pointing to a closed square cardboard box. I open it: A tiny round patty of sausage meat floating like a lone little island inside. I carry it to where the young black woman has seated herself in a corner and sit down at the little table close to hers and reach the box over to her. She later tells me, when I ask, that the sausage was delicious, “not dry” as in some other places, “but moist.” Then the other young woman, with the red face, sits down across from me and the two begin to chat across the gap of tables between them about their street life.

The black woman looks clean and dressed in good order. She has experience with shelters and “that life,” and tells the other woman in sisterly fashion about the best deals around, how she got bored in one place and thrown out of another. She seems entirely relaxed. “Working the system”, as they called it in another impoverished neighborhood I lived in once. She seems happy with her life.

“You look like you got a sunburn,” I interrupt their conversation, looking at the woman across from me. “I do,” she says. I say it would be better to stay out of too much sun, it isn’t good for her. I ask if she lives at CASS. “No, I live on the street.” She pulls out a box of Marlboros, asking me if I smoke. “No. I can’t afford it. My health can’t and my

pocket book can't either." It's not what I say, however stupid. It's that *we are talking*, and again it comes easy, and again I feel the gladness.

### *giving and receiving*

December 16

An old black man sits across from me on the Light Rail, with a bedspread half wrapped around himself, mumbling about "country, my country," and as I look at him and our eyes meet, he hooks himself and begins to sing to me: "America, America... amber waves of grain... my country free... for you and me..." The contrast of these words and their fervent rendering with the man's condition could be painful, but I am glad to see the cheer rising in him as he sings. I nod to him, forming the words with my lips in rhythm with him, without voice. When he goes on to "Judy Garland, you know... over the rainbow... why not you and me...", I find myself softly singing along. Two women on the upper level smile and applaud.

Then comes the next part. "What's your birthday?", leaning toward me. I draw the line. I must not go beyond the line of my comfort. It can be moved further out, to comprise more, expand the heart's realm of attention, but I must not willfully cross the limit where it lies, much less be pressured into it. He insists, I shrug, joke a bit, play with false dates, say "today," "every day." He seems disappointed. *Boundary problems*, I know, so often with the dissocialized, part of their problem perhaps. Isolating them further. He forces a dime on me, I resolutely say no, "keep it, give it to someone who needs it more." No, he wants me to have it, "it's magic, special, for good luck." I finally take it. - Later I think whether "these people" may not need to *be given* only but also to *give*, and to have received what they give. Why not? *We* need it.

At the Light Rail station where I got on, a little old man had asked me for 75 cents. "I'm stuck," he said. "When I see police getting on, I don't want to get on." I wondered aloud whether 75 cents would be enough for him to ride. He didn't know. I told him I pay two dollars as a senior, it buys a day card at the lowest price. "Tell you what," I said. "I'll give you one of my cards and then you can ride with it all day wherever you want to go." He took it, thanked me respectfully, then shuffled off. I went after him to remind him he needed to insert the card into the machine to stamp the date on it, or it wouldn't be valid. Again he thanked me. When I was hidden from his sight, I observed that he did do something at the automat, peeking out from behind it furtively. Then he shuffled on, away from the train line. Perhaps what he really wanted was 75 cents. Perhaps I should give people what they ask for?

A2J prayer this morning was again rich and fulfilling. I feel well into the life. On very thin ice, the utterly unknown like an abyss just under

my feet at all times, and also with that peculiar sense of safety, firm ground, of walking in submission to the Higher Will without steering-ideas of my own.

*the Chinese fisherman on the Canal*

December 19

An image yesterday on my daily walk along the Canal (but no, not an image - *life*, although as perfect as a print of ancient Oriental art): An elder man of Chinese descent, dressed in impeccably clean clothes, sitting on a tiny yellow plastic stool in the middle of the broad foot path, his delicate hands, half-closed, held out before him, his elbows propped on his knees. It took a while before I saw the fine white line going out from each hand into the water. He was fishing, but without rod. Only with this thin, almost invisible thread.

The part that held me captivated was his face. With no expression I could tell, it was absolutely still, the man's full concentration obviously on his work. His body also was completely still, as were his hands. The slits of his eyes and mouth mere tiny smudges to indicate features in this blank face.

I stopped at a little distance from him and joined him in his resting, leaning on a low wall, feeling a sudden peace. It is lovely to join someone in their time of rest, invited not by them but by their inward state. It felt perfectly natural.

But it did not feel, in him, like a happy rest. The immovable face, with just the faintest breath of an expression, more and more seemed to convey to me some sorrow, or worry, as I kept looking at it. Would he succeed in catching something? Was he hungry? Poor, much poorer perhaps than his clean, careful dress made it seem? Was it this that made him fish these unclean waters?

I had seen fish in this portion of the Canal that made me gasp by their size and fatness, and also their numbers. Carps, the Internet told me. They are put in to help absorb the weeds. It's legal to catch them, but not to take them away. One probably shouldn't eat them.

The other day, I passed a huge swarm of these fish, all moving rapidly in the same direction. I was almost sickened by their fatness and size and number, disproportionate to this body of water. Their color was a grayish-black. Then, at the end of the long swarm, there was one single orange one! With some black spots. A giant goldfish, same size as the others.

I wanted to tell the man I had seen these fish further east - though of course they wouldn't be there now. He sat a long time holding out those hands. His silence seemed impenetrable, his concentration, I did not speak to him. As I walked on, I noticed he had some wares at the

edge of the path, on the land side. A bucket, and some bagels or other pastries wrapped in cellophane, and a few tiny disposable containers for additions, with lids peeled back and half empty. Was he homeless?

Suddenly, as I kept walking - a flash of gold in the dark murky water! Some object, I thought, painted golden. Then - a violent jerk. "Fish! Fish!", I wanted to cry to the man. "Gold!" But it would be pointless. No fishing that way. No hunting them like whales.

"How utterly different cultures, races, peoples are," I thought, walking on. No white American, no black American, no Hispanic man, no European could sit on this tiny round stool in quite this way, in this almost stone-like stillness and steadiness and perfect ignoring of me. I wanted to know what I always want to know: What's in this man? What history, what culture? How was he formed? What does this very moment mean to him that I observe in his form only from the outside? Is there feeling? What is it? What is the "climate" in him, and what, at this moment, the "weather?"

I noticed the little nursery school yard again, a little further on - a narrow wedge of cement squeezed between two buildings, with a cloth stretched over it for shade. About a dozen tiny tots, under four years old, and lots of plastic toys, slides, wheels, crammed into this sliver of space, and the kids occupying themselves with them. Nothing organic, not a blade of grass, no reminder that we live on *land* - oh yes, so much land the city doesn't succeed in covering it, not even within itself. But the children seemed happy. One little girl came right up to the fence and smiled at me readily. Several young women in blue T-shirts were looking after them.

Again many blackbirds where I had seen them before - grackles, starlings, even red-wings, maybe migrating from the north where they will be harbingers of spring on their return. They cling low to the steep banks of hard, rough clay to drink the water, which is full of pollution. How good is this for them? They are certainly numerous.

The Chinese fisherman lent poetry to the Canal. It can be a dismal environment, a scene of depravity. I've been drawn to it because of the wildlife it offers (a green heron today; a couple of turtles sunning themselves on the bank the other day), the open space, and the asphalt- and traffic-free walkway. But now there is poetry, it's a lyrical, tender place now, full of surprises which my soul will stretch toward. The Chinese fisherman with his inward state, whatever it was, made it so.

### *large woman sitting on the curb*

*December 19*

On my way from McDonald's to the Shelter, I am greeted by a young, neatly dressed black woman passing me, cheerfully as if she knew me. I

look back: Is she the one I gave my sausage patty to? Am I beginning to have “friends” in this community? Is “connecting” that easy?

Then, in an empty side road, I come upon a huge black woman with grey hair sitting all alone on the curb, with enormous legs. A picture of pity. It just can't be - there seems no answer to such a picture. I nod a greeting to her and pass, then stop. I decide to listen whether God will give me something to say or do, because I sure don't know what it could be. I want to say: “Is there anything I can do for you?” - but I'm afraid I won't be able to do what she might ask, or I may not want to do it. She would be too heavy for me to help her up, even one of her legs would be too much for me to lift.

After a moment, I turn back and say just what had been on the tip of my tongue, that question, bending down to her. She looks up at me: “I'm waiting for someone.” There is no plea in her voice, just curt information. I'm ashamed. I heard a trace of pity in my voice, of condescension, not respecting her state. This is her place, her position, at this moment; she is waiting for someone. I don't need to make her feel as though it ought to be otherwise, as though something were lacking.

Still, I am glad to have stopped, listened, acted.

### *in the CASS yard*

*December 19*

Nick sits on a bench with his guitar, as he told me he would be that day, and Andrew, a Hispanic man I've seen at A2J prayer who lives at the Shelter, is with him, playing what I would call a baby guitar. They're singing very softly, Jesus songs, not “performing.” Two homeless people, a younger woman with a ruined-looking red face and poorly dressed, and a man with a preserved-looking brown face and dirty hands, sit with them. I join quietly, hum along with some of the songs. I feel a certain simple closeness, an intimacy, in the little group. I like the way Nick is with these people. I feel no condescension, no self-absorbed over-eagerness, no fear of them in him. He hugs them for good-bye - “a Christmas hug,” he says tenderly, it's the season -, then adds: “You guys want to pray the Lord's Prayer?” We join in a circle, holding hands. I have reservations about touching hands that look like they haven't been washed in months, and been in dirty places, but I do it. Nick *means* it. He has brought a bag of bananas, people do like these, and passes out what's left of them. I offer the two peanut bars I bought. They are accepted. Nick explains about his throat problems to his homeless friends, asks for their prayers. They nod. He takes me in his car a piece of the way before he goes to a club to play, needing the money. I take the bus home. This has been a small involvement, but I feel peaceful, even happy. What is it that is so freeing in all this? In all my “uselessness?”

When I wrote about entering another's rest (the Chinese fisherman on the Canal), I didn't think I would ever do this with a roadrunner! A creature one usually catches sight of - if at all - in motion and speed!

At about noon I set out for my first desert day this winter, in the little-frequented mountains further north and east near where I lived three winters ago. The journey, by three city buses, turned out to be only a little over an hour long and comfortable enough. I returned greatly refreshed.

I took it easy in the desert, going nowhere in particular, just moving about in a small area at a gentle pace, resting often. Delighted to greet, far and near, my former haunts - rocks, shady places, heights, gullies. The joy of familiarity, intimacy of acquaintance. Rains earlier this year seemed to have made the place fresh and a bit green.

I was amazed by the number of creatures I saw, not having expected it. In the denuded landscape of the desert, so still, every bit of movement, every manifestation of animal life becomes an event, exciting, lifting the heart, astonishing it often. That there should be anything at all! A pair of rock wrens, recognizable by their up-and-down bobbing motion - a grasshopper - a small lizard (I think) fleeting as a shadow - a few of those tiny desert squirrels that run so hilariously with their tail straight up. A jack rabbit eventually, racing down the mountain at great speed. A male hummingbird announcing its presence from a distance by the merest flash in the air, the sharp, metallic rose-red of its tiny throat hit by the sun, a color utterly incongruous with the desert and so intense I gasped... But the big surprise, in the end, was the roadrunner.

I was walking up a steep mountainside when suddenly there was movement behind a creosote bush: the whipping motion, it turned out, up and down, of a bird's long tail. Then the creature appeared in full, a very large bird though slim, with a gorgeous bush of black feathers on its head.

It wasn't very far from me, and the whole time I watched it, carefully sneaking after it as it moved on a leisurely journey of foraging, it never showed any sign of noticing me. I carefully laid down my pack on the trail and my coat on top without taking my eyes off the bird, then followed it as it crisscrossed about, now away from me, now toward me, now up the mountain, now down. At some point, it hopped on a rock and stayed there, its back to me, long tail straight down the stone, head bush laid flat. A simple, brown-speckled bird quiet on a rock. It seemed to contemplate the mountain across, although it kept moving its head slightly to the left and right, scanning the landscape, I assumed, for movement. I slowly approached from behind in small and halting steps until I reached a low, flat rock and lowered myself on it. And so we

remained, resting together, in peace.

It came to me how I used to never be able to leave the company of a wild animal without chasing it away first. I would make a move that would cause it to flee. I couldn't bear leaving the shared time without bringing on its end by some violence.

It was different this time. I felt no stirrings in me to disrupt the animal's peace, the simple life of its own in which I was allowed to partake for a bit. No need to make my presence known to it. I left when it was time for me to leave, without disrupting the bird's contemplation.

I feel it as a great privilege when I'm able to observe a wild creature in its natural, undisrupted life activity rather than in its reaction to my presence - wary or afraid or fleeing - but as it is in its own environment when I'm not there. Such participation feels almost holy - presence to presence, without employing artificial means or techniques, no binoculars, telescopes, screens, hidden cameras. I am there as I am in my own activity on that mountain, and so is the animal, and for a moment, we share each other's space without interference (though in awareness on my part), and the peace of this seems to reach yet a story deeper.

### *people and questions on the way*

*December 22*

On my way back from the mountain, while waiting at the Sunny-slope open-air terminal for my next bus, I watch a little girl with a big Afro, about two years old, pushing her stroller out into the runway. Her mother, a tall, elegant woman intensely working her phone, comes running after her, yanks her by the arm, screams at her, then returns to her agitated telephoning. The little girl runs into the runway again. Again the mother's angry response: Violently pulling the child by one arm, she drags her like a piece of baggage, screaming at her. It feels like pure hate, not a momentary breakdown as mothers have. It feels like the habitual treatment the little girl gets, who, when the mother comes after her again, runs from her shrieking in terror, shielding her face with her little hands. Finally, the mother slams the child brutally into the stroller. "Don't you move!"

I slowly move near them, having found that a quiet presence can sometimes calm agitation and restrain violence. I softly talk to the girl for a bit when she is loose again. She clutches a big bottle of ice tea and looks up at me as if utterly without understanding where such a voice comes from. Her mother keeps working her phone.

Always the question: What to do? Abuse is taking place - and one must respect the rights of blood bonds above it? A young child is being set on a path that will cause enormous problems for her mother later on and take the child's whole life to undo. One can see it coming, and one

may say or do nothing?

A young woman, a teenager perhaps still, waiting for the same bus as I, suddenly asks me if I saw her drop her wallet. I help her look for it, encourage her to search her bags and pockets again. She asks me for the fare. When the bus pulls in, she explains to the driver she thinks she left her wallet on the other bus on which we both came. He says she needs to call Customer Services. She says they are closed. He says there isn't anything he can do. I ask the girl how much she needs, getting ready to give it to her. The bus driver then decides to let her ride free. "Just this once." The girl settles herself on the bus in the empty row of seats across from me. She never thanks me for my offer, never shows any sign of appreciating my assistance. She has merely been using who or what was near, dropping it when it no longer was of interest. I consider for a moment whether it would be right to talk to her, kindly, to encourage her to a change of manner, as this would help her find her way in the world when she needs help. She has no "manners," perhaps hasn't been taught any. No concept of entering into interaction, relationship, community upon needing help. How much is this, just this, responsible for people's troubles? I look at her and when our eyes meet, I give her a small smile. She gives just the merest response with her lips before looking away again.

What is the courage I need to *act*, in situations where acting may signify a social trespass, for the sake of another? How strong the social barriers protecting our privacy are! Among the strongest. To cross them is taboo, without which we would live in even greater chaos. Still, they cannot be our ultimate recourse. There is One who may transgress them, gently remove them, rightfully. In His dominion, I know, we may act.

### *toiletries for Christmas*

*December 23*

After A2J prayer, Ryan reminds us of the gift boxes full of toiletries donated to us by a church, to be passed out to the needy for Christmas. He opens one to show us, tied with a ribbon and bow, and it is indeed stuffed full! Later, on my way to check on a neighbor I haven't seen for a while, I notice a black woman passing me, and on the spur of the moment decide to offer her one of the boxes. She seems in agreement and walks with me around the block back to the prayer house. She says she is on her way to see if she might "get some stuff somewhere" for her kids for Christmas. (There are no stores in this area.) Then she asks, looking at me somewhat suspiciously, what is in the boxes - "hygienic stuff?" I say there may be some of that, she can check it out. I'm enthusiastic.

On arrival at the house we find the door locked. I don't have the code and apologize. I check the door of the caretaker who lives in the back, no answer. Not knowing what else to do, I offer the woman a five-dollar bill as a compensation for the walk (she is obese and walking is labor for her). She takes it gladly.

*contacts on 15<sup>th</sup> Ave*

*December 23*

The 15<sup>th</sup> Ave bus I'm trying to catch at Van Buren departs on my approach, and I decide to walk a couple of blocks, up to Grand Ave. A "bad" stretch of road.

It brings me a couple of brief encounters with some of the down-and-out walking there. A small, thin, old man comes out of an alley pushing a bicycle by which he's transporting a double bed, both the upper mattress and the frame beneath. They are strapped with a single bungee cord to a dolly which is tied to the back of the bike. I'm impressed often to see how poor people make their lives in the way they can, their dedication in their circumstances. We exchange a few cheerful, encouraging words between us before the man ventures across the wide and traffic-filled avenue with his shaky burden.

At a bus stop across the road further on, three black people are sitting on the bench. A white woman, obviously quite mentally ill, comes along and hits the garbage can with powerful fury, making things fly. She stops before the bench and some arguing over money seems to ensue. She leaves before further escalation. One of the men waves and shouts to me to come over, but I feel my limit. I wave back and walk on.

On the bus, the woman driver recognizes me from a small friendly exchange we had earlier this morning. The re-encounter feels affectionate. So often I sense bus drivers' need and will for good contact with people, and I've been impressed with passengers thanking them heartily for their service and wishing them a good day when they step from the bus. Many do this. Goodness has not died out in this world, not in the world I'm presently traveling in, either. "Merry Christmas!", I hear, again and again. It lifts the heart.

An old man with a white pony tail sits across the aisle from me with a wire pull-cart full of groceries. I lean forward to ask him where I may get one like this. "Walmart," he says. We talk about the hardship of getting groceries without a car and not being able to carry much anymore. Again my heart is lifted in this contact.

*giving unasked*

*December 26*

Stopping at McDonald's at lunch time. It's busy. I order coffee and

fries, avoiding meat which all menus include, and settle at the table where the black woman ate my sausage patty the other day, remembering her and the sun-burnt woman who had joined us.

An elder white woman comes in, overweight but tidily dressed in clean clothes, her straight white hair neatly cut and falling to her shoulders. She moves softly between the tables, holding a small stack of bills in her hand. She passes one of these to the old man at the next table from me whom I imagined as a veteran, with his military-style pack (although many seem to carry these), pondering what his fate may have been. Then she approaches me, extending a five dollar bill. I convince her with some effort to give it to someone “who needs it.” - “Are you sure?” She winks at me as she leaves, as if I am now an accomplice.

Sometimes I feel there is more giving going on in this “scene” than asking for gifts.

### *“how was your Christmas?”*

*December 26*

On my way down Van Buren to the state government center with its strange, cool, manicured but deserted park-like surroundings, having felt a draw for that shade and quiet (so close to these other scenes and surrounded by them), I notice, walking before me at some distance, the tall, white-haired man named Fred I met a couple of weeks ago, who had considered buying me coffee. I am almost instantly sure it's him, even though, from behind, I can't see his big nose. An excitement that surprises me comes into me. I accelerate my step, in a real desire to catch up with him, in a joy as if meeting a *friend*. At the next bus stop, he pauses to chat with someone sitting there and I pass him, looking back at him over my shoulder and saying hi without stopping. He returns the greeting in mid-sentence but does not seem to recognize me. Turning into a side street, I notice him coming after me with his long legs. “How have you been? How was your Christmas?”, lifting his long arm in a magnanimous gesture to lay it around my shoulders. As if sensing that I'm making no move toward him in body, the arm comes down lightly and is quickly withdrawn. I feel a disappointment in him. A decent man, I feel, as I did the first time. He smiles with his big white front teeth, then soon withdraws and turns back. “Nice to see you again.” - “Good to see you.”

It was. - And how to begin an acquaintance on the right basis, not rushing intimacy, so it won't turn abusive? To begin in the beginning. In respect not only for the potential of love in us but also for the potential for destruction and causing great pain. Just to practice this discipline - to begin in the beginning, always, and again and again - the place free of assumptions - that would be something.

### *no coffee*

December 27

In need of bus cards, I walk along Van Buren toward the central terminal where I can get them. Suddenly, Fred is beside me, catching up with me from behind. This time, his arm is not coming for me; maybe he has understood something already. He says he saw me walking. I'm again glad to see him. I ask him if he is working today. He says he doesn't think so "because nobody made a schedule." I do not know what his work is. I ask if he is going to McDonald's, which we are approaching. "Probably," he says. "Just to get out of my niche." He lives, it turns out, with his niece and her "old man", further west. I sense anger and pain. "Not easy to live with people, huh," I say, remembering some of my own situations. - "No, it isn't. Especially over the holidays." - "A lot of people there?" I ask. - "No! NONE!", vehemently. He says he's thinking of renting a room in one of the motels he points to, over New Year's, just to get away. "A bit of solitude?" I suggest. - "I *would* like some company," he retorts, suggestively, in a defiant tone. I would share a cup of coffee with him right now at McDonald's, but he swerves off to it without a sign of invitation to me, so I accept that this brief interaction is enough for the day. "I may see you around again," I say, walking on without stopping.

### *conversation with a father*

December 28

At the back entrance to the bus terminal in Sunnyslope - a small gap in the surrounding wall - stands a child carriage with a little brown-skinned girl in it. She looks at me in a way that leads me to instant contact and interaction with her. We engage in this for a while before I really take note of a very black man standing next to the carriage and begin to have conversation with him. Via the contented and social little girl we come to talk about the challenges of parenting, his fears and worries - "I've got another one coming" - , haunted as he is by his own past which, he says, he does not want to repeat. "My girl (woman) is crazy," he says. I ask if he has any help in his questions, there are organizations who will provide help with parenting. He decisively shakes his head: "No, no help." I encourage him to trust himself, have confidence in himself and in the little girl. "She will teach you about what she needs." His anxiety seems great; I'm thankful, again, for the easy flow of the conversation and its cheerful spirit, without denial of the burden, indeed bringing it to light. - At some point, he says he has to go, grabbing the carriage and moving into the bus station.

Easy connecting and easy letting-go, is what I observe in my own relating at this time, paired with closer attention, fuller engagement.

Much less fear.

*meeting Burt*

*December 30*

After A2J prayer, Ryan takes me in his car to the Shelter where he says Nick was playing music this morning. People are sleeping in the cold on the sidewalks, wrapped in blankets and quilts. The open-air, chain-link-fenced sleeping lot called “overflow”, with its blacktop floor, is cleared of sleepers, heavily littered after the night. Masses of people line up for breakfast. The campus beyond is now gated and locked, enclosed in a tall cast-iron fence; one can’t just walk in anymore like last year.

We can’t find Nick, and Ryan drives me over to McDonald’s where I’ve decided to go for coffee. In the parking lot he calls out to a homeless man in a wheelchair, “Hey, Burt!”, and introduces me to him. He has given me several McDonald’s meal tickets, worth five dollars each, for myself or to give away. I give one to Burt, and two more to two other people who quickly draw near, they seem to all know each other and seem thankful. Burt and I settle at a small table inside for breakfast. He has no use of his right hand, gives me his left to greet me. His right eye is red and half shut. He looks as the homeless mostly do, disheveled and dirty. He tells me he has been living at the Shelter for three years. He seems to manage well with his left hand, pulling on his woolen cap, negotiating his breakfast. A veteran? Victim of an accident? Of child abuse? Born with this handicap? I do not dare to ask.

The usual restlessness is in him - looking around nervously, the mind elsewhere, as if cops were constantly after him. It reminds me of the two homeless Natives I treated at the McDonald’s in Sunnyslope a few years ago - people in constant flight. Fugitives, of a sort.

The place is not very busy this morning. I feel at ease in my conversation with Burt - questions, remarks, pauses. He seems satisfied with the shelter he has. “Good to have a roof over you and a bed under you?” I suggest. He nods as though he means it.

“Do you smoke?” he says suddenly. Always that craving, looking for the next relief. “No. Did you want a cigarette?” He nods. No smoking in here, he knows. I ask him what brand he prefers. “Kool Menthols,” he says. I resolve (to my own surprise) to buy a pack and carry it with me, to pass them out when asked. To practice giving what people ask for.

When Burt leaves to bum a cigarette outside, I notice five little containers of coffee cream on his tray, all empty. I myself did ask for two. He inquires, in gentlemanly manner, whether I’m comfortable staying back at the table alone, and thanks me again for (Ryan’s) gift. Content, I settle myself on a more comfortable chair to finish my coffee.

*“being here”*

Sitting a little longer, simply “being here,” even listening to the background music for a while, I realize I’m not here *for anyone*. I’m here because I feel it as *my place*, presently, whatever this has to do with others. I’m happy being here because it is where right now *I belong*. And so, all relation is easy. There is no foreignness to be overcome. I can join “them” because I already am with them – perhaps to become “like them.”

People come and go. Some are so obese they can hardly walk, or shuffle. I always wonder about people’s pants hanging down over their heels, much farther than their legs go, the extra fabric dragging along the ground, dirty and frayed. What would it take to stitch it up? The woman I’m presently rooming with, talking about her own extreme childhood obesity and early homelessness apart from her family, has told me it’s a *choice*. She didn’t *want* to conform, she said, didn’t want to join the society that oppressed her. Didn’t want to be “like them.”

**CASS**

*December 30*

*the greeter at the gate*

I go back to the Shelter. To enter the campus, one now has to pass through a narrow opening in the fence, with a little lectern inside. An elder black man with grey whiskers, wearing a broad-rimmed felt hat, stands behind it. He questions everyone who comes in, except those who can wave a card at him that identifies them as approved. He questions me, too, for a little while; I refer to Ruben, a young man I know who works fulltime at the Human Services Center. The guard speaks into his phone: “Greeter for Ruben.” I keep waiting while he deals with ever more people arriving. Some he turns back, telling them to wait an hour. They are puzzled. Some of the men seem on edge, quick to anger. Others less so, taking pains to be polite, uttering phrases of courtesy and appreciation. Not just submission, perhaps, I’m thinking. A means, possibly, to keep up one’s dignity. A thread of integration in “normal” society, a remembrance of a former belonging to respectability. Some, perhaps never having known such belonging, seem beyond trying for this.

The greeter, a small man, is nice in his manner, gentle, low-key, quick to smile with his white teeth. I admire him the more the longer I watch. People are often hard to understand, poor speech, poor articulation or use of language. Many are confused. I ask him if this is volunteer work or a paid job. Volunteer. I tell him, sincerely, I admire that he does this, recognizing it’s no easy work. “No, it isn’t,” he says honestly. The sympathy I show for what he does turns his relationship to me. He gives me a

pink temporary pass and personally guides me inside to the front desk, smiling.

I ask him why the campus is no longer open for free access, as it used to be, no longer available just for “hanging out,” spending one’s time. He says they are trying to “mitigate homelessness,” to get people out of it, not provide a place where they can perpetuate it. He says the plastic lawn used to be densely covered with bodies. No more. (Still, quite many lie there.) I ask where people can hang out now. He doesn’t know. One needs to “qualify” anywhere now, it seems, just to be there. I’m reminded of something I read some time ago about a fundamental difference between the American and the European attitude toward the state and society, an eye-opener for me: That in Europe people belong because they are there. In America one belongs when one has made it.

*inside the Human Services Center*

In the large lobby, lots of people are crowding around the great curved front desk, wanting lots of things from the attendant behind it (another volunteer, I believe). I admire his endless patience as I watch him. A seductive-looking woman approaches him with a broad grin of brightly painted lips to tell him she has “a crush” on him, “you are my one and all.” Apparently she is leaving the place, and he wishes her well, keeping to his quiet manner: “I will miss you, Amy.”

He attends to my request regarding Ruben, saying my friend is hard to locate, he flits around everywhere. I write a note for him which disappears in a number of hands.

People keep asking for toilet paper. A roll stands on the counter from which they take what they want, and the attendant keeps having to put out fresh rolls. He grumbles that he has too much to do to keep concerning himself with their toilet paper.

I overhear some talk about a “church on the street” which collects homeless in the neighborhood for Sunday services. Just what I’ve been waiting for, it seems - an opportunity to *worship with the homeless*. The attendant, busy as he is, tries to find some information for me on his computer, then scribbles a phone number on a slip of paper for me.

Suddenly Ruben is there, beaming, throwing his arms around me. He can’t spend time with me just now, he says, but we make an appointment for later. I mention the church I just heard about. He says it’s “very orthodox,” in a subtle tone of warning. I say it doesn’t matter to me right now, I’m looking to *worship* with the population I’m moving among, not for a religion to suit me.

### *lunch on campus*

Loudspeakers are announcing that it's time to line up for lunch, which is provided daily by a Catholic organization in a large dining hall on campus, and that people should use the bathrooms beforehand if they need to. I ask Ruben if "outsiders" can join. "Sure!" he says brightly. He is very enthusiastic about outside participation. I go and stand in the long, loose, scraggly line, noticing that there is no pressing and pushing.

The great hall inside resembles a gym. It is heavily decorated with sports symbols, flags, banners advertising sports teams, icons of that world. The overhead neon lamps make a cold light. There is no "atmosphere." People sit at round tables, each with a big red splotch of artificial poinsettias in the middle. As I approach the food distribution counter in the slowly advancing line, I notice, directly above it, a crucifix, of the old-fashioned "realistic" kind. Further over by the huge trash cans, I see a small statue of the Virgin nestled between the speakers blaring loud radio music, including the aggressive commercials. The combination of these long-revered religious symbols with the room's atmosphere as I feel it almost sickens me. Questions rise. "Why can't we provide a *climate of healing* to people who need it? Are we so sure they couldn't appreciate something other than what (we think) they are used to?"

I don't feel hungry and decide just to have a piece of pie from the end of the food line. But when I get to the counter, I realize there are no choices. I'm handed a food tray with the full meal like everyone else, dished out by the ladies behind the counter, volunteers probably. I look for a table with some women eaters (most are men), but it doesn't seem to matter. The table-round is silent, no one looks at anyone else, no conversation. The loud music seems to support this. I, too, do not address anyone. I'm afraid to be recognized as a non-homeless, ashamed of my "privileged" existence in their presence.

Many people walk out with transparent plastic boxes filled with snack pastries which are also offered free. I feel glad for this offering, a comfort perhaps in the long empty hours between meals.

### *leaving the Shelter area*

Walking across the campus yard, I notice some square patches of bright green in the grayish-green plastic lawn, and believe for a moment some real live grass might be sprouting there after the recent rains. But it turns out men are ripping up damaged parts of the "lawn" and putting in new plastic patches, not yet faded!

On passing the overflow lot, I watch some homeless men, some with their packs on their backs, clearing it of the night's litter - huge Styro-foam soda cups, plastic water bottles, paper and plastic wrappers, rags. They use leaf rakes and brooms and move slowly, with dragging, listless,

uncertain movements. I expect they get bonuses for this work.

At the bus stop on the corner of Jefferson, as usual a crowd of homeless is waiting for the free DASH circulator that goes to the center of town. Directly across the broad street is the historic Carnegie Public Library, now some government archive, a charming, quaint, perfectly maintained brick building in a vast, immaculate park, real lawn grass glowing almost blindingly green, expensively cared for no doubt, plus many fine trees. I stop to consider this striking contrast to the barrenness and depravity of the Shelter environment. It feels almost surreal. For the first time I see the wide drive-in gate open. I walk in and circle the building, finding its door locked, a guard sitting inside at a desk. No one is ever in this park, it seems, even with the gate open it is completely empty. Nothing on the lush, perfect grass but flocks of wild blackbirds flown over the tall fence and grazing.

It seems to take a long time for me to learn what this environment is I've been cast into, the scene of the homeless as well as the scene of those who attend to them. I don't mind. It's often been the way for me to move into a new situation: with little or no information to prepare me, just being present, attentive, learning from what I'm experiencing, and constantly being corrected by further experience. It seems my way.

### *music at CASS*

*January 2, 2014*

Late-afternoon music hour in the Shelter yard, Nick joined by several other A2J musicians, led by Amber, a guitarist and singer. About a dozen homeless draw near, some settling. We begin with the popular old hymn "Amazing Grace," in a very slow, even dragging rendering. Tears fill my throat several times as I see the faces of listeners changing, opening, the watery blue eyes of two old, whiskered cowboys sitting side by side on a stone block softening, shyly, their soul rising into them, their smile with missing teeth. Soon they and others join in the singing, as I also do. *We have songs in common! We have love of music in common, and the need to sing! We share a heart, an ability to be moved!*

It seems so much, to experience this and to bring it on by this simple act.

### *Amber's guitar*

An incident that made a special impression on me: A young man, even a kid still, wearing a woolen cap, approached the players and desired Amber's guitar. She handed it to him without hesitation. He sat down on the "grass", bent over the instrument, and played and sang two long songs he said he had written. It seemed he just had to do it, out of hunger for a guitar. He seemed competent enough. Then he handed the

instrument back to its owner, and the group, pleased, gently applauded.

As simple as that: A desire, stated; a response without question, in trust. An offering, received. Nothing further. The young man went on his way.

Hearts were lifted.

### *sunday morning at the Shelter*

January 5

I came with an intention to attend the Catholic Mass I'd heard takes place in the Andre House parking lot.

City birds - pigeons, sparrows, blackbirds - finding their feast on the street and sidewalks leading up to the campus, along the "overflow lot," again heavily littered after the night, walking around freely and pecking at things. From a board posted outside Andre House I learn with surprise that Mass is held Monday through Thursday, *not* on Sunday. I decide to hang out.

Men equipped with carts, brooms, and rakes are sweeping the streets around Andre House. They are dressed in the informal manner of the place but more clean, and move with energy and efficiency. I assume they are staff.

The scene on the sidewalk bordering the House on its sunny side is especially hard to look at. A scene of gregarious camping, more expansive and social than in other spots, and more depraved.

### *chocolate*

Feeling a bit woozy, I pull a piece of dark chocolate from my knapsack, then have an impulse to offer it to a black woman in a wheelchair who smiles at me with her few teeth: "Do you like chocolate?" She affirms, but then spots a tiny package of air plane crackers in the little sandwich bag I am holding: "What's this?" She seems to want the crackers. Then she wants the chocolate, too, and finally she asks for the plastic bag as well. I give it all to her.

### *handout*

I go back to the road leading up to the Shelter, with its loose, slow traffic of walkers dragging their bags. A cluster of people is forming around two cars with their hatches up, drawn like city birds when someone throws them food. Wrapped sandwiches - rolled, soft flour tortillas (good for the toothless) - and small bags of chips are being passed out. Heaps of crumpled used clothing in the back of one car, bags full of it being brought out. People rummage, load up. Some walk away with armfuls like dazed customers at the Goodwill (or Filene's Basement, in the old days). Where will they put it all? One will find the pieces lat-

er dropped in the streets, crushed into dirt, left behind in the haunts around the city. Care and preservation of things is not the way of the homeless.

New socks are also offered from a bag. As well as the usual “hygienics”: shampoo, toothpaste, skin lotion, soap... Several times I go after people who dropped part of what they took, without noticing it or looking back, and hand it back to them.

I’m accosted a number of times by those doing the handout. It seems hard to convince them that I don’t need anything, that I’m not “homeless.” I should take socks, one woman keeps urging, one never has enough of them. “I have enough,” I protest, anger rising finally. *“I don’t need more than I need. That’s why the poor are poor - because the rich take more than they need.”* She seems taken aback by the idea. She tells me her group, from a church, comes down here once a year. The first thing she handed me was a religious pamphlet.

### *the preacher*

Something else is going on on the other side of the street. About a dozen folding chairs have been set up in a dirt area in two rows. I see two black men gesticulating. One, large, heavy, in a black leather jacket, is sitting in the back row; the other, in a clean blue T-shirt, is grasping a Bible and starts preaching passionately. The role of the first man seems to be to respond, often, “yeah, amen, hallelujah,” as a means of stimulation. But no one draws near. He disappears eventually. The chairs remain empty, except for two black teenage girls sitting side by side in the back row. Each chair has a battered copy of the Bible on it, in different versions and editions. The preacher knows his rap well. It is not so bad when I listen, except for the very bad parts, outside of the spirit of “that book” which he says is all we need. He seems to have no awareness of his listeners, or the lack thereof, addressing no one but the air. He’s focused on his sermon, which often lifts up his own calling or service. I’m surprised that no one - or almost no one - takes advantage of the offered seats, just to sit, instead of leaning against a chain-link fence or cowering on the curb. A few men stand near, pretending not to listen. One, a tall white man in clean clothes and leather shoes, his gray hair slicked back in orderly fashion, finally sits down and begins to scribble. Maybe an observer, like me.

More and more my attention is on the two young girls. They hardly move, their faces sullen and resentful. The younger one yawns from time to time. Why are they here? I conclude they are the preacher’s daughters. Perhaps placed here as bait, to draw people; perhaps to hear their father’s instruction. The more I consider them, the more they appear to me as slaves. Several times I feel an impulse to sit down with them, in

solidarity, in sympathy with their situation, for companionship, or to encourage their silent rebellion. A few times I almost do it.

Am I here to meddle? To upset things as they are?

When the preacher, after a long time of advertising “the book” in general terms, finally invites his imaginary listeners to open it to a certain place, to read for themselves the line he is quoting - “Jesus says, have faith in God” - I see the girls obediently reaching for a Bible and staring into it. I half expect their father will beat them if they don’t obey. It’s hard to watch.

Just as I finally start walking away, motion comes into the girls. They pull on gloves (it’s cold!), giggling over it, leaning toward each other as if to share secrets and giggling with the same amusement and abandon other young girls do. It’s so good to see their white teeth flashing in laughter! I’m relieved. Perhaps their life isn’t so bad after all?

#### *cross*

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the street, a couple of men come striding along at a clip pace, one of them dragging a huge wooden cross with the word “Jesus” painted on it, the horizontal beam pressing his shoulder. When my eyes reach the lower end of the long vertical beam where I expect it to touch the ground, I see two little wheels attached to it, making the burden roll along with ease. The surprise has me shaking with laughter, I cannot help it, it seems too funny! At the next street corner, the men lean the cross against a fence and stand planted with legs apart, facing the street as if waiting for “customers,” an audience. After some time more people come along dragging a smaller cross on larger wheels. Then a big pick-up truck arrives. The crosses are loaded on it, the men climb up, straws sticking out of giant Styrofoam soda cups go into mouths, and off he goes - Holy Jesus, wheels on wheels.

#### *the maze*

Feeling I can’t stand up much longer, or stand to watch more, I begin to walk out of the area. Passing two men along the sidewalk, one standing, one crouching, I hear behind me: “Hey, preacher lady.” I turn around, as if provoked. “Are you talking to me?” The man standing affirms. “I’m not a preacher,” I say. “What makes you think I am?” - “Oh, you know, the calm, God all over you...” - “Well, I guess we can use a little calm, don’t we?”, I offer peaceably. They agree. The crouching man begins to roll up his sleeve to show me something, all the way up to his shoulder. A small, neat tattoo, of a maze, he explains. The tiny figure in its open entrance, he says, is a man or a woman, or Christ, or the Spirit, whatever, and the maze is what we walk to get to the center. He is serious, and I like what he says. “Are you a Native?”, I ask. - “Yes, Pa-

pagos tribe,” he says. “We have Mamagos and Papagos.” He smiles with a mouth so full of teeth there seem several rows of them, in all colors, pointing in all directions. “In my native language,” I say, inspired by his humor, “we call a parrot *Papagei*. So there are Papagos, Mamagos, and Papageis!” We laugh. I tell him about the maze I discovered in the Phoenix desert a few years ago which someone had laid beautifully with the stones the mountain spills (it is still there), and how I walked it, and how amazing it is when all of a sudden you find yourself very close to the center, you don’t know how you got there, and the next moment you find yourself way at the periphery again without seeing why. We express gladness for the warmth of the sun and wish each other a good day. It’s more than a phrase. I feel refreshed, as though I had found my Mass, a bit of the Love we seek, shared with one another. Here was a soul that wasn’t lost.

*the color of Mercy (a reflection)*

When driving home last night with my son after a visit to his family, I got into a “socio-political” rap about the outrage of this homeless scene in a rich country like America, and how unthinkable this would be in a Western European nation at this time (especially that of my own origin, Switzerland).

After listening in silence, he said, tersely: “Yet you are here.” That’s all he said. (He has this way. Being quiet for a long time, listening, and then saying something small that pierces.)

I straightened up in my seat, conviction coming over me. “Yes. I am here. And this is significant.”

It *is* significant. Why am I happy here? Happier in a place of such brokenness, poverty, depravity, suffering as I see in this modern city, than I am in a country that deals with its problems so well, a “perfect” country by comparison, one of the wealthiest on earth, that distributes its wealth so much more equally and wisely, caring so much more for the common good.

Yes, it is a significant question. I should not avoid it. Perhaps it is something more than my love of “adventure” and the fascination with surprises that endears America, this “permanent disaster zone” as I sometimes call it, to me.

“*The poor you will always have with you,*” Jesus said. I think of this often. A liberal or “progressive” goal is to do away with poverty and its awful effects entirely. But will we ever? What is our poverty (and why am I not seen, so often in this scene, as *different* from “them,” but as one of them)? What is it but the *brokenness* in which we really are, everywhere, all of us? Why am I happy among the poor and low? *Because here our true state is not hidden, not concealed.* (What *is* concealed, my friend

Tricia, who was raised in such circumstances, said to me when I ran into her recently, is the *shame* the poor feel about their state, and the *pain* of their exclusion of which they are constantly aware.) And because here I feel Love pulsing through it all, in my modest little interactions with these afflicted, in our helplessness: Christ among the poor. Affecting me, changing me perhaps. Not bringing me out of the poverty I share with them (“*I do not take you out of the world,*” the Master also said to his closest followers, another thing I often think of), but bringing on the *joy* in which we can live our earthly state, doing good to one another.

My older grand-daughter asked me last night after my favorite color, as part of a game she overheard adults play at a New Year’s party. My answer came without hesitation: “*Deep red.*” Next, she asked me to explain my associations with it. “Well, for one: depth. And then: blood, life - we have no life without blood.” Finally, I mentioned the cranberry bogs on Cape Cod I so loved when I lived there, turning that deep purple-red color in winter. I did not mention how, one day, upon gazing on such a bog for a long time, it came to me like a revelation that this hue is the *color of Mercy*. I told my granddaughter about the bogs, but did not use that word, “*mercy,*” saying there is more to it but that I’m shy about it.

The large painting hanging in the A2J prayer room, above the couch, often looking at me when I’m with the group - a really good painting, I think, perhaps one of the best modern religious paintings I’ve seen -, of the Crucified leaning forward and outward, straining toward us with all his might (we see only his head and disheveled hair and parts of his shoulders), blood-red, but not, in my view, as tainted with the blood of his body, rather, as *burning* from within, burning, in his terrible suffering, with the love and mercy of a fighter who will never give up, whose fight is continually and absolutely needed.

*In this fight I want to be.* It is needed equally everywhere, but it’s a favor to be in it, and part of it, both fighting and being fought for, where this may happen in *openness*, beyond question.

Yes, my son, I do love America, though not for the reasons Europeans may expect. Yes, I am happy to be where I am, and thankful.

Waking up this morning, I felt the wounds, all over me inside. Christ’s wounded body. And I thought how meaningful the Catholic contemplation of this wounded body, over so many hundreds of years (and now so rejected by many modern minds), has been and is. The love and mercy that gives itself fully - in the wounded state.

### *a neighbor’s view of homelessness*

*January 6*

Talking with a resident in the neighborhood about her personal experience of the homeless, I see that not everyone feels the sympathy I’ve

tended to feel. Homeless bed down in people's yards, pee and defecate, cause litter. The woman finds herself going from pity and trying to offer relief to calling the police. She says an officer told her never to pity the homeless. There is a special squad, he said, that goes around in a van to pick them up and take care of them "A to Z." "But," this officer added, "I tell you, out of thirty, *one* will get in the van." - "It's their choice to live like this," the woman says. We talk a bit about what "choice" might mean in this life situation. How far does "the situation" steer the choices people are able to make?

### *the couple with a doll*

January 6

At the bus stop on 15<sup>th</sup> Ave and Van Buren, a couple stands waiting, the woman with long, tendriling blond hair and the man holding something to his chest. I see a little shock of shiny, tousled blond hair, a dog's or a child's, I'm not sure. The woman is focusing on ordering that hair, daintily picking up strand by strand with two fingers and patiently straightening it out. She does this with complete attention and great tenderness. I keep watching, unable to move my gaze, as if the woman's concentration were entering me. Suddenly I see that the little arm sticking up in the air is made of grey cloth. It's a doll. The man keeps tenderly stroking the arm with his thumb while the woman works.

On the bus, the woman sits the doll on her lap like a child, then leans it on her shoulder face down as one does with a baby, turning its head into a comfortable position. The doll is now looking at me with one big brown eye. The woman adjusts its arm and hand carefully as a mother might her child's. She seems contented and in peace.

I wonder what causes this dedication to a doll in a grown woman. Has she lost a child? Maybe taken away by the Social Department, due to her mental condition? Has she lost a beloved doll when she was a child, maybe by fire, has she lost her mother in it, too?

Whatever the answer, I'm touched by the manifestation of care and tenderness in this "parenting" couple. It tells me that these feelings are present in these street residents of another condition just as they are in other people, and it seems an important reminder.

### *Madeleine's example*

January 12

A young white man, wearing a white T-shirt, lingering on Van Buren just west of 19<sup>th</sup> Ave, at the side of a black man sitting in an electric wheelchair. He stops me as I come along, explaining he needs some money to feed his companion. He claims the man ran out of battery power the evening before and was stranded in the street, and he, the

younger man, brought him to CASS to stay for the night, and now the older man is hungry and they are going to Jack-in-the-Box, the fast-food place two blocks east, could I add a dollar to the bit of cash he has? His paycheck, he adds in explanation, isn't coming until next week.

My response is instant and plain. I say I will go with them to the fast-food place and pay for their food. He thanks me and we start walking east. Then he says it is too far and really in the wrong direction of where they are going, it might be better to just go to the Circle K convenience store a block or so west, they have hotdogs there, that would be fine. I willingly turn around and say I will go with them to Circle K and buy what they need. He asks me for a dollar in cash so he can take the man on the bus to 54<sup>th</sup> Ave where the man lives with his father. I say I will walk with them to the bus stop and see that they get on. He says he has a bus card for himself and only needs cash for his companion.

At Circle K, the man in the wheelchair wants to stay outside while the other man comes in with me. There are no hotdogs, and we decide on a sandwich for the older man, to which the younger man wants to add a bag of chips. I suggest this may be hard for the older man to eat if his teeth aren't good. A back-and-forth follows that keeps intimating to me more and more that the white man is not clearly in a mission for the other one but may be looking for some cash for himself, possibly using his companion's disability for this purpose. I do not let myself think out these thoughts in my head but try to go straightforwardly, taking the man by his word as far as it is recognizable. We end up with a large turkey-and-cheese sandwich, a banana, and a package of small sugary donuts the young man suddenly seems very interested in. I also buy a coffee and a sweet snack for myself. Outside, the man in the wheelchair thanks me profusely, heaping blessings on me. The younger man asks me again for cash for the bus, so I wouldn't have to take them there. It's not far to walk and I insist calmly on my plan. Then the black man suddenly announces he does not want to go on the bus, he wants to "stay right here." He seems determined. Was the whole bus thing about the man's father a fib? I don't dwell on the question. The end of my involvement seems come, and I take leave of the two in friendly manner. Perhaps to share the food I bought, I don't know.

I didn't solve anyone's problem or save their situation. I only responded as I could see reasonably to respond, and that was more than I could do in the past in practical action. I was guided, I believe, in the approach I took by the example a wonderful aged member of the Zurich Quaker group, *Madeleine*, gave me some years ago. She, a seasoned Friend, and I were returning from our yearly meeting, sitting at a major station in a train that hadn't taken off yet. A young man came in and asked us for money so he could ride the train to the next city, where we were going

also. "Sit down," Madeleine said, kindly and firmly. "When the conductor comes, I will pay for your ticket." In no time the man was gone.

I was hugely impressed. I had never known how to respond to beggars that give you "a story" of their need. A confusing feeling of acute discomfort - a mixture of spontaneous sympathy and goodwill, a sense of being lied to and led by the nose, shame about my own privileged position, fear of my judgmentalness and, on the other hand, of aiding a bad purpose (use of drugs or alcohol) by giving as asked - usually led me to turn away and avoid the request. Madeleine, however, didn't seem to enter into any of this, not even "sympathy" or pity with the man. She simply was upright in her attitude of justice and mercy toward the world. Obedient to the Lord, regardless of her "feelings."

She had honored the man by allowing that his request may be honest and straightforward. In doing so she confronted him with his lie. He chose to react by fleeing. She would have worked with him further if he had allowed it, I'm sure. He was not ready. Jesus often acted in this way.

Can we do better? Are we called to enter into the labyrinth of confusion caused by dishonesty and lies? What, if anything, can cut through it?

I felt neither the little rush of satisfaction that tends to come after an act of magnanimity or mercy, nor any sort of rebuke within me. My errand was done, I was in the service still, going on. "Unprofitable servant."

We never know how our acts of simple uprightness affect others, and we are not called to ask.

But there may have been an effect on *me* through this act of responding. The interactions that followed on my further walk that morning occurred in a liberty that didn't seem to require any discernment or overcoming of doubt, straightforward upon simple impulse.

### *Fred's New Year's*

*January 12*

Running into Fred again. (Why do I keep feeling, and felt from the first, as if God had some intention about this acquaintance?)

I was walking behind a waist-high wall along the road when he came toward me on a bicycle. He stopped when he noticed me (I think I may have called out to him), and I went around the wall to meet him. This time his long arm did come around me again and he insisted on kissing the top of my head and my neck despite my obvious resistance. He asked how my New Year's had been. "Ordinary," I said. "Just like any other night. It's nothing special to me." And his? Not uplifting, apparently. I asked him if he went to a motel. He said he would have if I had gone with him, why would he go to a motel alone? "So you are

taking a ride on this fine day?” I said. Apparently the niece had been driving him crazy again. He wanted to watch the football game on the big TV, while she, 23 years old, wanted to watch cartoons!, and not on the smaller screen. “Too small!” he aped her girlish complaining. - He went on his way soon after that. I was again glad to see him.

*God's hand in his life* – that's what I long for. A good man, I feel, struggling with ordinary issues, but without much guidance.

### *left holding the bag*

January 15

Approaching the A2J prayer house to wait there for a friend, I notice a homeless Native person coming along behind me, a small woman, not old. Remembering the gift boxes with hygienic articles a church had donated to our group, which Ryan had personally encouraged me to give out, I ask the woman if she would be interested in one of these. She says yes. I invite her in but she says she has sore feet and cannot lift them over the threshold. She sits down on the doorstep and I bring a couple of the boxes out. The content of each is different, and my idea is that we would look through them and she could choose what she needs. We open a large, heavy box with a Christmas ribbon around it, filled with innumerable toiletry articles, hotel-bathroom size, plus some socks, a deck of cards, and a small game of dominoes. The woman wants socks. I search the other box for a pair to fit her small feet and find two pairs that seem right. She takes off her shoes and socks, cooling her feet in the air (tiny, tiny toes), and says she needs powder between her toes. I look in the other boxes, but can't find any. The woman takes a jar of Vaseline, then asks for the deck of cards, “I like these.” She also wants the dominoes. I go back inside to search further for the foot powder she wants, eager now to serve her need, thinking also I could give her some money to buy the article if we don't have it. Meanwhile, the woman is left alone at the door.

Suddenly, I get a feeling I should check on her and go back. On the threshold, neatly placed in the middle of it, is a pair of black socks rolled up, the woman's own, on a little scrap of paper. She herself is nowhere in sight. Astonished, I look around, and finally spot her far down the street, walking, almost to Van Buren.

This behavior shocks me more than I would have expected. A “small” thing, it would seem, but so “otherworldly,” so out of the code of the civilized conduct we know and take for granted - no thank-you, no waiting to learn about the result of my search on her behalf, no announcement of taking leave. Just a silent disappearance. I feel the *disconnect* this expresses opening wide as an abyss between us. I stand there startled into helplessness. What is in a person's head, in her soul, regarding her fellow

beings, that allows her to act like this? (No turning around as she goes, either, no waving good-bye.) Her act seems little more than that of an animal who has found a morsel in someone's dooryard, grabs it and runs away, without concerning itself as to where it comes from. *No relation.*

Living utterly outside of the context, the community, of *relationships*: this is chilling. Possibly the situation of many of these people.

Most of us feel lonely at some time or another. But this? So outside, so disconnected in heart, that the feeling of loneliness might not even form. Or else the woman would have used what I offered: a possibility for *contact*.

I engaged myself for her, but I never came into her space. It hurts, to be left standing like this. To be so utterly disregarded in one's existence. - But I doubt there was contempt in her, or any sort of intention. Disregarded by society, as a Native American, and then, as a failed life, can she have any regard for *herself*?

Even the little she took that she thought she wanted or needed may soon fall into this disregard, forgotten or lost without regret among the litter the homeless leave wherever they put down.

*Might there be another way to "reach" these people in their isolation - other than by attending to assumed physical needs? Approaching them, instead, as persons? "Hi. How are you doing? May I walk with you a little way?"* Being with them as they are, where they are. Not even thinking of physical needs, until these make themselves known.

*Just to be* with them, feeling *my* isolation in the separation between us, the gap of *my* separation from them. Yearning to close it. Christ's yearning, in the loneliness of his separation from us.

I'm thinking of the homeless Native man who showed me the maze in a tattoo on his arm. That conversation is still in me, about the maze and what it teaches. It benefited me. I've been thinking of it often.

It was a *real* conversation, two-way, a genuine give-and-take. That man was just as deprived as this woman. But I didn't relate to him by pity, by assumptions about his needs. There was a *person* there, he came forward as that person and caused my person to come forward, and we met.

What if we started there, letting the physical needs appear as they will and be met naturally in the process - a process of *relationship*?

### *the woman dressed in beauty*

January 17

Going down to the Shelter for Nick's weekly music hour, because it is Thursday. Getting there early. Wandering around the area for a bit, no longer finding it challenging to be there, not stirred up anymore by the open display of all that misery, the insane asylum on the street corners.

Dulled, it seems, to it all.

One figure attracts me: a woman sitting alone on a bench in the yard. I see first her black-stockinged, spindly legs. How can legs be so thin? Then I perceive her whole appearance: Impeccably dressed, black from head to foot but loaded with innumerable pieces of jewelry, bunches of necklaces and bracelets, rings on every finger. All color-coordinated in tones of gold. Something fantastic on her head, too, and a long bush of copperish hair, neatly tied in several places, down her back to her waist. A remarkable creation, a person created by herself. I stop before her and remark, with genuine enthusiasm, on the beauty of her appearance. She smiles. Her sun-tanned face is quite wrinkled, but I can see it has been beautiful once. A former actress or beauty queen perhaps? Aged, fallen, gone insane, but still living in that image?

Not often, in that place - although there are many self-impersonators, and many fantastic creations - that one would meet such clean and coordinated perfection.

There she sits like a queen on a lonely throne, on that plastic lawn. Alone with her creation of herself. All she has.

Is it different from myself, as I sit here on the front porch of my present hostess' home, writing this? Am I not working every day, in my mind, on that self-creation, in the desire, the need, to achieve some former "beauty" again, physical or spiritual, in the *present* - something I once was or may have been - not to lose it, not to let it fall by the way-side?

I felt something like love, like respect, not pity, for that woman, although my heart was hurting for her, too.

I wanted to sit down beside her and learn her story. Why didn't I? "Hi. How are you doing? May I sit with you for a while?" Person to person.

*I didn't feel invited.* As if her universe were closed to me.

### *meeting again*

January 17

It's beginning to happen, with the street persons: meeting *again*. With quite a few, actually. Acquaintances perhaps slowly deepening, something like relationship beginning to form. But nothing fixed, ever, with these people. Their memory, their controls, their will perhaps not seeming to reach far enough.

*Anew each time:* This could be a blessing.

Saw the young woman with the sun-burnt face again yesterday, in the CASS yard. Went up to her - that little surge of joy in the rediscovery: "Hi-i! Are you being careful now about getting sun-burnt?", jokingly, tenderly. She did not understand, didn't remember. "Are you?", I insisted

- caring about her, yes. Seeing the loveliness in her face, feeling love for her rising. - "Got a cigarette for me?" , she answered, in a barely audible voice. - "No..." , sadly. Sad that I hadn't bought the pack I had vowed to carry with me. I could have given her what she asked! Then she would know me, we might become friends, on her level! - I thought of Dorothy Day, in the film about her life we recently watched in my Neighborhood Ministries class: always smoking. In the first scene, showing her as an old woman in a prison cell into which a black girl is being thrown, screaming and kicking, Dorothy asks her new cell mate, who attacks her: "Want a cigarette?" Lights it for her, slides it gently between her lips as she calms down. *The connector.*

(Tears streaming down my face as I think of it.)

*What is that cigarette, between me and my new mates, as a non-smoker? What is our common vice God forgives, that we may dwell together in His forgiveness?*

*Re-visiting:* the scenes, places, people. At unexpected times. *Long-term relationships:* a "core value" Neighborhood Ministries has recognized as essential to healing.

The *whole life* given, not only "special times": That is ordinariness.

*Commitment.* A word I still dread. "Ordinariness" is better - I am at home there.

### ***"have you had breakfast?"***

January 20

Phoenix Marathon day. I wander about the neighborhood, not sure what to do with myself. The streets seem even more deserted than they usually are on weekends. For the first time since all this began, I feel a moment of *loneliness*. Nowhere to go, not sure who I am. Trailing toward the Shelter, I decide to give up, then stand for a moment at a street crossing resolving to listen earnestly for what *God* may want of me. Looking up, who would I see coming along on the other side but Fred!! Why do I keep running into this man? Neither of us is looking for the other (at least as far as I know). "We do seem to walk similar paths!", I say, joining him. He seems less than excited, but again puts his arms around me and kisses me on the head, while I resist as usual but do not refuse. "Where are you going?" I ask. - "Just looking around." - "Have you had breakfast?" He nods. I had hoped to take him to McDonald's. He says he has been doing his laundry, "just the usual." He smells fresh and clean. I notice the purple-red color of his great nose for the first time. Is he drinking? He seems discouraged, disappointed with me perhaps, too, and soon takes his leave.

As with others, no sign of progress in this encounter. Another small segment of a journey, through dry land presently, to God.

***“Project H.O.M.E.”***

January 21

I notice for the first time a place on Van Buren where many homeless are hanging out, some going in, others exiting. “Project H.O.M.E.”, a large sign says. I can make no sense of it and go in. People stand in lines before a counter. A uniformed guard sits on the side behind a large, polished desk, perfectly empty except for a sign saying that only the guard is allowed to use it. Outside, there were other signs saying loitering is not allowed. I’m in an atmosphere different from that of people-minded charity. I ask the guard what this place is. He’s friendly. It’s part of Social Security: Many of these people, he explains, have mental problems and cannot manage their social security payments. So this place keeps them for them and they come in at intervals and get a partial amount paid out, so they don’t use it up all at once (for drinking etc., I suppose), or lose it, or have it stolen.

A further facet of the homeless life and its nature of *dependency*.

***opportunities for small encounters***

January 21

A long wait between buses at the Central station gives me the opportunity to pick up a Mexican teenage boy’s woolen cap he has dropped inadvertently, and run after him yelling. When he hears me, he turns around, and the genuine big smile of joy appearing on his face, white teeth flashing, makes this little encounter more than a “small” thing to me!

And then - can I believe it? - there he is again, sudden as always - Fred. I see him first and approach him. He smiles, but not gladly, walking on. “Going somewhere?” I call after him. - “Just to meet a friend,” he answers almost gruffly and disappears into the station building.

Perhaps I have really cooled his interest beyond restoration. I’m sorry, but not dismayed. It’s not in my hands. This man, for reasons I do not know, has a root in my heart. I will be faithful, but not imposing, letting the Lord guide it.

At the bus when it comes, I make sure the driver waits while a passenger comes panting along, trying to catch it. The man is grateful. When I get off at my stop, a Native woman outside with a ruined face wants my used ticket. I don’t understand immediately. The day’s date is stamped on it, so if I don’t need the card again today, she can use it (although this may be illegal). The very poor are shrewd as we are, resourceful in finding ways to get by.

*Shelter residents at A2J prayer*

January 22

Several homeless persons at prayer with us this morning. Nick is excited: Something is happening in the CASS yard, around the music; this is what brought them. One man tells us a “religious” joke after prayer. “Whose job is it to brew the coffee, the man’s or the woman’s?” The wife tells the husband it’s his job, because he gets up early. He says no, it’s hers, because she is the woman and does the cooking. No, she insists, the Bible says it’s the man’s. “No coffee in the Bible,” I throw in. Our friend knows better: “Hebrews!” We share a good laugh.

A little later, waiting at my bus stop on Van Buren on my way to the mountain, I sit next to another Shelter resident who was with us this morning and gave good verbal prayer. I admire her elaborate costume, colorful and dramatic, put together with obvious care. Her blue-painted toe nails and black-painted, long fingernails are tidily enriched with colorful sparkles. Her purple knapsack is adorned with purple sequins. I address her cheerfully by name; we have been acquainted for some time. However, she shows herself inaccessible, not responding to me and staring into her phone.

The unpredictability and lack of continuity among the homeless (or mentally ill) is something to get used to. I become aware of the *role of continuity* in “normal” social life, without which there is no cohesion, no rational order, no productivity. Above all, the importance of continuity in friendship, love, and caring.

*man sleeping in the midst of traffic*

January 29

At the huge, noisy intersection of Van Buren, Grand Ave, and 7<sup>th</sup> Ave (where the McDonald’s is), I notice, in front of a (also very noisy) car wash and very close to the roaring traffic, a sleeping bag with a hump in it, on top of a little mound of gravel landscaped with a couple of shrubs and some blooming flowers. The bag looks closed and I’m not sure there is a person in it. I walk around it to see. It is open on the far side. Yes, there is a body, fully clothed. A man asleep, it appears, in this terrible din and all the fumes. I can’t make sense of it. Why *this* spot, of all the spots he could have chosen? He is carefully wedged between the two decorative shrubs, not just randomly slumped down. I wonder if the deafening noise may serve as a painkiller, maybe even a sleeping drug, as I have heard it can be for people used to constant exposure to it.

*meeting Dolores*

*January 31*

At A2J prayer, I get to sit next to an older black woman I haven't seen before, and talk with her for a long time. She lives at CASS, is new in Phoenix, coming from Chicago, and checking out resources. I soon grow warm toward her. Her name is Dolores. She appears sane, has been a nurse and teacher, and has adult children here but feels she doesn't want to impose on them, "I'm not there yet." She is dignified, and now homeless, feeling the pain of it . She gets help from a Senior Center nearby which she likes. I give her the address of a small homeless shelter on the east side, which I visited last year with a friend. It takes in homeless persons who can show that they are seriously trying to get out of homelessness and are willing to cooperate in the services the shelter offers. I feel Dolores may be a good candidate. She seems grateful for the suggestion.

## Part II

### *the weight increases*

#### *“the Lord has need of it”*

January 31

After another “chance” encounter on the street with the man named Fred, and learning a bit more about his life and condition, it comes to me that if I lived in the A2J unit Ryan has offered me in the Woodland District I could have this man over for coffee or even dinner some time. We might talk. I would be “safe” there, integrated in the community. He might even come to our prayer on a Friday morning, experience the warmth and friendship, enjoy meeting people, gain a sense of home. It’s the *kind* of home, I think, he needs.

Suddenly it seems clear that I must move into that little house. “*The Lord has need of it*” - this scriptural word<sup>1</sup>, given me some years ago as God’s answer in a very challenging living situation, is suddenly in me again. *Surely I am not to receive the offered apartment for my need alone.* At that time, the Lord had need of the little studio apartment I had rented expressly as a space of my own - for the sake, it turned out, of my obstinate, unjust, lonely landlady who kept intruding! I submitted to the guidance, and great blessings and healing came of it.

*The Lord has need of me living in this A2J unit for those who need my hospitality and presence in this neighborhood.* Already the little unit, until now feeling cold and bare in my mind, seems warmed by their presence, in my heart; by the works of friendship and community that are to happen there. Once again the Lord has gone ahead of me and prepared the place where He wants me to be.

#### *Fred: a meditation*

After writing the above, I hear:

*“He is not an object of your desire to save. People are not objects of salvation.”*

We have been created to *be*, to live, not to be saved.

That is the whole point in my present endeavor to “encounter” the people of the street - the homeless, the marginal, the “lost” -: to meet them as *people*, persons, not as objects of (social or religious) salvation. To overcome precisely this latter tendency.

First comes turning away, overwhelmed with their state, their needs,

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 11:3

their neediness. In helplessness.

Then, turning toward them from a desire, an inward burning, to help, to restore, to re-include them in “regular” human society. To *make them fit* for this. That is, acceptable to ourselves. So that we may see them as people like ourselves and not be disturbed by their divergences.

This is not yet seeing them as the persons they are, persons as we are.

Third, meeting them no longer as objects of a desire to help, in fact, objects of *any* desire other than healthy human desire for each other’s company and presence.

If I do not see them as *worthy* of my company, in the way I see my “normal” friends, in the state they are in, I am not worthy of going near them.

I feel *fear* now, at this very moment, regarding my mysterious acquaintance with Fred. He may not wish, indeed it looks as though he doesn’t, to “take the place” of a person I picked up in the street out of sheer compassion. He may see himself as the full-fledged person he is, whatever his troubles, not essentially on another level from me, who happens to feel an attraction to me and desires a relationship.

What do I wish for him? He is a lonely man. There are many lonely men. His days seem much filled with emptiness he does not know how to fill in a manner worthy of him. I’ve felt much *disorder* in his interior life. I’ve desired, when I knew him first, that God would have an ordering hand in his life. It’s possible that a friendship with me could provide an entry for that ordering hand to come in, that Presence to fill the void in his life.

A genuine friendship with a person of the streets? Am I ready for this?

I did see him as an “object of salvation.” And I recognize that in this I put him in a place of contempt. Worthy of salvation - yes. But *only* of salvation, to my mind. Not worthy *of me*, the person I am - *as he is*.

I see old specters arising. It is a terrible thing to befriend someone so as to save him. It’s a very deep (mainly unconscious) form of human contempt (one many Christians may be guilty of).

And possibly, a deep, tragic misunderstanding of Christ. *Has Christ come to save us - or to be our friend?* Not condescendingly, but to let us know that he, Son of God, *is* our friend, and we are his - and not because he has “descended” to us, from his higher level to our lower, to “save” us - but because it *is* so, this friendship *is* the reality, and we need to know and believe it.

I see how far I am from this understanding. From willingness, ability, to “accept” the man and the woman of the street as my brother and sister because they ARE that, and not by any heroic “Christian” choice.

I feel as though I have sinned against this man, and all the others I am desirous toward in the “scene” - to “save” them.

A hard schooling, a new, harsh learning, seems to loom on the horizon for me if I continue in this involvement.

*We are to be saved together, in one another, equal in our need, by Christ's friendship with us, through our genuine human friendship in him.*

Lord, guide me on the path toward genuine human friendship with all I meet, for your sake, for their sake and mine, for your glory.

### *money for a towel*

February 5

As I wait at my 19<sup>th</sup> Ave bus stop after A2J prayer, a black woman arrives and sits down next to me on the bench. She looks young, a large, compact body, thick thighs in jeans. Several neat braids hang from her head, from under a straw hat with the brim turned up on the sides. Her clothes are clean, I admire her good walking shoes, new and expensive-looking. She carries a semi-transparent, colorful bag stuffed with many things on her shoulder. On her chin she has a natural, short but full beard.

I'm aware of her mainly because she talks loudly to someone, in tones of swelling rage, about how things have been taken from her, *stolen*, "they stole all my hair things, then they stole my towel, this was *my* towel, they *stole* it, they keep stealing things, they steal everything - *do* something about it, *DO SOMETHING*, this is no fun game....," yelling, screaming. For a while I believe she is talking into one of those invisible phones, but it doesn't seem to be so. I want to whisper to her: "Talk to God. Tell all this to God." But I don't. She calms down, talks softly, falls silent, talks very softly again. Who is her partner? Her mouth looks relaxed, not bitter. But I feel that pain. The pain of that which is intrinsically ours being *stolen* from us. I know it, yes.

I sit next to her in effortless relaxation, neither afraid of her irrational rage, nor embarrassed by hearing it. As if all of this were perfectly normal. She seems to pay no attention to me.

On the bus, we sit more or less across from each other. I begin to wish I had a towel in my knapsack, one I might have just bought. I'm clear that I would get up and offer it to her - not so she has a towel - they are a dime a dozen - but so that the deed that destroyed her peace may be overcome by an act of kindness, and peace restored. (*"For just as death begins with one offense / so by one loving deed is life restored / in Christ the Lord."*)

I don't have a towel, but it comes to me to give her money to buy one, again for the same reason. I'm free to get up and go to her with three one-dollar bills rolled up between my fingers, gently offering them to her for a towel. "They have them very inexpensive at the Goodwill," I

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from an old hymn

say, suddenly afraid that my cash may not be enough in a regular store. "They are often like new."

The smile that comes on the woman's face is totally unexpected. A very sweet, broad smile of beautiful, perfectly white teeth. It seems an entirely different face, of a perfectly sane person. She "gets it" completely. "That is so sweet of you. But no, I don't need it. I can buy one. Thank you so much." She really doesn't want it, but the deed is done, and it was not rejected, not resented. "I know it hurts to have things stolen from us," I say, sincerely, then return to my seat and leave her alone. She has been heard. When I get off, I give her a small wave; she returns it.

"*DO something about it.*" The rage, the despair and pain I heard in that cry was not imaginary. Have I "sown," in this small response, the "good news?" "Indiscriminately" - that is: not without inward leading, not coldly, but without worrying whether the soil was prepared to receive the seed or not? God blessed the sowing.

An act coming out of inward preparedness, by "a lamp burning," "a small knock at the door" - words of scripture we considered together this morning at A2J.

Surely, my acts are small. I'm not recording them here to count them, but to strengthen my faith as I see God's word borne out. To keep my inward lamp burning, in thanksgiving for the grace.

"Money for a towel" - the title I gave to this account: She didn't need the money, she needed "a towel" to wipe her inward tears.

Later it comes to me: What do I know but that the woman *was* talking to God, screaming there on the bus stop bench? "*DO something about it...*" And God answered, through me, letting her know she is not alone in her suffering, others know it and suffer it with her and are ready to help...

### *his eyes*

*February 6*

15<sup>th</sup> Avenue bus, late afternoon. The clientele is disturbing to me: more or less the same as at the Shelter. This is a public city bus for the general population. A vision comes to disquiet me: of the "general population" turning into depraved, demented, dirt-poor, filthy individuals.

A black man in bad condition enters, pink gums flashing horribly naked in his deep-dark face, in a wheelchair pushed by a ruined-looking, dirty Native woman who seems dead drunk. They giggle uncontrollably, acting all out of hand, condemned to their own world. Spell-bound, I watch the bus driver, a tall, younger black woman, engaging herself with attaching the man's wheelchair to the heavy hooks and straps under the seats by the middle door, as she is required to do. I've often watched this slow, laborious procedure (first letting down a ramp through the door

by a slow mechanism so the chair can roll in, later to be lowered again so as to let it roll out), in awe for the drivers' patient dedication. It requires bending down, crouching, sometimes kneeling, fumbling around the bottom of the chair and under the seats, near the dirt. Many drivers are quite elderly, and some quite overweight. I watch this driver's long, elegant hands, their tender motions. I see no sign of reluctance or contempt in her serving these degraded citizens with their poor, repulsive behavior. No trace of hidden reproach.

Next to me, separated by one vacant seat, sits an old homeless man, leaning into the corner, small and slight and very dirty, weak and very tired-looking. He lifts his eyes to me sadly as I look at him. For some reason I don't feel the usual separation. It's as if I saw my own father, or uncle maybe, or one of my brothers. We talk a little, his mouth seems gummed up, I can't understand him well. But there is a sense of almost closeness. I ask him where he spent the night. In the hospital. I picture him lying in a clean white gown in a clean bed. I can't believe they would dismiss him in these clothes he is wearing, frayed and stiff with dirt. I can't picture him getting out of bed all cleaned up and stepping into these clothes, or someone helping him to step into them. Where are the missing links?

He says he wants to go to CASS, as I do presently, and gets off with me at Van Buren. We start walking together along 15<sup>th</sup> Ave, then I propose crossing the Avenue to enter the smaller Monroe Street, for a more pleasant walk. He hesitates, seems confused. I start crossing, he stays behind, traffic separates us. I wait, he's leaning on a low wall, then turns his back to me, bends forward over the wall, as if overcome by weakness or vomiting. Then he begins to walk away, slowly – away from the Avenue. I go on my way. - Always this breakdown of communication, of connection and continuity, the perpetual dissolution of everything. Yet this man touched, moved my heart, by his eyes. I could see the man in the disfigured image.

*the courage to act (a meditation)*

*February 8*

Feeling *remorse* about forsaking the gentle, weak, old man I met on the bus two days ago when he wouldn't follow me across 15<sup>th</sup> Ave but turned the other way.

Why did I think my errand with him was at an end at that point? Did I merely *accept his decision, the choice he made for himself*, out of respect for his "right" to do so?

Or did I not *care* enough?

I still see his eyes looking at me - gentle, mild, so human. Pleading? I don't know - seeking the contact, though, *eye-contact* - which few of the homeless seem to do, or only with "shielded" eyes. His were - open; I

felt *no barrier* in them. “My father’s eyes, my brother’s eyes.” How could I leave him?

I could have, at least, gone back to him when he was leaning over the wall, sick or overcome with weakness. Maybe he needed to go back to the hospital, maybe Emergency needed to be called (I do need to get that cell phone!). Maybe I couldn’t do anything for him, as I couldn’t do anything for the woman crying over her towel. But at least, like her, he would have known someone cared, someone was there for him.

I can’t fix their lives, I can’t fix their persons. *Christ can*. I can, in him, give them a small experience of the presence and living reality of Christ in the world, and in people. And leave it to God as to how big or small this experience will be in them.

“*When will I have the courage to act?*”, I asked a while back. God, give me courage. I know you do not ask more than I can do. Take me a little further on this journey, hesitant as I am, not knowing where it will take me. Give me courage to act, at least to the measure of my heart’s spontaneous yearning. Give me confidence, the simple confidence I’ve been feeling in my interactions with people lately.

No, they are not “other,” these “weird” figures in the streets and on the bus. This, God, I feel you are trying to teach me. How easy it is to forget, to drop them into an abyss of forgetfulness, as creatures foreign to us, of no concern to us.

But I have seen those eyes, watched the laborious effort of that poor mouth to form words meant for me. *I have seen*. You are not taking from me, God, what you have shown me. I am responsible for what I have seen, with my own eyes.

There is a reason why people are not eager to go and *see* “the scene.” Why they prefer not to ride the bus or look at the other passengers. Deep within ourselves we know: We are responsible for what we have seen.

*Little* - little the works you give me, Lord. Help me to be faithful to that little. Help me to go a little further with you - *with you* - when you call. Help me not to be afraid to listen for the call, in my spirit. Help me to go confidently on your hand.

I ask that you hold that man, wherever he is now. Let your angels hold and carry him in body and soul, and bring him to you on his last day, into the bosom of Abraham like poor Lazarus. Comfort his soul.

Make me an instrument in the comfort of souls. That we may all be part of “*the generous, tranquil contribution to the good of all*” as which Oscar Romero defines peace.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>From his radio address given on January 8, 1978. We studied the Salvadoran Archbishop’s and martyr’s life and work in my Neighborhood Ministries class at the time.

### *the 20 percent*

February 8

Music hour at CASS. No musicians arrived yet except Andrew, a Shelter resident, with his baby guitar. Few of the homeless are around, because at this time in late afternoon they begin to queue up in a long, scraggly line over at Andre House for dinner. (I'm told about 700 people are served there per meal. I later suggest to my music-making friends that we serenade the line some time.)

Later, during the singing, I decide to walk over to the dinner line at Andre House, and one of the homeless men decides to join me. Someone has dropped a coat in the middle of the street. I remark how "these people" often drop things, seeming to have lost the ability to care about them. My companion, speaking with a toothless mouth, says emphatically: "You know why? Because many of these people have got NO SENSE!" He explains: "20 percent of them are mentally ill; 20 percent are here because they want to get out of homelessness and are trying, and 60 percent have GIVEN UP ON THEIR LIVES!" I ask him which group he belongs to. He says the second 20 percent. He has lived at CASS only for about six months, but was here once before, for several years. This time he is going total, he says. His face looks clean, his eyes clear.

I notice that *cleanliness* has become a decisive factor in how I judge "these people." Perpetual filth is a barrier for me. It carries with it a threat of contamination, with bugs or disease, or worse. There is fear of bad smells, too; of horrible sights from close up.

Later this man insists on zipping one of our musicians, a thin young woman, into his dirty jacket as she shivers with cold. She giggles with her pearly white teeth, tolerating it. This homeless man has begun to cling to our group; I can believe his intention to "get out" of his state. "*Grab hold of anything that can help pull you out!*", I suddenly declare to him, passionately. - Am I ready to be one for him to grab hold of, as part of the group or individually?

I'm aware of several homeless women hanging around us who look interesting to me, like interesting personalities whose stories I long to hear. I crave entering into contact with them but am still shy to approach people without invitation. Their avoidance of eye contact makes it harder.

### *a disturbing vision*

February 8

A guided tour of a large homeless shelter on the east side of town, founded about fifty years ago by a group of church people, mainly for homeless families. My wise and aged friend Jay from India, who inspects charities as a prospective donor, invited me to it.

The shelter is housed in a very large former hotel and almost shocks me in its present aspect, after my experience of CASS: Nothing of grunginess, crowdedness, or shabbiness, the marks of poverty and deprivation I've come to expect. A desirable, serene, middle-class-standard environment. Vast landscaped courtyards, the family units with generous balconies full of children's toys. Space wherever we go, beauty, resourcefulness, order. Almost like a grand resort place.

This is a very developed facility with ever expanding programs and services. Our guide, a young woman, tells us it is supported by an army of donors, large and small, organizations and individuals, and an army of volunteers, individuals, groups, church communities (10,000 persons is the proud number she gives us).

Poverty and social dysfunction taken in hand by the well-to-do. As the families themselves are taken in hand. One way to share privilege and wealth. And many desiring to do this - as long as it does not diminish their own. In fact, we are told, donation of time and money by companies, churches, or private individuals tends to result in the bettering of the careers, reputation, and wealth of the donors.

Like a frightening specter this vision rises in me:

*More and more of our society (and the world) becoming dependent on institutions established and provided for by the initiative (charity) of the wealthy, at the expense of people making their own lives.*

When I share this with Jay, who thinks about things, he says the reason for this is *the breakdown of the family*. People, he says, have always mostly been poor, but as long as they existed as families and on land, they could live self-directed, autonomous lives (as animals do in the wild, something I'm often aware of). How important this seems to me: *to make one's own life*, whatever the poverty and hardship of it.

It's not an ideal of "rugged individualism." It's that the innermost living center of man (and all creatures) *requires* this for true life. We are all interdependent, requiring community. But *there is no true community, no healthy society, without self-determination of the individuals, the creative forming of each life out of itself, primarily by its own impulse and power.*

The vision scares me. It feels apocalyptic. The world divided into two halves: Not only the "haves" and the "have-nots", but *the deprived and exploited cared for and maintained by the exploiters, in total dependency on them*. This situation is nothing new (as in the "patronizing" relationship between rich landowners and those from whom the land was taken and who are now serving the "patrons," as well as being cared for by them while kept in bitter poverty by them, in Brazil - my reading of last winter.) Is America, with the widening of the gap between rich and poor with all its terrible consequences, approaching this state, subversively,

under the flag of (self-serving) “charity” - voluntary giving and sharing, an ideal always held high in this country?

Hopefully, something like this cannot permanently realize itself. It would break again and again over the reality deeply implanted in man, in life itself. It is for this reality - in man and all creatures as they are made - that we must fight.

As we are shown the chapel of this large, fine shelter, I am struck by the words set on the wall above the altar table, prominently in big letters and in the shape of an arch: “Zimmerman Chapel.” Puzzled, I remark to our guide: “I’ve never seen this in a chapel.” She explains that the donor of it, or his heirs, probably wanted it so. It seems in keeping with the other parts of the building, halls, gardens, rooms, prominently inscribed with the names of donors. This particular naming brings me a smile. In my native language, “Zimmermann” signifies “carpenter.” Jesus was a carpenter. He won’t be displaced!

### *the Native in the olive grove*

February 9

Decide to attend Sunday morning Mass at the large church of San Mateo, in Spanish, near Neighborhood Ministries on 20<sup>th</sup> Ave. The first person I see after getting off the bus on Van Buren is a homeless Native man. This ethnic group surely is at the bottom of American society. I couldn’t describe in words what I see in his ruined face, the wretchedness. Not only the man’s utter personal misery, but the entire history of his people since the White Man came seems written there, history of abuse, violence, disownment, forced settlement, deprivation, physical and cultural genocide... and, not least, the *alcohol* to which they were delivered and which so many now can’t seem to get out of.

Later in the day, I walk in the beautiful old olive grove running along Van Buren between 15<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Ave (which might become a spot of refreshment for me once I move into that neighborhood). Homeless people walk on Van Buren and cross over into this strip of grass, although it is forbidden to people, as proclaimed by a series of large signs posted along the length of it, which I ignore.

I’m studying the trees, as I’ve done numbers of times already - so amazing, olive trees. Their trunks tell a story of anything but straight and smooth growth - gnarled, twisted, lacerated, broken open, turned to strange and weird forms of great variety - but surviving for many years, the crowns steadily producing abundant, dense foliage of small, silvery leaves, home for the birds and casting rich shade.

Another Native man approaches me, remarking on these trees. His awareness of them strikes me as something rarely found among us white Americans.

Something else strikes me: *How about sharing the light with these people, wherever I meet them, whoever they are?* How about less dwelling on the “darkness” of their condition, recording it so conscientiously as I have been, “taking note?”

*“Darkness is not dark for you, and the night is clear as the day,”* as we prayed recently at A2J, in Psalm 139.

God, in this light that the night is for Him, sees us, his beloved children, his own - our true person.

Shall I see them differently?

I was struck the other day to hear Kit Danley, founder and president of Neighborhood Ministries, talk in a video on this organization about *the Christian’s duty to SEE* – see what’s there, the misery in the most deprived neighborhoods of this city to which this organization attends. It appeared she meant seeing the *darkness* - the depravity and sin, the injustice, the suffering and need in which so many of our fellowmen live. Hearing in it a call to *attend* to these conditions, both physical and spiritual. I was struck by her remark because it is this seeing, and bits of attending to need as able, I’ve practiced these last two months in the downtown scene.

The question now arises in me: *Is it the Christian’s duty also NOT to see?* I think of the Russian staretz Zosima’s words in his contemplation of the Crucified Christ I’ve been carrying with me for a long time: *“He closes his eyes to avoid seeing our sin...”* I had wondered about that part.

It seemed a little easier with this Native man this morning. Homeless, yes, sleeping out in the open at CASS on sheer pavement, no mat, he said, only his two blankets. Not a complaint. He had come from Mississippi, not sure why he chose Phoenix; hoping to find work. Could he move in with me? Was I looking for a husband? We laughed. He looked clean, his long hair neatly tied back in a pony tail. I did smell the alcohol. After we parted, I called after him: “Have you had breakfast?” - “No.” - “I’ll take you to McDonald’s.” That didn’t take, he asked for *money* for coffee, then said he was hungry. I handed him a couple of the McDonald’s meal tickets Ryan had given me to pass out; he complained that they are good for a free sandwich only if you buy one. So I gave him two dollars as well. He said he makes Katchina dolls, but there is no wood here, olive wood would be too hard. I recommended going to crafts places in the area, they may be interested in helping him out with wood and maybe selling his products. He extended his hard-skinned hand to me in the end. “What’s your name?”, I called out as he walked away, he gave it to me, I gave him mine. (Already I’ve forgotten his.)

All this came a bit easier than it used to. Less of a special act. An almost natural exchange. Not exciting me, producing no special warmth of heart. A simple interaction...

*My vows to the Lord I will fulfill before ALL his people* (Psalm 116) - isn't that the point? Isn't that what you want of me at this time, God?

*it's here, too*

*February 10*

The condition plaguing the “bad” neighborhoods is here, too - in this nice, decent, orderly working class neighborhood where I'm presently rooming, inhabited by people attending, as best they can, to what they have and protecting it. Just now, as I'm writing on my hostess' lovely front porch, a presence disturbing to this quiet, “safe” atmosphere emerges. A slim figure, looking in height like a young teenager, with skinny brown limbs, long black hair tied in a knot in the neck, carrying a heavy knapsack. The knotted hair seems to imply a female. I somehow can't “place” this figure - India, is my first thought - walking at a good pace but with a difficulty. Then I notice that the sneakers on the feet are too large, causing the feet at each step to rub against the back of them as the foot slips in and out. At the side of the yard across the street, at a fence with a hedge behind it, the figure stops, facing the fence closely, and stands as if peeing - so, a man? -, then turns in the direction from which it came and stands in the shade of tall oleanders, fumbling with pants and belt, then returning in my direction. At the opening to the dirt alley just across from me, with its many trees and bushes, the person stops again, looking in. Is he - I assume by now - searching for a place to defecate? (Where do they ever do it?) No, he walks on, then stops before the next house, peering at it, bending forward with his hands on his knees. What is he looking for? Something to steal? He walks on, shoes flapping almost energetically. In a couple of minutes he is back, passing our house again. I can't hold on any longer. What does he need? I go out to meet him, moving gently, slowly, so as not to threaten. He has turned around again, in my direction, crossing the street before we meet. I, too, cross, and he crosses again, never looking at me. I see him grinning as if to himself, and hear him mumbling. Eventually, he disappears in the direction from which he first came, around the bend of the next side street, in his determined step, under his too heavy pack, in his painful shoes.

What can we ever do? I couldn't even have invited him into our house to use the bathroom, it not being mine. And if it were, would I have done it?

“Maybe a foster child run away,” I'm thinking. At the foster home for about a dozen boys Nick recently took me to, we heard that two children ran away in the last few months.

### *encounters on the 19<sup>th</sup> Ave bus*

February 11

A man getting on wants to sit next to me. An old, skinny man wearing a green beret. He wants to talk, and like so many, he knows no boundaries and gets intrusive with personal questions almost immediately in a way that offends me, so that, not in the mood for banter and joking around, I confront him: “You want to know everything, don’t you.” Finally I tell him straight out, without much friendliness, he needs to respect personal boundaries. He nods. He has been at the Pine Street Homeless Shelter in Boston, he says, but is not homeless here. His face is clean, his eyes clear and sane. I tell him personal intrusiveness prevents friendship.

*“hey-hey”*

At Indian School Road, Fred’s getting on. I notice him outside before he boards, wearing green, reflecting shades that hide his good eyes. I stiffen a little but when he walks by me, I smile up at him, we slap our hands together briefly and he says, “Hey-hey.” - “Hey-hey,” I answer, and he walks on to the back of the bus. It feels satisfying, an appropriate contact for where we presently are.

We both get off at Van Buren, I first; he catches up with me. “Where are you heading?”, he asks. I point to the Neighborhood Ministries building just beyond the railroad tracks: “I’m taking a class there.” - “Okay,” he says, turning in the other direction, east on Van Buren.

Again I felt the little jolt of joy on seeing him. I told him he has a spring in his step like a man who has something before him (and not like the 60 percent (at CASS) who have “given up on their lives.”) It’s true. He seemed to like hearing it.

### *embedded in community*

February 11

In my Neighborhood Ministries class, I am much affected by the experiences and concerns shared by the women (staff members mostly) and prayed over. Stories of sexual abuse and slavery even, of teenage mothers taken in by a staff member into her own home, only to have them disappear while their children stay on with the woman. And more.

I think of the young boy I met, from a large Hispanic family, who is now living with an NM staff person while his drug-addicted mother is in jail (“for self-defense,” he told me assertively) and out of contact with him. I think of the foster children Nick and I visited at the home. But first of all I think of the *homeless women* I see at the Shelter and around it, the woman with the sun-burnt face, and so many other ruined-looking ones. “The last station” - of a downward spiral when rescue hasn’t succeeded. For the mothers, possibly for the children. NM performs

Sisyphus labors trying to save at least a few.

It's so much harder to hear these stories in the context of the people among whom they actually happen, the people directly affected by them. The misery is overwhelming, even for me with a relatively indirect exposure to it still. And that's where I am right now, as the green-beret man on the bus came to experience: *graceless, sad, and angry*.

*But I am in community.* On the edge of it, true, a stranger, hanging on by a thread - but taken on board: "Come on!"- "We have work for you!", as Kit, our class leader, shouted to me, passing me on her way to her office on my first brief visit to the place.

As I am also among the A2J people, and beyond. Walking with an African refugee presently among us, after prayer, hearing about her situation; then a hot chocolate by myself at McDonald's (just to *be* there again - and there he was, too, once again: Fred, his great crooked nose silhouetted against a window); then sitting at Central Station waiting for my bus - feeling a deep *peace* spreading in me, a calm. A sense of embeddedness in community, resting in it as in a hammock in my heart - for the moment, at least.

## Part III

### *action!*

#### *the nook in the oleanders*

*taking action*

February 12

Walking home at the end of the day in a state of peace along the Canal, the section between 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue, I pass as usual the nook in the long hedge of tall oleanders which homeless people seem to use at night, often leaving it badly littered. Passing it this morning early on setting out, I was thinking what a nice shelter this could be for those needing or wanting to sleep out in the open, a little abode half-secluded and sheltered by the dense, long branches, but easily accessible from the walk- and bike-way along the water, set back from it a bit but not too far - *if it were kept clean, decent, by the users.* (I myself would feel attracted to it!)

But no way these users will do this.

Something happens: For the first time I see *people* in that nook. A man and a woman, plus a bicycle. I call out something cheerful in passing, about what a nice little shelter this is, as one may congratulate campers in an orderly forest campground for the beautiful site they chose, or were given. The two step out, the woman vehemently denying that she wants to be there. She seems ready for contact. I stop, and we are soon in conversation.

At A2J this morning, we considered Hebrews 12:38 to 13:6, which contains the admonition: "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*" I shared briefly with the small group about the *challenge* this is to me, and the difficulties I experience in it.

And so here they are – *strangers*. Are my faith companions helping God to break open that inner gate in me that has been sealing in my charity and goodwill to action?

I seem to conduct an interview with these two, unafraid and without hesitation. I am serious, not joking or bantering. The woman, who looks destroyed, not old but toothless as so many homeless are, declares she does not want to live this life on the street, she wants out (assuring me that many others do not, they love it). I ask if she has tried CASS. She says they told her (over the phone, apparently) she needs an I.D., and she doesn't have an I.D. I do not let up. "What does it take to get

an I.D.?” - “Fifteen dollars.” Ah. The catch again: money. I grow even more serious. “Listen. I will pay these fifteen dollars for you if you really want to get in.” She assures me she does. What else will she need? “A birth certificate, Social Security papers...” She says she has all that. I say I am willing to meet with them at CASS and pay the fee for her. They have nothing, they tell me, could I give them two dollars to eat something right now? After some consideration, I arrange with them that I will meet them tomorrow (giving up my weekly desert day) at 3:30 pm in this same spot and take them on the bus and walk with them to the Shelter (where Nick’s music group will be playing at 4 pm). Will they have a way to tell the time? No. “Okay, there are people around you can ask. *Three-thirty*. If you are not here, that will be that.” I sternly advise the woman that if I take them on the bus, I will *expect* them to go to CASS with me. That I do not want to waste the money for their fares, I do not have much myself. They nod. “Three-thirty,” the man repeats.

This is further than I have gone before. So far, there have been only “contacts,” an important preparation, and “seeing.” This is my first *concrete action* to assist homeless (apart from giving small amounts of cash). Prayer heard, it seems.

I don’t like the almost “scolding” tone I got into, although I do not object to firmness. A tone of righteousness, full of secret reproach, reminding me of certain people I have heard speak to those they wanted to help, a tone of superiority I detest. However, Lord, I am not crushed. I am a beginner. My present experience with active groups of faith teaches me that we don’t need to wait until we are perfect before we can serve in God’s Vineyard. I pray for humility and guidance in my efforts, and vow that if the couple doesn’t show up the next day, or takes off after a free bus ride with me, I will not blame them.

The man - not old, Native American or Hispanic, perhaps mixed - does not look ruined. I question him, too. How long has he been homeless? About a week, he says. His eyes have a sly look to them and seem evasive. How did he become homeless and without means? It’s a participatory question. He hedges, hinting “misfortune”... Does he, too, want to get into CASS? Again he hedges, indicating he might try “some other ways.” I beg them, straightforwardly, looking at him especially who seems to have a chance, *not to waste their lives*. “There is help out there for you,” I say, “but you do have to do your part. People will help you if you do your part.” The woman holds up a pair of boots, dusty but otherwise in good shape. “Someone gave me these. I want to exchange them for shoes I need.” Engaging in needless, distracting maneuvers, veering from the concern at hand. “They’ll give you shoes at CASS,” I say. “There is plenty of that around. You don’t need to exchange these boots. Put them on this stump and someone will take them.” (Was that

a good answer? Was she trying to “do her part” as she understood it?) I go on my way, and they walk away in the other direction.

Maybe all of this, I reflect as I walk on, was foolish on my part. But how am I going to learn to act if not by *doing*? “I went this far, engaging myself,” I tell myself. “I will find out what it is worth. It won’t be a wasted experience, not for me - maybe not for them, either.”

If nothing else, have I “shown hospitality to strangers?”

The man had asked me for an aspirin. “You got a headache?” - “Yes.” - “Why?” He shrugged. “Stress...” I shelled out an ibuprofen pill, making sure they had water.

It was as far as I could see. Walking with the lamp of God’s light on my feet, lighting up just the next step or two in this darkness, how can I find my way?

Since “*darkness is not dark for you, and the night is clear as the day,*”<sup>4</sup> can we?

### *second thoughts*

Some thoughts and inklings come to me on reconsidering this experience once I get home. The plan I made with these two people may not only be foolish, it could be *dangerous* - to my life. I realize that I opened my knapsack, took out my red fanny pack and my wallet from it, and took my time shelling out a dollar’s worth of coins plus a paper dollar in their sight, on this forsaken strip of way - without any precautions, fearless. Without any thought of the risks. It occurs to me that, when I approach these people tomorrow, assuming they show, they will know that I carry the money for our bus fares and the woman’s I.D. The man could easily knock me down to take the money and run. He could have done so today. I did seem to see something in his eyes, without looking for it, and in his manner when I asked him questions, that could make me suspect him of an inclination, or willingness, to criminal activity. These thoughts now appear reasonable. I hadn’t acted in fear, or from fear, so far.

It occurs to me that I need to be *careful*. That I shouldn’t plan actions like this *alone*. If I am to meet these people tomorrow (and the thought of disappointing them, of not showing up while they do, of breaking my sincere promise, is unbearable to me), I ought to bring another person along. I wonder who this could be.

At least, I feel I should have chosen a place to meet with them where other people would be around (as I first tried to do, but it seemed confusing as the couple didn’t seem to know the area). It also occurs to me that I need to talk with more experienced persons if I am moving from mere observation and casual exploring to concrete, serious action. I

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<sup>4</sup>Psalm 139

need to do this *in community*.

I feel God is speaking to me here, intervening in my zeal.

It comes to me then I could be a “shelter mother” for that little spot on the Canal! Since the users will never keep it decent, I could go there every morning and again before night and clean it up, bringing a trash bag and gloves. I could put up a little sign: “You who use this spot, leave it as you would like to find it. (Clean?)” The sign, of course, may land in the Canal, or be knocked over.

Why would I do such an action? To educate, correct, influence the people? To help them change their ways? Are they capable of being educated, corrected, influenced?

Or to simply provide for them a place as good as possible, with a little dignity, even if they don’t care about it? (Perhaps influencing them unconsciously by giving them a sense of being cared for?)

I realize I don’t have a clue what I’m doing.

One thing, though: On meeting the couple tomorrow, I could wait at the start of the Canal walk on 15<sup>th</sup> Ave for someone to come along in that direction, and ask to walk with that person to the agreed spot. Or, if I see the couple waiting for me at that spot, I could wave to them to join me in *my* place, near the road.

I don’t think I acted from any bad motivation. I ask God to honor my sincere intention and protect and preserve me, in patience with my limitations.

*the outcome*

*February 13*

At the appointed time, I go back to the nook in the oleander hedge where I am to meet the homeless couple this day. I approach it slowly, though fear of an attack has subsided. Reaching the spot brings a new shock: Several used crumpled garbage bags filled with trash, apparently collected from the place, are neatly crowded together against the stump on the walkway. *My vision realized!* The job is not done as a “normal” person would do it, more loosely, but it’s done! However, the shelter within is nevertheless quite littered. The bedding I had seen there is gone (I later find it spread out a little further on in the hedge, a rug actually, in a more shallow nook), and a blanket is spread instead. Maybe the new tenant did the clean-up, replacing the former litter with his own.

I pass the place and slowly trail on to almost 15<sup>th</sup> Ave, to wait there in a bit of shade. If the couple should approach from the 19<sup>th</sup> Ave side, I would see them coming; if they come from 15<sup>th</sup> Ave, I will be on that end. But nobody comes.

Finally I notice a figure approaching from the 19<sup>th</sup> Ave side. It’s still far away, I can’t make it out against the late-afternoon sun. When I imagine it might be the woman, alone, I feel a little jolt of joy. The

figure moves into the shade of the hedge, almost blending with it, then suddenly swerves sharply toward the hedge and - is gone. Swallowed up.

I carefully trace my steps back to the spot, then bend and peek into the nook. A large man with close-cropped white hair is sitting on the blanket, bare legs spread out before him and rummaging through an orange bag between his knees, paying no attention to me.

Laughter seizes me as I pull away! I feel such relief and lightness! So glad the couple hasn't shown! So glad the new tenant doesn't need me! I have no desire to enter into conversation with him. I return home, at a leisurely pace. Back in my street, a feeling of peace and fulfillment comes into me such as I feel after a blessed "desert day!"

How silly it all seems! These people are living their lives, as I live mine. (I'm reminded of the woman I found sitting on a curb some weeks ago, whom I asked, anxious for her, what I could do for her, and she said, curtly: "I'm waiting for someone," and how corrected I felt!)

Yesterday's woman's ruined face, though... the eyes of the old man on the bus... the cries of the woman who felt robbed of her towel... When did the sufferings of people first begin to move me? A very, very long time ago. I was a child... and the co-suffering cut deep. *It cannot be meaningless. It cannot be something that requires no answer.*

For today, I am glad to let it go. I feel saved, from my foolishness and ignorance. I've given a lot to this, and I said I would not blame the people if they did not show up, and I won't blame myself either for having tried.

I've been given my desert day!

I'm waiting on my side, God, and you are waiting on yours. It's as if we were looking at each other, eye in eye, waiting.

Right now, it's a lovely, sweet tension. Right now, I'm not agonized by it, only thankful. Stay there, God, and help me to stay here, in my place, in this sweet waiting and tension. Take it where you will.

My God! They're doing their own cleaning!

*still life on the sidewalk*

*February 14*

With the question of "What to do?" persisting in my mind, I talk during A2J fellowship time with Danny, son of Steve Malakowsky, the great friend of the homeless and a "father" to many of the street, who suddenly died last year. I tell him I wish I'd known his Dad. Danny says he himself has a lot of questions he would like to ask him. He says his father believed we cannot "fix" the homeless or their lives, but we can "*give them dignity.*" "How do we do that?", I ask. This, I suppose, would be my journey - this query.

Walking over to CASS afterwards, I am arrested by a great jumble of stuff on the side walk that looks like a spill from bags such as the

homeless drag around, just before the fence that closes off the campus. It catches my eye, and I stand to contemplate it. A still life.

It seems to say it all: how it is with “these people.” Not a single piece making sense, because not a single piece relates to any other. A number of women’s shoes of all descriptions, yet no two matching, all scattered about in various and absurd postures. Crumpled pieces of garments, shreds of fabric, rags – nothing recognizable. *A picture of these lives as lived at this time.* A picture of the inside of heads, too: Nothing fitting together, all jumbled, disconnected. I want to photograph the heap, but have no camera; then I think of the still lifes my friend Andrea used to render meticulously in paint: of scenes just like this. Images of *mess*, every detail rendered with utmost care, as if each had value. I was so surprised: she with her fine aesthetic sense, her love of nature, her delicate sensibility and high ethical standards. The pictures sold well.

“It’s a mess.” The painter meant something by it. And, by her art, without creating order out of disorder, without tidying up anything, she created something beautiful, or revealed to the eye the beauty even the mess cannot be without. *Perhaps this is what it means to “give them dignity”: Not to create order in their mess, as I wanted with the couple on the Canal, but witness to the beauty, the truth, the life present even in the mess.*

The mess in the nook under the oleanders: ever in flux, eschewing all attempts at order and cleanliness.

#### *further developments*

*February 16*

On reaching the nook on my early morning walk, I’m in for a surprise again: *it’s clean!* Well, almost. The *large* pieces of trash, anyway, have been picked up. The stuffed bags outside by the stump are *gone*. I dare to sneak into the space, standing for a moment under the shading canopy of the branches. Yes, what a lovely bedroom! I’d like it myself! Some small trash still scattered about, some caught in the shrubs. But the place where the bedding was is clear, scraped of natural debris, too. *Someone taking care!* No personal possessions left behind, only a small grocery bag, stuffed with something, hung up on the side, in the brush.

Did city authorities do it? I doubt it. Or a person with my own concern, another watchful eye? Or did the last tenant *care?*

*February 18*

Finding the nook littered again. Some bedding stuffed to the side to hide it from easy view. Old socks, pieces of food, bottles, plastic cups...

An amazing large duck I’ve never seen before, with beautiful plumage, flies, all alone, very fast and close to the water along the Canal, bill and feet a bright red.

I keep discovering, it seems, new species.

*February 23*

A funny sight on the Canal today: On the opposite bank, two men are fishing. One, small, old, perhaps homeless, has a bike with a tiny, dusty cart attached to it. He is pulling hard on his fishing lines, hauling two huge carps out of the water. He slams them into a plastic crate, slams the crate on the cart and another, identical crate on top, fitting snugly inside the first. Then he stuffs all his fishing gear into the top crate and drives off fast on his bike. All this happens in a great hurry. The other man walks off in the other direction.

I'm standing there laughing out loud! Obviously the fisherman knew he was *stealing*, breaking the law. (Carps may be caught but must be thrown back in immediately.) The image in my mind of this man riding down the next broad avenue, perhaps passing police, without anyone suspecting the huge, live prey he's making off with, his day's catch and possibly dinner, feels hilarious!

Then, at the nook in the oleanders, a sad shock: the front plants screening the shelter from the walkway have been cut down. I see now that oleanders grow thick trunks made up of several stems, of which only stumps are left now. The branches are piled to the side. Most litter is gone. The little place could still be used for lying down, but it wouldn't afford any privacy or feeling of security. It seems a terrible deprivation to take that from someone. I feel how *hounded* these people are.

Again I wonder who did it. City authorities? Or residents nearby? A dog is barking behind the fence in the back of the oleanders. I suppose the folks using the place might be noisy occasionally at night.

A little further on, under a large palo verde tree reaching over a property wall and shading a bit of ground by the walkway, a man lies sleeping, a bicycle pinched between his legs.

*February 26*

The nook is now completely stuffed full with brush, piled high, leaving not enough space for a mouse to get in. Two younger men are sitting at the "closed door," one on the stump that has always been there, the other on the ground, exchanging something between them. The furtive way they look at me as I pass implies drugs.

The chapter I've been following appears closed.

*new nook*

*June 24*

Four months later, shortly before my departure from Phoenix, I walk once more along this stretch of the Canal, beloved to me by now - on

the opposite shore, this time. The nook across the water appears essentially as it was, the leaves of the cut brush withered, the pile slightly sunk.

Suddenly, I burst into laughter: In a different spot in the darkness of the hedge, a bit further on, two pale knees are sticking up! The usual wares of the homeless are spread about the invisible body. A new nook, more shallow but usable. I think of something one of the directors at the Human Services Center told me: “*Our goal is to end homelessness.*”

A form of life as old as humankind.

### ***accompanying Dolores***

*visit to the east side shelter*

February 19

On my way to look in on an A2J member I haven't seen at prayer for a while, I am stopped by a black woman I recognize as Dolores, with whom I had felt an affinity at one of our prayer meetings a few weeks back.

She recognizes me first. It takes me longer to recognize her. She appears to me a different person. I remember her as rational, dignified, and unhappy at CASS because she felt she didn't belong there, and determined to find her own place to live.

Now she appears run down (although her hair is neatly tied and her clothes look clean). She is wearing badly worn sneakers that don't seem to fit her feet, given to her, she says, at CASS. She is full of complaints and bad stories about life at the Shelter and the treatment she gets there both from staff and the other clients, and she talks ceaselessly the entire time we spend together (about two hours) so that I have to stop listening eventually. Spinning, spinning, spinning in the captivity of the mind - the bad stuff - so many are in. (I tell her about the text we were reading this morning at prayer - that we should keep our minds on things “lovely” and “away from trouble” - but it's hard to break through that spin.)

She says she had hoped to meet me - having lost the information on the small east side shelter I had given her.

I invite her for coffee at the McDonald's (she wants no food); she accepts. As she wants to go to that shelter, I ask her if she would like me to go with her. Her answer is a clear yes.

She tells me she has lived at several other shelters in Chicago and she finds CASS the worst. She insists on her self-image as a former nurse (for 42 years), i.e. a *respectable* person without a dishonorable past (no crime, no addiction, no prostitution, she stresses), which I think is good. She says again she is here in Phoenix because her children want her near if she should need help, but she does not want to live with

them. (I sense the relationship may not be suitable.)

We take the Van Buren bus - a *freak show*, it comes to me, with horror, and the fullest bus I've been on so far - to E. 17<sup>th</sup> Street, walking from there to our goal. The office, we find, is closed because of a staff meeting, but someone comes out to talk with us briefly. Through the open door I see the director who gave me and an interested friend a tour last year. He is sitting with other staff around a table and I briefly introduce myself. The woman who came out explains the process of application to us: The candidate has to call and will be screened over the phone, then possibly invited for an interview. She does not seem inviting. Dolores does have a cell phone but says it isn't charged. She tells me she can call from the Senior Center she goes to for meals and other help. She seems determined to make this call this very afternoon. The facility, as it appears from the outside, appeals to her, especially the quiet and the small size. We get back to the bus and part at 10<sup>th</sup> Ave where Dolores gets off and I go on home.

According to Dolores, conditions at CASS are unbearable: lack of cleanliness, stealing, men encroaching on women, rude staff. At the McDonald's this morning, a black man who also lives there was talking with her about the "rats" (I had to ask four times before I grasped he meant the animal; she said four men at different times had told her about them.)

*honesty: examining my action*

Back at home, I feel compelled to take a good look at what happened in this action, settling down with my notebook.

It does appear as though I've gone from a long initial phase of *observing*, watching, holding myself back (a discipline), and giving small spontaneous responses, to a more *active* or practical participation, for which I had prayed. I do not know at this point whether my "acts" make sense, or ever could.

Dolores clearly was glad I went with her to the little shelter. Would she have gone without me? I knew where it was, and, she said, "they know you." I took, well, *leadership*. "This way." Explaining to her the structure of Phoenix: On the east side, it's "Streets"; on the west side, "Avenues." Trying to get her to pay attention as we went - in her ceaseless rambling - to where to get off the bus, how to walk to the shelter, and where the signs were posted for the office. Again I noticed, as with the homeless couple on the Canal, *severity* coming into my voice: "Pay attention!", "Try to remember!", "You should..." - and our relationship was changing from the way it was when we first talked at A2J. No longer *equals*. There was the vertical drop. She began to sound *submissive*, timid, "looking up" to me, and *dependent*. I was robbing her of her *dignity*.

I became uncomfortable. *I don't want any dependents!* I don't want anyone to latch on to me for their needs! (I don't want the relationships to people I witnessed in some of the "social workers" in my family!) It's not who I am! It's not my role!

*What moved me to go to the shelter with Dolores*, unasked, instead of just giving her the address and the directions? It was a *simple feeling* - a sense that it might help her. An act of friendliness, really; of friendship. An impulse of spontaneous compassion. No strategic intentions.

Did this act *weaken her confidence and self-reliance*, the image of herself as an *independent* (she uses that word) and self-motivated person she has worked so hard to keep up?

*Lord, am I doing more harm than good by taking action?*

I do have this question.

Am I hankering for a role not given me - despising the one that is?

Ryan just sent me an email warmly inviting me to an A2J work day on Saturday, saying it won't be necessary that I contribute physical labor, *prayerful presence* will be valuable enough. What would have been the way to give Dolores (I do feel the Lord put her in my way) simply "prayerful presence?" Over coffee, say, at the McDonald's, without giving instructions, without trying to steer or mend her ways.

*What is it that disquiets me about this act?* What is it that cut her down, made her small and insecure? (Whereas, I think, in our first meeting my friendship built her up.)

I *criticized* her. It was clear that she felt this. She describes herself as "a religious person," looking at churches in Phoenix and having found a few she likes. She indicated to me that she felt *God led her to CASS* when she first came here. I said: "If you feel God led you there, you don't need to *criticize* God's gift. You need to go with God in that place" (and He will lead you out of it in time). True, I think, and important, but she heard the word "criticize" and grew defensive. She claimed that she is not criticizing the Shelter but *telling the truth* of what she sees going on there (all kinds of depravity, according to her, sexual, violence, filth, offensive language). Well, she was certainly complaining.

Thinking about this as I write, it comes to me *I should have talked with Dolores about the telephone screening ahead* - and maybe suggested that she wait a day or so to think about what to tell the people at that shelter, regarding her motivation for choosing it. If she carries on about how much she hates CASS as she did with me, they are not likely to take her. They don't want people who run from place to place and are never satisfied. They are *specifically looking for people who want to embark actively on the way out of homelessness*, by the services they offer and by submitting to an orderly environment that is not as stressful and distracting as CASS. She needs to put those complaints - understandable

as they are - aside and tell the interviewer about her clear and focused good intention (which I believe she has).

This could be one aspect of *accompaniment*, or companionship, on my part in a role as a “friend” (what the staff at this shelter actually call a “mentor,” the very position for which they invited me last year to volunteer). *Standing by as an extra seeing eye, free of the anxieties of the candidate, in encouraging support.*

*the need to feel superior*

A question comes: Is putting ourselves above those we desire to assist, as superior to them, a means to *keep our distance*?

The thought lies near.

The Van Buren bus this morning: yes, a “freak show,” there was a reason why this term came to my mind. Not one “normal” person in sight, it seemed. I’m not even going to *try* to pretend that I would, or want to, consider any of those passengers my *equals*. Even at A2J: A pleasant young man I didn’t know was carrying on eloquently during the sharing in lectio prayer this morning, and I wanted to meet him. I went up to him afterwards to greet him; then it occurred to me that I didn’t get up to greet the person next to him, a disheveled, unappetizing, and agitated homeless man. I didn’t want to shake *his* hand, let alone hug him.

At least I’m coming clear about this much, looking it in the eye: *I want to keep a physical, and maybe emotional, distance from “these people.”* I don’t want to get intimate in the way I would with my “equals.”

So that is the truth, for me as well as, I expect, all these other great masses of people who ignore the homeless and choose to have nothing to do with them. (Not even by riding the public bus.)

*friendship*

Would I be Dolores’ *friend*? Simply a friend? As I am and would be to so many other, “normal” people. I felt I would, even desired it, with warmth, the first time I met her.

Is not the real desire I feel, the deep longing that motivates me toward “these people” in the first place, a yearning to be *friends* with them? A yearning that can be explained *only* by the existence, the reality, of Christ, the truth within ourselves, in me as well as in them? And with that, the truth that we are of *one body*, a truth I cannot stand denying when I see these “hordes” of marginal, cast-out, “forgotten” human beings?

*what is the love we are called to?*

My sister Sophie (now deceased) did practice *friendship* with some homeless. She visited them under the bridge where they lived (she, a

minister of the church, in her fine two-piece suit and shined leather pumps, a much respected and highly educated person), and she befriended a particular pair of drunks among them over a long period, taking them for rides to beautiful places on Sunday afternoons. I think she strove seriously to be on a level with them. Was she motivated by a desire to be faithful to the call of Christ - or did she *feel* this friendship personally? (Wish I could ask her now.)

What are you asking of us, Lord? What are you asking of *me*? Is the love to which you have called us - loving our *neighbor* as ourselves - a call to *feelings*, or a call to *acts* - attitudes and ways of acting as we would practice toward persons we *naturally* and emotionally love?

It's been my sense, these recent weeks, that it may be the latter. Love as a *principle* (or a *discipline*, as someone has said so wisely). An act of *will*. A sincere *commitment*. "In Christ": that is, for the sake of God, the love of God and His Will, the sake of His kingdom. (And the sake of our true innermost self - and that of our neighbor!)

Christians in churches often understand this principle to mean giving money or food to the poor, or working to change political structures in their favor. They may not understand the "love of neighbor" as acts of personal, intimate friendship, expressed one on one, in body.

*But precisely this latter I seek.* I was not seeking to align myself with organizations of charity or social change when I was "hit" by the homeless scene, in all its reality, last winter. I brought myself into the scene *personally, in body* (just as I discovered it, those Christmas days, by actually *walking* into it), to see where this would take me.

So, to work through organizations, formally - churches, non-profits - is not only one way to *attend* to need, it can also be a way to *keep one's distance*. Exactly in the way I was doing today with Dolores. Putting myself on another level, making clear we are not "the same," i.e. not equals.

The idea of "*equality*" can be so theoretical.

I have no answer, God, and do not hear any from you right now. I feel patience, and also, as before, the call to *care* - to go care-fully, without violating myself or others, to make no demands on myself that are not of you, to accept, in humility, things as they are, to *wait* on you.

I thank you for *honesty*. For being able and allowed to acknowledge honestly what I experience and see, knowing you want this first of all.

*"Christ in the breadline"*

This phrase, title of Fritz Eichenberg's famous wood engraving, which one dedicated Christian friend of mine keeps on his desktop screen, comes into my mind. It suddenly strikes me that in this image (from the years of the Great Depression), *it is not Christ who passes out the bread,*

*but Christ stands in the breadline with the needy, Christ needy, Christ a beggar with the beggars.*

Shall the servant be greater than the master?

Before he redeemed, Jesus suffered with the suffering, suffered their suffering, became "like them."

## Part IV

### *small works*

*NOTE: The following entries begin immediately after my move into the downtown Woodland area in early March, where I inhabited a small free-standing unit that was part of a four-plex owned and inhabited by members of the A2J community or persons related to it. It was directly on 13<sup>th</sup> Ave, with only a minimal separation from the street, including a light, low fence.*

#### *sitting by the stream*

##### *people*

Yes, I am now placed, in my little, yellow brick “cabin”, directly on the “stream” - of *people!* As I would listen to the murmur of the water in my dream cabin on a real stream in the wilderness, so I may, and am to, listen to the murmur of this stream. Quite literally, often - people talking out loud to themselves; people carrying on imaginary conversations with non-present others - angry, often; people talking to each other or fighting. And: people talking to me.

(A feeling comes as I write this: “I will come to love this stream. I will miss it one day.”)

##### *the tree*

Sitting outside my door in the barren little piece of cityscape presently assigned to me, I notice the tree closest to me and fix my eyes on it. It's tall, a “phone tree,” a wooden pole with much metal gear on top holding up many crisscrossing wires cutting up the sky. “*My tree,*” I say to myself, feeling a touch of irony. Then noticing, suddenly: Yes! it *is* a tree! A real tree! This was once a *living tree!* And so, even dead, completely dead, unable to ever put out another bud or branch, *it is still a tree!* One can tell by its contours: not straight as a ruler, not as an industrially fabricated pole would be, but ever so slightly undulating, wavering a little without losing direction. It's what alerted me to its organic nature. And being a tree is why it's thinner on top than on the bottom, tapering as it goes up. Its natural branches replaced by the metal gear. (Are they still making telephone poles out of trees? I doubt it. All steel now, I expect. A vision briefly crosses my mind: of millions of trees that became telephone poles, row after row across the land!)

Promptly, a gila woodpecker arrives, checking out the pole near the top - "dead wood, perfect!" After sitting there for a moment in its vertical position, it lets out a cry and flies away without having hammered. Maybe a substance used to treat the wood against rot deterred it.

### *first encounters*

In the half-hour or so I've been sitting here with my coffee, I've had three encounters with passers-by. Matthew, from A2J and now my neighbor two doors down, coming from the community garden with a bag of kale and asking me how to cook it. I tell him about "Portuguese kale soup" and the fishermen of Provincetown on the tip of Cape Cod (where I lived for a while long ago), an excellent winter food for them, with beans and pork in it. Matt warmly offers me to use his beautiful front porch and yard facing the small residential Woodland Street that runs alongside Van Buren, separated from it by the olive grove. I had been eying that space.

Next, an old white man, homeless, tells me he lost his CASS card, claiming he will get a new one the next morning. He asks me for a dollar so he can eat. Just another story perhaps, but I hand it to him, plus one of the McDonald's meal tickets Ryan gave me for passing out.

Third, a homeless Native man asks me how to get to CASS. He seems honest in his request and I give him directions. He isn't asking for anything else.

It will be no problem "hanging out" here, right here where I now live, to get in touch with neighbors.

### *"please pray for me"*

After A2J prayer, I settle under the lovely, budding little tree in the yard over by my next-door neighbor's unit, continuous with my bare bit of front space. I have my Bible in my lap for one of the Lenten readings Ryan recommended to us this morning. I have barely begun Psalm 121 - "*my help comes from the Lord*" - when a middle-aged woman comes along and asks me where "McMellan" (or similar - her speech is unclear) is, where she needs to apply, she says, for social security. I give her the location of the huge Social Security complex I've seen up on 7<sup>th</sup> Ave, straight across from McDonald's, where every day a long line of people are waiting early in the morning for the doors to open. The woman says no, not that one. I don't have the answer she needs. "That's okay," she smiles and walks on, then turns: "Please pray for me." - "I will," I say eagerly, meaning it. "What is your name?" She tells me and I repeat what I hear. "No," she says, "that's my mother's name. What's yours?" I give it to her. "Oh," she lights up, "that's the name of my best friend in grade school!" - "How wonderful!", I answer. - "I *will* pray for you," I

call after her as she moves on - then it comes to me: Why didn't I invite her to pray with me right here? The Christians I'm presently among have no inhibition about praying together whenever the call comes, even in public. One of the square posts holding up the fence between us was right in front of me; we could have laid our hands on it, holding each other's across the separation. It would have strengthened her.

How slow I am in learning. But learn I must, and I do. So much opportunity here for *heartening hearts*, for God to do what I did pray for this morning. *So much need!* "Be of good courage, and the Lord will strengthen your heart" (psalm 27:14).

Lord, help me to be ready in time. Be with this woman. Caitlin, I think. You know her name.

#### *creosote*

Surprised by a passer-by complimenting me on the tiny bit of vegetation I've put in the bare place by my door, in a little glass jar - a small, dry branch of creosote I picked from a bush in the desert as a comfort to me, ordinary plant that it is, but resinous and fragrant and very dear to me. The water turned quickly a deep brown, so that the jar looks as if filled with earth. Truly a very small thing - but noticed by this person, and *enjoyed!*

Give me the small and very small works, then, God, in the barren places - while the "big" works escape me!

#### *water*

A homeless couple stops and asks for water. I serve them on the square post between us, after inviting them in to my side of the fence to sit, which they decline. We talk about the stones I've brought from the mountain and laid out by my door; the woman, Native American, immediately points out the animal shapes she sees in them. They don't want the food I could offer, but accept a large chocolate bar my neighbor Todd has brought me. They don't like the food at the Shelter, they say. When I ask what they do like, the woman says enthusiastically: "Bologna and cheese!" The man, pointing out he's Mexican, asks for work. They inquire, "How do you live?" (meaning, how do you make ends meet?). They have no government support, they tell me. The woman has a cast on her arm from a clinic. After some further chatting they go on their way. It was a satisfying encounter.

## Part V

### *persons*

*NOTE: This section draws “portraits” of homeless people who became more distinctly persons to me, with names. Most of these I encountered more than once, and the acquaintance began to move toward relationship.*

#### ***Dolores***

*her visit to me*

*March 7*

How happy I was to see Dolores again at A2J this morning! It had been a good while; I feared I had lost her. She waved to me eagerly as I walked in the door. I sat down beside her to hear her story and found no resentment in her for anything I had done or said or not done. She did call the shelter I took her to, on the afternoon of our visit, and is expecting to go for an interview soon. She looked clean and in order and continues to tolerate life at CASS.

Have I helped her? Insofar as friendship, whatever our shortcomings, helps. I cannot doubt that.

I encouraged her afterwards to visit with me at my new place. She came with me and settled freely, without waiting to be invited, on my little “couch” (created by moving two armless, upholstered easy-chairs together and covering them with a soft plush blanket). I cooked my breakfast oatmeal while she munched on fresh strawberries. Again she talked non-stop and I made listening noises without trying to understand all she said. Her talk is clearly not addressed to the person present.

After some time she said she had to leave and without further delay did so.

*unresponsive*

*March 14*

Dolores was present again at A2J Friday prayer this morning, sitting in the same chair as before. Again I sat down next to her. She made little response. In fact, she did not talk to me or seem to take notice of me the whole time, and in the end disappeared before I got hold of her. She seemed remote, not present, maybe depressed. A marked contrast to her earlier behavior, her endless stream of compulsive talking. To my question whether she had been invited for an interview by the east side shelter, she said no. She had her Bible open in her lap.

I was “out of it” somewhat myself, not really able to tune in. About six people from CASS were present, and in the sharing time some shared

extensively about their stories and woes and addictions and troubles - and joys! (A bit like AA-meetings, I thought, with that confessional frankness.) The rest of the group seemed to rejoice in this participation. There seems general delight that homeless respond to our offering, especially one pair who said they look forward to this prayer all week!

Some homeless mentioned *their children*. What does it feel like for a child to know his or her parent in such a place as CASS, in such living conditions and personal state? What does this do to *their* lives?

Dolores has children...

*at the dining hall on campus*

March 17

On a visit to the CASS campus with an interested friend, we take a look at the dining hall run by a religious Charity while lunch is in progress, and I spot Dolores sitting by herself at a table munching chips. I go and spontaneously put my arm around her, in joy about seeing her again. Like last time, she seems little responsive, despondent. I ask if she is depressed. She says no, she's *angry*, she feels treated badly. She does not want to stay in a place where she is treated "like that." (I wonder whether, as justified as her complaint may be, this may be part of her problem: an *idea* that, wherever she goes, she is treated badly - worse than others, maybe.) She says she will leave in a few days for another shelter (not the place I took her to). I worry about her self-isolation, and invite her to visit me again and to return to A2J prayer on Friday.

*on an evening walk to CASS*

March 23

In the evening, as the air begins to cool shortly before sundown, I step out for another little walk. Where to go? I spontaneously turn in the direction of the Shelter, where I haven't been for a while, simply walking. An evening walk as I've been in the habit of taking anywhere else I've lived. In my neighborhood, visiting my neighbors. It's how it feels. Simple.

I feel something has changed in me. I'm tired, tired of looking. I'm here right now just because here is where I live - but I'm drawn, too.

At CASS, I see something I haven't seen before. The so-called "*overflow lot*" - a large, open-air area, fenced by chain-link wire and paved like an ordinary parking lot, for people not accommodated in the buildings - has opened for the night. Many people are inside already, with their bedding, spreading out a blanket or whatever they have to lie down on. The sun is still up, but it will get dark quickly once it's gone. Most people are sitting, sorting their wares or whatever. I don't stand and stare, but take notice. The air already smells quite strongly of urine. The short row of portable toilets at the back of the lot is in use. More people are getting into the lot, both men and women.

Tears well up in my throat once again and shake me. *Is it possible, America? Can we really do no better than that? Couldn't the city build better overnight lots, at least?* An excuse may be that “we don't want to enable homelessness.”

A police car drives head-on toward the fence where a group of people is sitting outside. “Get going guys, move!”, an officer shouts. They struggle up, disperse. Like flies shooed, like stray dogs chased away. No rights, no answers. What if officers and guards used a respectful tone and language, as they would with “respectable” citizens? Shouldn't we treat people as the people we hope they will be?

I see that a gate to the yard is still open and walk in. Not very many people inside. I seem to recognize a black woman at a table, eating out of a bag - yes, it's Dolores. I greet her, she greets me back by name but without sign of interest. I tell her I thought I saw her today walking up Van Buren carrying luggage, while I was sitting on my neighbor Matthew's steps; she affirms it. She tells me she will move out of CASS soon, some other housing or shelter is promised her where she will share a room with five or six other women. I've heard of this kind of arrangement, though I'm not sure what it is.

Again she is not really accessible, but says she will come to see me. She seems far away. Still I meet her with *joy*, a joy I really feel about seeing her again.

An officer appears and checks people's ID cards, asking me for it also. I say I am a visitor to Dolores. He tells me they are closing the gate for the night, only CASS residents are allowed. I leave.

A very short visit. I had been wondering, walking to the Shelter, whether I might see some “friends,” knowing some of the people around by now. Does it mean anything to Dolores to be visited, to be looked after or thought of? Will this little bit of accompaniment in her journey help her? (Always the temptation of that question! Though it seems to become less pressing now.)

I walk back. The great, glowing-green lawn of real grass around the historic Carnegie Library is being sprayed by powerful sprinklers. I catch a few of the cold drops through the tall cast-iron fence. It's getting warmer now, my hands are beginning to feel heavy while I walk, my fingers swollen, hard to bend.

I take my route through 10<sup>th</sup> Ave, three blocks east of my own, a poor block, judging by its appearance. It's how our own neighborhood may have been before idealistic young people moved in and started restoring the charming but dilapidated old houses.

This walk was satisfying. I sit on Matthew's steps a little longer before turning in.

**Peter**

*the square post*

*March 7*

A long talk with a Native man today, the longest rational conversation I've had so far with a homeless person. I was sitting outside my new dwelling in the red-and-white striped, plastic folding chair my son has lent me, its minimal comfort improved by a couple of Goodwill cushions, my lunch next to me on a low little bench I picked up on the roadside in my previous neighborhood, my legs stretched out, bare feet resting on the foldable little footstool I'd acquired at the Hardware store to take with me for sits on the Canal. Resting from the morning's activities - A2J Friday prayer, with music, with a crowd of people; then a walk down to 20<sup>th</sup> Ave for Immigration Reform prayer in the corner dirt lot there (no one else showing up, however; I stood alone for a while by the little symbolic circle of broken stones in the middle, then took the bus back).

So, into this scene this Native comes along from the Shelter side. He slows as he approaches my tiny house, seeming to investigate something in the small parking lot at the side of it. He's holding a cell phone, and approaching me says this is nice, the mural painted on my south wall, he wants to take a picture of it, but his battery needs to be charged. He says he can't find a place that lets him do it, it takes all day. It seems he was hoping I would offer him to charge it in my place, but I don't. I'm so tired and finally comfortably settled (it took some doing, all this improvising), I'm not going to get up soon again. But perhaps it's something more that keeps me on my seat.

The first thing I did yesterday after my first night in the Woodland neighborhood was write a letter to Ryan with a couple of favorite 18<sup>th</sup> century Moravian quotations about how these people did mission, such excellent texts. How one missionary went to Greenland with some companions, full of zeal, and yet Christ let them fail at everything they tried, until they understood that he wanted them to be still and wait on his will for them in that place. These words had surfaced in me that morning with power.

So I keep sitting. The man is leaning with his forearms on one of the square posts that hold up my little black fence (making me think, a while into the conversation, that I must not put anything on these posts, no flowerpots as I had considered, these posts are for leaning on and talking), and so we get into conversation. (Looking back on it later, I think this talk may have been worth more to this man than charging his cell phone might have been, and worth more to me.)

The large mural on my southern façade is one of Steve Malakowsky's, depicting a train engine in grays and black, a machine implying strength, with a woman's head where the engineer would be, a female

icon he often used (appearing also, in full figure, on the long mural across the street from me). It represents the epitome of the person of misery and lostness, *hopelessness*, to whom Steve's art and ministry was addressed. Behind the engine is a long outpouring of huge, colorful roses, exiting from the machine in place of exhaust, and above it the words, "*We need hope.*" I had not liked this powerful mural being on my tiny house, seeming almost to crush it, and so far paid little attention to it.

"You like it?" I ask the man. "Yes!", he cries out enthusiastically. I explain to him who the artist was: a great friend of the homeless.

Our conversation flows easily, but with energy. It is a genuine exchange between *equals*, no element of one person extending charity or pity to the other from an elevated position. My questions are real, asked from real need and desire to know. He is an interesting man, intelligent and capable of verbal sharing. I suppose he's enjoying my genuine interest in his life and his knowledge as much as I enjoy learning about it. I learn a great deal - along the lines of questions that have long been on my mind regarding the life of the long-term homeless. I do ask many questions, and he answers with openness.

He does not live at CASS (though he may use the facility on occasion; he mentions bedbugs and rats) but sleeps out in the open, by the railroad tracks I often cross on 19<sup>th</sup> Ave. He likes it there, no one bothers him, he can see *the stars*, he says, they are *beautiful*. He also says - this comes after some time of conversation - that he is in touch with... (pointing to the sky) as well as he lies there under the stars, and I am touched by that.

He has lived this way, he says, since he was ten years old, coming from alcoholism (as so many do). His mother was fifteen when she had him. When I ask if he would like to be settled in a steady place if he could, he says, quickly and emphatically: "I can't change." He works at times, preferably with a circus he travels around with. "It's a hard life," he says. I ask about it. "Do they treat you well?" He shrugs. "Do they feed you?" - "No! We feed ourselves." - "But they give you a place to sleep?" - "Yes, a bunk in a wagon. But it costs thirty dollars." He is not complaining. He likes the life, the travel. He also looks at people's yards as he wanders around to see if they need weeding or brush cutting. I notice the smooth skin of his bare, thin but muscular arms, while his face looks quite wrinkled. He is only, he tells me, fifty-two years old and able to work. He says he isn't married because he is bound to a wandering life. He gets no government assistance, only food stamps. Does he use soup kitchens? "Sometimes, if I know where something is open." He tells me about his personal hygiene. One time, he says, he saw water in someone's water hole and speedily washed up and washed his hair, he needed it so badly. Then the owner appeared, a woman: "What are you

doing here? Don't you know you are trespassing?" - "It's you who are trespassing," he told her, aware of the aboriginal right of his people to the land.

"How do you feed yourself?", I ask. - "I improvise." He eats out of cans, beans, he says. Sometimes he uses a grill in a park and then gets something to cook on it. "But you would need wood," I reflect. He pulls at the thin twigs of the little tree in my neighbor's yard that is just starting to leaf out. "Ah, I see," I say. "Please don't take this one, we need it!" He says he takes brush people cut and leave in the alleys. The more I listen to him, the more I see that the homeless life can be a developed culture, involving much knowledge and survival skill, experience, know-how. It isn't necessarily the dull, arrested kind of stupor so many of the wandering folks appear to be in. It can resemble more the highly alert and sensitive, self-reliant life of an animal in the wild in harsh conditions, a hard life yet anything but stupid. The man shows himself aware of the hardship, but also appears to like the life. And I suppose I do so with him, some of this preference being in me also.

I ask him whether he keeps some stuff by the railroad tracks, such as clothes. He pulls his mouth to the sides: "I must tell you, ma'am, I don't do laundry." He says when the clothes get too smelly, he just drops them and gets new ones. "Oh!", I cry. "Now I understand why there is so much clothing lying around the landscape! I always wondered why the homeless don't take care of what they have." He shakes his head from side to side. I suddenly see it: No money for laundry. No laundromat within easy walking distance. Everything needs to be done on foot. No money for buses. So, the clothes drop. Fresh clothes, he assures me, are available everywhere. (There even is a secondhand store near his haunt on the tracks, he says.) "I put them in a garbage can," he corrects my unspoken assumption of littering, not wanting to appear uncivilized perhaps. A truly careless, carefree life. Apparently it "works." A hard life, however.

I don't even offer him a drink of water, or coffee. I just remain in my comfortable chair on my plot with my legs stretched out, while he keeps leaning on the square post. We seem to understand each other.

At last he says something about a desire for ice cream. He'd like to get some ice cream. So I finally do get up and go for my purse and hand him a couple of dollars. "Are you taking it for beer?", I inquire, the strong fragrance of it wafting across the fence to me. He assures me no, ice cream is what he wants.

It was a frank conversation, but I do wish the homeless didn't lie to me when they want money, so as to manipulate me. At least he didn't say he wanted to buy some healthy food. Maybe he did tell the truth.

Something about his face: I told him at some point, as he described

his hard life: "But you are smiling! The whole time we've been talking, you haven't stopped smiling! You are *happy!*" - "I'm happy in my heart," he said, "but no, I'm not smiling. I do not smile. It is my mother's face you see." He insisted on that. I said his whole face was smiling, not just his mouth, his eyes, all his lines and wrinkles. "No," he insisted, "I do not smile. It's my mother's face." (She is no longer living, he told me.) He said people get mad at him for smiling. "Why are you smiling?," they yell at him, angrily. They think he is making fun of them.

Another thing I wish for homeless men is that they wouldn't give women the eye, in that way which is degrading to a woman. It was in this man's eyes, too. I think it's what these men have learned a man must do, it doesn't necessarily imply intention or even desire. I told a homeless man at A2J he must learn to relate appropriately to women, the way he goes about it turns them away and he misses out on potential friendships. I was getting impatient, even angry, with the way he kept coming at me. There is an insidious implication in it as to what a woman is. Yes, it deserves anger. But these men also need help. They need education. Someone to help them see and understand. At my best, I try to simply not engage with that kind of look, and return my own straight on. But it can be difficult sometimes. Women of my generation have a history of degradation by men, from a time when we didn't know any better, although we sure could feel it.

The encounter with this Native man - his name is Peter, he told me in the end, so I gave him mine - was different somehow from the ones I'd had so far with street people. It felt like an *initiation* to my "new life" after having moved into this neighborhood. "No longer a visitor," I had written to Ryan, "but *planted*" - feeling as if my entire interest and zeal as it had been for this place and its population had disappeared with my move. No longer a visitor to them, but a *neighbor*. This talk with Peter was from neighbor to neighbor (which is why I could stay put where I was, in my place, as he stayed in his), not a visit from an outsider to an exotic people, for reasons of curiosity or charity. If this is my place now, then these are now *my people*, and so, it is a new relating. A further adventure of relating and learning lying ahead.

*And* it must be waited on, as Christian David, the Moravian missionary to Greenland, recognized.

*through a crack*

*March 9*

A knock at my door in the morning, as I sit just inside of it. I peek from behind the curtain, as Ryan had seemed shocked that I would open the door without first checking who it is. It's Peter, the Native man I talked with two days ago.

I open only a good crack. I'm not really available this morning, as I

have to get ready for my trip with friends to Santa Rita's Abbey.

He stands out there, with his perpetually smiling face - extending a couple of dollar bills to me, without a word. I'm not taking them. "I want to give it back," he explains. - "Why? It was a *gift*, not a loan - it's yours." - "You helped me," he says gently. - "I'm glad - and you helped me, too, you know. I learned a lot from you that I needed and wanted to know." - "I owe you a poem," he says. (He had mentioned that he writes poems, and I had expressed interest.) - "Yes! - bring me a poem!", I affirm, without widening the crack. "Did you get the ice cream?" - "Yes, I promised." - "Was it good?" - "Yes." He says he's hungry right now, but he wants to give me the money back. "Go have something to eat!" I say. - "There are no places around here to eat," he claims. - "Sure there are, Jack in the Box on 19<sup>th</sup>, or McDonald's just up on 7<sup>th</sup>." He says he doesn't know the streets, he doesn't know his way around here, he lives on the railroad tracks. I explain how to get to McDonald's - just up Van Buren, the very next light. He can't seem to be moved. "I don't know the place."

He doesn't seem to be the man of only two days ago. No longer a man in control of his life, but weak, confused, helpless, dependent. And maybe drunk.

Just as he knocked, I was typing the words, "*A real tree!*", in my account about the dead tree that makes up the telephone pole near me which, even dead, is still a real tree. A symbol, a *sign* - given me as the first thing after I moved here.

I could not be moved to open the door to him. Had I not been pressed for time, I would have wanted to go to McDonald's with him and buy him breakfast. This, yes. (I wished afterwards I had thought of telling him this.)

"A gift, not a loan." - "I want to give it back."

What about *receiving* from the other person, receiving just what they want to give, as I am to give what they ask, as I reflected some time ago? What about mercy on a human being's need to *give*, to be generous, a giver, to be in that position?

We were no longer equals as we had been. He did as I demanded and left.

I had felt that Peter wanted to push his way in, without saying so. There is genuine need, innocent, the need of the deprived and hurting and exhausted child within, I know. And there are dangers that lurk for adults. I try not to invite or encourage things that will make relationship impossible. I yearn for genuine relationship, for them as well as for me, in Christ.

Yesterday, Sunday (an in-day for me), on my way to Food City toward evening, I ran into Peter again, at the end of the olive grove on 15<sup>th</sup> Ave. He saw me first, called out to me. It clearly seemed to give him joy (unless it was his perpetual smile). I greeted him back. He extended his right hand to me. I was reluctant to take it, but did. He seemed interested in more contact. I said I had to run to make the bus (true). He mentioned the poem he had promised me. “Oh yes,” I said, “you haven’t brought it to me.”- “Yes I did,” he said, “I put it on... the wind must have blown it away.”

The wind.

The continuous unraveling and fresh starts. I shared this morning at A2J, in the personal prayer period, about my struggle to know how to meet the homeless, in practicality. I noticed my voice was sad, and in the end I said so: “I’m sad now.” Then I added – perhaps more to honor the community’s faith than from my own at that moment: “But I know God can bring good out of this,” and so gave thanks.

Peter said he was going to see a movie. (A *movie*? Where does he get the money? But I know “our” logic doesn’t apply in these lives.) “What are you going to see?”- “About barbarians.”- “*Barbarians*? Just what you need!?”- “I’m a barbarian myself,” he said, earnestly.

Surely he would have liked me to go with him. Before I ran, he quickly pulled an unopened bottle of water from his pocket and extended it to me – the last straw, the last hope. And again I refused. “No, no, I just got a bottle myself” (my tap water). And off I ran across the street for my bus, getting there a couple of minutes early and engaging in conversation with another man waiting.

I feel Peter’s *disappointment* right now in my heart. And it makes me feel as though *no* contact with homeless – in respectful ignoring of them, in contrition about my inability and lack of love – may be better for them than a half-hearted attempt at connection.

### *Christabel*

March 13

Something I’ve never done before:

I was sitting on my end of my neighbor Andrew’s elevated porch, in my foldable yard chair, to honor the mild and lovely evening sky, at the same time rereading a meditation on prayer I had sent to a friend, when there was *screaming* in the street before me. It came from a young black woman yelling at the man who was walking at some distance ahead of her in the direction of CASS. She seemed to have “lost it” completely, screaming out her rage and frustration and pain full force at him, the f-word appearing in dense frequency as if nothing else could possibly do

justice to what she felt. The words I was reading softly out loud to myself at that moment became filled with tears, filling my eyes and running down my face, words describing the content of prayer. Her pain was in me.

This scene is not rare in our streets. Most often, with couples, it seems to be the woman yelling at the man, feeling at the end, while he appears closed and cold.

My impulse was to call out to her: "Come here! Come here!" But I held it back a moment. Was I really going to do this?

I did. Just like that, loudly: "*Come here! Just come here!*", waving my arms to her.

And to my utter surprise she complied. It was as if my call turned her body in my direction and her steps followed without hesitation. "Just come in, right there by the gate." She did, came up to the porch, crouched down next to my chair and pressed her head into my shoulder and neck, in absolute trust like a child, sobbing hard. My arm went around her, my hand stroked her hair, her shoulder and back, our heads leaned close together and our tears flowed as in one stream. All I could say was: "Yes, I know, it hurts, it really hurts, doesn't it. It hurts so bad," softly.

She began to talk and talked freely. I was amazed to see her beautiful face, not destroyed but well-looking. "Such a beautiful woman," I murmured. Her talk showed she was intelligent, rational, sane. She stays at the Shelter with her man, they came here from California two weeks ago, CASS found them an apartment on the east side, he found a job and is working. She is four months pregnant.

Her frustration is one I've heard from many women. "I just want him to listen to me, how I feel, I'm so stressed out, he wants me to go here and there with him, I'm so tired, it's so hard at CASS, everybody is telling me what to do, I don't know what to do, it's so hard there, so stressful, I need rest, he doesn't understand, he's so selfish..." She feels so humiliated, she said, he humiliates her before all the people at CASS, and then she loses it and screams in the street and is humiliated still more. She apologized for the screaming.

I felt nothing but understanding with her. She calmed down. I softly suggested a cup of tea. She nodded. I "counseled" more than I would expect to and freely asked questions. As this is an ongoing situation with her - they have been together, she said, for six years but she feels uncertain that she can marry a man who is so unresponsive to her feelings and needs - I suggested that they find someone to talk to *together* so he can hear better how she feels and perhaps receive help to open his eyes to his conduct. I also said she needs to find a way not to go to pieces every time he frustrates her, a place within herself where she can

go and remain with herself, without giving herself over to his problem. A way that would help her live through her remaining weeks at CASS without letting the place get the better of her. A discipline to be careful, too, about who she shares herself with (“so many confused and stressed people over there”, I acknowledged), to turn away from some, to keep to herself. And to find places in the daytime where she can relax and be calm and come to herself.

She said she uses the libraries. She intends to go back to school, already chosen, to finish her training in a medical field so she can make some money. They have none presently. “How do you live?” She gets food stamps and buys herself TV dinners she heats at the Shelter. They also get free bus passes.

I was deeply calm through all this, everything came easy. She seemed to respond well. Now and then she checked her phone, said he was calling.

I also suggested that she will need friends outside of her present environment, people she can talk to and release her stress with, so as not to be totally “one on one” with her man. It came to me to mention the A2J prayer meetings, open to all, a presence of good spirit, friendship and love, and inclusiveness of those in the neighborhood. I said it was a religious group but that I was not trying to convert her to religion, “it’s just good company to be in.” I mentioned tomorrow’s meeting with music and fellowship (so popular). I also said if she would like to go for a walk afterwards I would have time to go with her, and mentioned the Canal I often go to, with its relaxing atmosphere. All this came out of me without any pressure, very simply and without inhibition. She seemed interested.

Suddenly she said she needs to go now, she needs to get her blanket. So, no tea. I said I could show her the place of tomorrow’s meeting, just around the corner, on the way to CASS. She accepted that. When I unlocked my door to get my sandals, she followed me freely inside (“oh, this is nice!”). On the way she talked to her man on the phone, saying she met a “nice lady” who calmed her down. Her tone and language, however, changed from the brief intimacy and warmth we had shared. Another “culture,” suddenly, again. She seemed to grow cold toward me and pointed to the next building, saying she was to meet him there. I let her go, giving her my name and asking hers, “Christabel.”

I took a walk around the block, in the dark by then. The whole value of this intervention was that I had done it. I realized fully that the threads of a life had for a moment run through my heart, my hands, my voice, my words, and were released again. I held nothing, it was gone. I had no idea whether it effected anything, or ever would. It did not seem important.

I realized that this is my life here, in this neighborhood where I've chosen to spend this winter. This immediate and spontaneous self-giving from the heart, perhaps to countless people (as these first few days would imply), and in countless ways, without any drive to achievement, any aim at results. I truly can do nothing in these situations, for these people. And yet I do *everything* in this response. Everything is being done in it. Ultimately, it is only a brief appearance, a manifestation, a small sign of something that is being done invisibly continuously. I am faithful to this continuous invisible act in conceding to the occasional visible manifestation, what we call *witness*, as it may come through me.

I am reminded of something Catherine of Siena wrote about intercessory prayer, something a friend sent me many years ago. It was not easy to understand, but it stayed in me. Catherine said that God is already doing everything people need; praying for them means for her simply that when she goes in to the Light, she takes them with her.

My rereading of my text on prayer on the porch was a way for me to go in to the Light more deeply, it's why I did it. And when this woman appeared in her need - which indeed seemed great, she seemed utterly fallen apart, her suffering extreme - I simply took her along.

It's all I can do, perhaps all we need to do. I may never see Christabel again - although I love her now - or be of any further instrumental use to her.

Why would God want this witness - of so little use or no use at all? Great God, who does not need our help?

And yet how utterly needed it is, this simple neighborly witness, to hold our poor world together!

Can I doubt it? It's simply how the world is made, how it's meant to be.

## **Rose**

*morning coffee with Rose*

*March 25*

I sit outside as usual with my breakfast, close to the street and facing it. A great *screaming* comes from Van Buren where my street crosses it. A woman who has been sitting on the edge of the olive grove with a loaded child's stroller has gotten up, throws her stuff around, grabs the stroller and bangs it against the pavement over and over, in greater and greater fury, screaming and yelling, as if determined to kill it. I assume her vehicle has broken down, she can't fix it and is in a fit of frustration, bringing up all the frustration of her life, the pain, the rage.

However rational or irrational the reason for her anger, what is on me is that she *suffers*. At some point I do what I cannot *imagine* doing: I slowly walk toward her with my cup of coffee in my hand. She's obvi-

ously crazed, in a state of uncontrolled violence, and might well attack me. I'm aware of this, but feel the deep peace in me which I also felt in my recent action with Christabel.

I slowly approach the woman, gently, without looking at her, keeping my eyes on the ground. When I've reached her, I say tenderly: "I'm having a cup of coffee. Would you like some coffee?"

"NO!" she screeches, then almost immediately: "Yes, yes!" I utter some words of regret about her vehicle breaking down on her and how frustrating that must be, but she quickly stuffs her wares into it, piling them up high, all dirty and with plenty of dry plant debris sticking to them, and starts pushing the thing. It works. Something is scraping. "Ah," I say, "one of the wheels?" - "No, it's just this," she says, quite rational suddenly, fixing a bag hanging from the bottom of the carriage so that it won't touch the pavement. She puts a big old traveling bag on top of it all and we walk toward my place.

I offer her the folding yard chair I've been sitting in while I go inside to prepare a cup of coffee for her (the instant kind I drink), leaving the door open. She is soon out of the chair, then tells me to sit in it, saying it's no good for her. I say I have another one and go inside again, to the bedroom in the back to get the large, high-backed, very light plastic arm chair my son bought me, the best I can offer. The woman sits again and seems comfortable.

We sit and chat for about forty-five minutes, until I have to tell her I must go to my class now. During the whole time she seems completely calm, as calm as she can be in her obviously disturbed condition, almost content. This is the first time I've invited a homeless person off the street into my "sanctuary," if only the tiny "courtyard" of it. She is *inside* the fence with me!

Her mind, however, is going a hundred miles a minute and seems to freely jump around the whole universe. There seems hardly anything that is not or has not been part of her life: the military, prison, children (she's pregnant again, she told me already at the curb where she raged), a dad (her own) she wants to see and who is using her room; she's an architect and designer, was adopted from Germany, has suffered abuse, finds the world too sexual and does not like prostitution, and has all sorts of medical conditions to cope with, from "amnesia in the blood" to a heart pump to various sorts of brain damage, and more. She is really an attractive woman, I come to like and even love her face, and compliment her on her good, very short haircut, very becoming. (She says there is a free hair-cutting place down the road somewhere.) I cut in now and then to change the course of the word-flow a little, if just to break the daze-inducing spell, and we have a few little spontaneous laughs, such as over the sudden observation of a starling near us. To hear

a person in that obsessive condition laugh with genuine amusement, or see her lips break into a spontaneous smile, with whatever teeth appearing, can be a real gift, lifting the heart. Now and then our eyes meet for what seems a real, quick connection. Hers are a pretty green. Her name, she tells me, is Rose.

She also responds to the bright and strong colors of the murals across my street. I tell her who painted them. She taps one of her bags: she carries a Bible in there.

Her language, too, is changed. The f-word, which was almost all she had left when screaming on the curb, does not occur a single time in this conversation.

My intervention did break her anger, for that moment. I have no illusion that it did more than that, but I do not know.

My Hindu friend Jay keeps telling me to remind myself always that I do what I do for *myself*. I sense a good warning in this. Perhaps, according to my experience, I would say that my actions can be prompted by the state within myself. I'm reminded of a famous word by the Russian saint Seraphim of Sarov: "*Strive for inward peace, and a thousand souls around you will be saved.*" I would say that I have experienced a trace of this sometimes.

Every now and then in this irrational conversation - in which, however, I seem to participate as if it were a rational one, with an old friend - a little ray of light seems to break in, and for a split second there seems sanity. I seem to be hoping and trying for this penetration, by my little interruptions, waiting on it.

My neighbor Andrew steps out, leans on the square post by my gate, tells me about a funeral he is going to, and how people will fight over some worthless thing or other left by the deceased. He ignores my guest. Another participant in A2J pulls up in her car, parks at the curb, waves to me and chats a little through her open window, but does not step out. I introduce Rose to both of them.

When I tell her I need to go to my class now, Rose asks to leave her traveling bag with her "personals" in my yard while she takes a bus to see her dad and her daughter, Annie. (Her mind made several quickly changing plans for the day as we talked, all seeming to me beyond her reach with all her stuff and no money.) Then all of a sudden she is gone, quick as a hummingbird - and I find not only the bag she mentioned, but *all of* her stuff, loaded on the stroller, left in my place. I wonder whether she will find my house again or even look for it, and what I'll do with her stuff if she doesn't.

I go inside, pick up a clean rag, and gently wipe the chair she sat in. Tenderly, feeling no disgust, nor self-reproach. The act feels included in the gesture of love.

A little later, when I see Andrew again, I pose the question about her stuff to him (as a long-time Shelter resident he has far more experience than I). He tells me he knows Rose, she's been around for years. So I may likely see her again.

When I return home at the end of my day, her stuff is still there, baking in the sun, and I groan a little. But in the evening there is a knock at the door: Rose has returned and thanks me for holding her things! I am truly *happy* to see her face again!, become dear to me, and greet her with joy. She seems in full fling and takes off fast to make it to dinner at Andre House (and to *sleep*, she says.) She tells me she did not see her daughter, "but it's okay."

I feel this encounter like a further "friendship" at its moment of chance, like a bud on a tree that might open or wither and fall. I feel in the gladness of it without notions or expectations attached.

*Rose returns*

*March 26*

A hard knock at the door around noon. I half expect Ryan - he knocks hard. It's Rose. She smiles, as I do. She asks for the address of the Greyhound bus terminal, wants to go see her dad. I let her in, let her sit in the folding chair just inside my door. She asks for coffee as well (what did that sign yesterday - my offer of a cup of coffee in her distress - mean to her?). I make coffee for her and look up the addresses in Phoenix and Glendale on the Internet and write them on a slip of paper, which she instantly crumples up in her hand as if she had already forgotten the purpose of it. She's again "crazy as a loon" (I tell myself, appeasing myself with this folksy term affectionately); talking weird, twitching and scratching incessantly. I'm friendly but cool, responding slowly and calmly. She wants me to look up a post office address as well, then forgets about it, and the address of a personal friend, which I tell her I cannot do. I tell her she can get information at CASS. She says she can't go in because she made trouble there and they turn her away. She says she doesn't feel safe in the street because of the police, they are "sexual" with her. I tell her I can do nothing more for her right now, and she does get out, leaving her coffee minus one sip.

I've been warned to *set boundaries*. I will. But what about her? She won't even get on a city bus with her stroller and all, I think. She lives in a world of ever-changing fantasies and obsessions. What belonging does such a soul have, in our present society?

Recently, from one of the city buses, I saw a young man lying on a bus stop bench, barefoot, turned on his side, sleeping, his clothes disarranged, exposing a fat midriff. The bus tarried a while, and before it took off again, the man stretched, yawned, sat up, stared, then leaned forward and vomited. Noticing the bus, he staggered toward the front

door which was still open. The driver had a thick novel in her lap which she was reading whenever the bus was not in motion. She looked up just in time to see the man trying to get on and screamed, as if panicked: "NO! Not with bare feet!", and slammed the door on him. One passenger remarked that the man was vomiting, too. He pulled back and the bus took off. - What would have happened if he had had shoes? Vomiting all over the bus, the floor, the seats, passengers - disgusting and upsetting people, making trouble for the driver, delaying the bus in its schedule? Only for him to get off in some other place of no importance to him, no better than the one he had left? Why admit, why refuse these people, when nothing seems to make a difference?

Rose talked openly about "mental illness" this time, of herself as mentally ill, saying she had been that way since she was thirteen. In a "normal" civilized Western society, it seems to me, she would be contained in an institution, with her basic physical and medical needs provided.

If "neighborliness", that friendship in Christ, is asked of me - what does it consist in, in *action*, in this case?

If I get practical in actions, I must get practical in *thinking* about them and in *informing myself* about them as well. What risks am I taking in these contacts - on several levels - both for her and for me?

In my kitchen, Rose was staring at the cabinets. "Oh, those are big!" A woman's longing for a home (a man's, too). Her children, she claimed, were taken away from her by CPS (the Social Department).

What brought Rose back to my door? I suspect the story about the Greyhound and visiting her father (which she also told yesterday) is both an obsession and a fib. Did Rose experience something in our encounter yesterday that she needs and rarely finds? Is it this "something" I must give her? - What is it?

*setting boundaries*

*March 28*

Rose: What did I invite here?

Unlike Christabel, Rose, in all her irrationality and confusion, seems to have seized on me or my place after our first encounter, as a point in her rumble-tumble existence to return to. And I find I am *not ready* to be available to her any time she wishes, or for just anything she wants. I'm starting to let her know this, to turn her away, and her mood toward me is changing. I'm *disappointing* her, I'm not the reliable merciful love without limits she may need - not to "get better" perhaps, just to exist in some merest basic comfort. She may find kindness being extended to her *some* times, and at other times not. This may be altogether worthless. It may be worse than not extending myself to her at all, ignoring her and her existence. She is used to that.

When I heard a knock on my door the night before last, while it was

still dark, I didn't get up. Not even when I heard the screaming in the street I thought was hers – the raging and cursing in which I had met her first. When I did look out the window a little later, I only saw some others of the aimlessly wandering folks.

This morning, when I stepped out to go to A2J prayer, Rose came toward my house again, and I remarked, jovially, on her wearing glasses, which I hadn't seen her do before. She pointed to the jeans she was wearing, a good, strong pair, attractively accentuating her slim figure. She said she needed to buy a new pair, it was "payday" today. Before she could make a request on me, I said I needed to go somewhere right now and walked on.

When I came back from prayer, she again came along the street toward my house. She remarked about the stroller she was pushing, how it can't fold up because it is a carriage "designed for a brain-damaged child." She had emphasized this before.

This time, she asked to charge her phone at my place. I asked her where she usually charges it. She talked of a place she said was twenty minutes away, then claimed that there is nowhere she can charge it, she hasn't used it for a long time. Again the facts she was citing were chasing one another in rapid succession, whatever came to her mind, without substance or cohesion.

Seeing me hesitant about her request – I told her, gently and calmly, that she can't use my place for *all* her needs – she lost patience. "Forget it," she hissed, walking away. I sensed anger.

*small acts: a reflection*

All the frustrations of her life came up again in Rose at that moment - or so I imagined - just as they did in her fit at the curb. The anger I had been able to appease at that time by meeting it with kindness and calm, with an offer of rest and a moment of friendship.

Is she *teachable*? Able to learn to *respect* boundaries? The answer is almost certainly no. As with Dolores, am I offering friendship only on condition that she learn appropriate behavior?

Isn't the need precisely for *acceptance without those behaviors changed*? (Even as we teach better ones.) Isn't this what we generally mean by "Christ love?" *Forgiveness*?

*Christ did teach*. Christ did ask for change of behavior, as the prophets did. For a "conversion of manners," of life.

It would be entirely wrong, I can see this much, if I turned *against* Rose in my heart because she cannot, or will not, conform to "normal" expectations regarding social intercourse. (To establish this for myself is at least something.)

The harder part is to *endure* her inappropriate behavior without clos-

ing the door on her.

Still harder, if I endure it, to do so in such a way that it doesn't unleash her (considerable!) energies beyond what little control she has over them, causing her to do damage to herself and my own life.

This thing with "setting boundaries:" I have always had a question about it. It sounds like a social agreement among the "normal" to keep to one's comfort zone, and grant other people theirs. This generally seems to be the social contract we live by.

Christ seems to have asked for more. - *Far* more.

"*Carry your sword as long as you can*" (George Fox). The sword by which we defend our comfort zone. And: Give as you truly, genuinely, sincerely are moved to do, always looking upon Christ. The little "all," the widow's mite, in your spiritual pocket at that moment.

Is that how "boundaries" are to be set – fluid, flexible, depending on the *state of my heart* at any given moment?

Might work for *me*. But what about the other person? How would a child do who doesn't find a reliable door to its mother's care? Some children are in that situation, and they don't do well in it.

*Care means reliability.*

Or, as one writer put it: "Our passions come and go, but *love is a discipline.*"

What is the discipline in me? Is there one, or am I just indulging my changing *feelings*?

What would love as a discipline, or principle, *the principle of Christ* (the "principle that is pure," as John Woolman called it) in this concrete situation with Rose look like?

"What would Jesus do?"

I don't even dare to ask this. I cannot do what he did. I am not ready, not willing, to lay down my life – even my little daily life with its little comforts – for this "friend."

Perhaps better ask: "How do you, Christ, *lead me – me*, at this moment of the challenge?"

Lord, I ask for this, humbly, from my present and actual state: That I may look to you, person and principle, when the challenge comes up to me. When I find no spontaneous movement of feeling in me toward this poor person whom my heart seemed to have adopted in my first meeting with her, when she was screaming in her pain. When I'm confronted only with her obnoxiousness, her demands, her inappropriate social behavior that disrespects normal "boundaries" (and gets her banned even from CASS, making her a person with nowhere to go). When I'm not in the mood to *give*, when charity does not seem in me. That I may look to you, trusting that you give as we need, and that I may accept just as you give.

Perhaps you will not, do not, ask *every time* for the “big” act as I gave it when I met Rose first (putting my life at risk, yes, in her violent rage; everyone would have advised me against it). Maybe, in your boundless Godly imagination, you will find the act just right for me at that moment, the act I *can* do right then, an act *within* your love and peace and expressive of it, though “small,” subtle, maybe.

Oh, how many times have you given me such small, even invisible acts, and I have felt your greatness in them, and there was nothing lacking.

O Lord, let me not disdain the “small” acts in your great movement - like the tiny wavelets on the beach that come many times, forerunners of the large crashing wave finally surging way up on the sand (as I observed so often, years ago, on Cape Cod) - *builders* of that wave, perhaps, secretly.

Only lead me in your Spirit that all my acts, the smallest gesture and sigh, may be of your Spirit, and help the other person to feel it, to receive the peace of it despite the smallness of the act. This is my prayer for them - that they may be touched by the *peace* that is of you, and not by my act, and it is my prayer for me.

I felt, God, that you “gave” me Rose as a person I must have a care about. The *joy* I felt each time I saw her - whatever the character of the encounter, varying - has been the *sign* that I was in your gift, with her.

I did not “get rid” of Rose this morning. Neither by your prompting, Lord, nor by an impulse of my own heart. She met me in a different mood, as I meet her in different moods, which makes us real to one another. She did not meet me in adherence to a different *principle*.

Help me to go gently, carefully, and above all *humbly*, Lord, in whatever further interactions you may give us. With my eyes on you and your guiding and ordering hand, “as the eyes of the servant are on the hand of the mistress...”<sup>5</sup>

Help me to go in *trust* that you can lead both me and Rose (however deranged her state) rightly in a land of relationship in which, to my eyes, there seem no landmarks.

Again, after this last interchange, Rose asked to leave her stuff in my yard, while she went about her day’s “business.” I let her do it.

### “Squirrel Woman”

*the woman on the curb*

March 16

On my way home from a neighborhood visit, in the dark, I notice a little shopping cart loaded in the way of the homeless - high with many wares - standing as if abandoned by the curb near my house, then I

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 123:2

discover behind it a little woman sitting on the curb, with a large soda bottle at her side. I gently approach. "Are you tired?" She nods, and we are soon in conversation.

I sit down beside her (the first time I've done this with a homeless person in the street), not too close but at a small friendly distance. "I'm a bookkeeper," she soon informs me. She's been at CASS for two years, it's okay but she doesn't like the food - she whispers this like a secret, crinkling her nose - but buys her own. Unlike many others, she states with some pride, she goes *home* now and then. Where is home? Surprise, name of a town west of Phoenix where her mother and aunts, she says, are farming. She takes the bus there. She goes to church in Sunnyslope, reads the Bible. She talks a blue streak merrily, contentedly. She has a cute and funny little brown face with beady dark-brown eyes, like a squirrel somehow. Hers seems a happy life, I detect nothing else.

*"not only darkness but sin"*

*March 18*

Relaxing outside my door after sundown, I notice the cute little woman with the brown button eyes, from Surprise, sitting again on the curb with her loaded cart, in the same spot, and join her as I did before, sitting down next to her - desiring a better experience of a human being perhaps than I just had with a rude man, not homeless, who approached me across my fence. She shows me her crocheting, a blue doily; she can make sweaters, too, she says proudly. Again I notice her contentment, as if she, a Shelter resident, were lacking nothing. It feels refreshing, she seems dear. She tells me again about her "federal job" as a bookkeeper, at the Federal Bank, she says, and reveals, leaning toward me and whispering as if to share a precious secret, that through her connections she can get me a free phone. All of a sudden, looking shrewdly at me, she announces: "I am a doctor," then adds, "but I never practiced it." She sounds proud of this, too. What is true, what is false? - Does it matter?

Then she starts talking about "colored people," derogatorily, sounding more and more racist, and I begin to feel sick. So much distortion everywhere! As I leave her, I feel soiled - not by the outward filth of homelessness, but by *moral* depravity - *evil*, yes.

What did I think I was here for? Pity?

"*There is not only darkness, there is sin.*" I'm hearing these words, rendered as from the mouth of Jesus in one of Lev Gillet's spiritual dialogues with Christ who wanted him in ministry in the streets of Paris, which appeared dark to this disciple in his yearning to return to the lovely shores of Lake Gennesareth where, mystically, he had met his beloved Master. The light of these shores made the streets of the big city seem unbearably dark in his eyes.

I haven't even begun to deal with this aspect, even to consider it. I

saw these people as *victims*, as pitiable (although with faults). But there is more - "there is sin." Evil in action. And resistance to conversion, change.

This is sickening far worse than outward depravity, as hideous as this can be.

How different, then, really, are these persons from ourselves?

*at ease*

*May 9*

A long, sweet talk with "Squirrel Woman" when she silently pulls in, after dark, on a great shiny three-wheeler, a remarkable, sturdy vehicle, almost massif, she says her mother bought her and which she seems to handle with placid ease despite her diminutive size. She rides it all the way out to Surprise and back, she tells me, along Grand Ave, when she visits her home. I greet her as she passes me, and she swerves around and comes abreast while I eat my supper outside my door. She talks non-stop, fantasizing again about her important government jobs and her large, far-flung family and its holdings - farms, mines, stores, and more. She believes that she and her family have an important hand in the prospering of business in Arizona, and seems much contented by that. I listen with ease, enjoying her. She is elegantly dressed and wears jewelry. She has a bed indoors at CASS and is presently returning from her mother's farm. Why does she live here?

She tells me she is excited to go visit a cousin in Tucson. She will take the Greyhound. "Where will you leave your stuff?", I inquire, always trying to trace the process, in these mysterious lives, from point A to B. "Can you park your three-wheeler at CASS?" - "No, I leave it in my storage unit." Ah - another perspective opening. Not as bare of resources as I had thought. Tomorrow she will get her ticket. She seems happy, not a care on her mind.

*friendship*

*June 1*

Sunday morning: Stepping out at dawn, I'm surprised to find Squirrel Woman sitting in her usual spot on the curb, peaceful as always, a little pull shopping cart loaded with her stuff at her side, no bike or three-wheeler, sorting out her wares in an unhurried, diligent manner. Then she sits knitting a hot-pink scarf, contentedly as if she were sitting in her rocking chair in her own home. When she notices me watching her, she waves to me and smiles invitingly. I go over and sit with her. She has left her vehicle at her mother's, she tells me, and is presently waiting for her to return from *California* (with her usual proud nod, glancing at me briefly to verify the impression this may have made). She could stay at her Mom's, she says, "but everything is shut off, you know, lights and all..." She explains why scarves are needed: Phoenix is warm

really only for three months of the year - in her view - "June, July, August; by September it gets cold. One needs a scarf for winter, and they wear out, you know" - nodding at me gravely again. She says she doesn't like the young women, they don't know how to sew or knit, the Bible says we need to know these basic things and how to do for ourselves. I agree, we do. The young, I offer, on the other hand have to learn a whole lot of other things today, like this ever-expanding computer technology that keeps them so busy!

As I take my leave to get in my morning walk before it gets too hot, I realize I've come to feel a kind of kinship with this woman. She has told me that her family is of Hungarian origin, and her very posture as she sits on the curb, not slumping, not collapsed, but in an orderly, tidy, almost stylish fashion, has something of the Old World about it. The way she seems always nicely dressed, too, with her hair pinned up handsomely, seems to imply that. And then these views she just shared, echoing my own upbringing, the seven years of sewing and knitting school girls had to endure in my time (two afternoons a week), and other ways we had to properly learn to attend to the "basics" of family life.

I'm not worried about this woman, whatever the reason why she lives on the streets. However deluded she may be, she seems to have her life in hand, caring for it in small steps as I care for mine. And it brings her the pleasure, the good spirit, the attitude of confidence she constantly seems to be in.

She does talk a lot about her family, fondly, which seems scattered far but very present to her mind. I think of my friend Jay saying the cause of the social disintegration we witness in America today is the breakdown of the family.

And what is the cause of that? "Individualism," is the answer I often hear. And yet how individual this little woman is!

Of all the connections I've made with homeless persons so far, this relationship seems the one coming closest to a simple natural friendship.

**Burt**

*April 12*

As I sit on Matthew's front steps writing, on a hot but breezy afternoon, Burt, the gentle homeless man Ryan had introduced me to at McDonald's near the beginning of my time here, comes along the sidewalk in his wheelchair, and I spontaneously rush out to greet him. We chat for a bit. I ask if he would like some water, then bring him a glass of it with ice and fresh lemon, which he drinks down quickly. I also bring him a copy of the photo Ryan has taken recently of Burt and me by the prayer house (which I had reserved for someone else), asking if he would like to have it. He nods, and I get him an envelope for it, and inscribe

the back of the print with names and dates for future reference.

I ask if he stays at CASS. No, another shelter. I inquire whether he has there what he needs. "*I could use some things!*", he says, looking at me darkly. I ask what things he needs, and he seems to indicate toiletries. I tell him we may have some over at the prayer house, would he like me to take him there? Again he nods and starts moving, then asks me to push his chair. I do so. I leave him in a shady spot across the street from the prayer house while I go in to check, finding three of the large plastic boxes a church gave us at Christmas, left in a closet, packed with a great variety of articles (in travel size). I bring out one box to see what articles Burt may want, holding up piece by piece and reading the labels to him. Suddenly he says he wants *the entire box*. I look at him perplexed. The whole box? What for? Twenty bottles of different shampoos, fifteen lotions, a dozen soaps... A heavy box, for a man with only one functioning arm or hand and no use of his legs and probably very little personal space to put things, and likely not used to holding on to them... I say I'll just give him what he needs for now and put the rest back for other people who may need something. He can always come back for more, I say, if he needs it. He says, "forget it," he doesn't want it. I don't understand. "You said you needed some?" It's either all or nothing, it seems. Once again, all logic seems to break down. I don't know what I'm dealing with. I decide to make the decision myself. *He seems to want the box*. I put all the content on the sidewalk next to me and choose one or two pieces of all the products he indicates he wants as I hold them up to him and put them in the empty box, plus a large white T-shirt he says he also wants. I close the box and give it to him. As I gather up the rest to take it back inside, he opens the box again to add another item in my hand. What is the meaning of all of this?

I leave him for a moment with the heap on the sidewalk to get some container inside, finding an open one at the bottom of the closet, then put all the stuff left over into it. To my (rational) mind, I did the best I could to make sense – in *my* world.

Like most homeless, in my experience so far, Burt is gracious, thanks me and blesses me. A man working at a computer in the prayer house tells me he has made some food, which he offers to share with Burt. He eats and drinks in the meager shade of the one small tree in the prayer house yard, then he's on his way with his box.

Back on Matthew's porch, I get to talk with Matt about what just happened, describing the incident in detail. Matt, who has volunteered at Andre House for several years, doesn't know the answer either. We do not know what our efforts at interacting and giving mean to the homeless, we may only know what they mean to us. Matt feels many homeless take whatever they can get for free, whether they need it or

not. (My experience also.) *There may be a need, a neediness, unrelated to any objective value of things, and it cannot be recognized or named by the needy other than through obtaining things.*

In the light of this, it may be that we cannot make “mistakes” in a rational or objective sense in our effort to respond to this neediness. Giving Burt the whole box, or half a box full, or just a few items may in the end all amount to the same. There may be no *objective* value in any of these actions over another. The only difference would be one of *heart*. Whether I respond in kindness, tenderness, generosity, compassion - or gruffly, reluctantly, meanly, or demanding a rationality the recipient is not capable of, may make a difference. These people may have limited power of *reason*, but they do have (I believe) a *soul*, and they can *feel the spirit of a response*. Perhaps with an even keener sensibility.

The detail of Burt wanting *the whole box* – cumbersome and too heavy for him as it was and without objective need – does remain interesting to me, though. *This was no random request*. There was clear *wanting* in it, a *will*. He did not want a *part*. Was he saying, “*My need is whole, total. And it can only be met by a whole, total. I need EVERYTHING, ALL. Total, entire healing*” - ?

Jesus gave that. I’m convinced. He said, “What is easier to say: ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or, ‘take up your bed and walk?’” He didn’t separate needs, filling only some but not others. He knew the need as *one, total*, and offered the healing that would heal the whole, totally. This, I think, may have been the secret of his success, why the crowds trailed after him. *He truly understood the need*, and he had the power in him to heal it wholly.

To keep this in mind. To keep mind and heart on this Christ, even while I give “only” a bottle of shampoo or a glass of water. Which may be - sometimes perhaps, by grace - a touch of that power which heals wholly. A small experience of it maybe. A tiny sense of this power existing in the world. And its *availability*, which spells *hope*.

Toward evening, Burt comes back. As I greet him, I see his reddened eyes looking at me with that other look men give women. I hadn’t expected it in him, I had not seen it before. We bump fists. “You are beautiful,” he says languidly and almost pleading, as if seeking a way in.

*April 13*

Sunday morning (the next day): When I see him coming, laboring to maneuver his chair forward with hacking motions of his heel on the pavement and to make the wheels rotate with his one good hand, I flee inside, but he rolls by on the far side of the street without even looking in my direction.

## Part VI

### *alley life*

#### AN ODE TO THE ALLEY

*In assembling this manuscript, I came to feel I wanted to dedicate a section especially to the “alley,” “the highway of the homeless” as I came to feel it. The dirt alley running directly by the southern side of my house, without separation, gave me opportunity to witness and feel something of the importance of these long, narrow avenues of hard sand or pavement running between backyard and backyard all through the city of Phoenix. Free of cars and other motor vehicles, except the occasional trash-collecting truck, and generally unused by walkers other than the homeless, they constitute a kind of private realm to them, with many practical uses.*

*The main use of the alley for property-owning or -renting citizens seems to be as a depository for the very large, city-provided trash cans (I like to call them “tubs”) where householders can leave their trash bags out of sight until they are anonymously picked up. These large tubs harbor smells that grow stronger over time and reach across fences, hedges, and property walls. The two alley cans placed just across from my house kept me aware of this.*

*For the wandering people, the alley holds many more uses. Perhaps its first is as a place of relative privacy, a piece of public property less contested than the streets, sidewalks, or parks. A place, perhaps, where one may be relatively unbothered among one’s own. A place where one may sit and rest for a moment unobserved, leaning against a wall, perhaps in the shade of an overhanging tree; perhaps to take a snooze or even spend a part of a night. A place where one may attend, also, to that common business all of us must attend to in private.*

*Not that there is official tolerance for the homeless in the alleys. Dogs may bark at them fiercely from the backyards as they pass, and residents may eye them suspiciously from behind windows and curtains. It just seems a little less easy to detect them; and because most “regular” citizens would rather not spend much time in that place, there may be less harassment for lingering.*

*They came through at a good frequency, the wanderers, some more than once a day. On foot or on a bike, often pulling or pushing some little cart. One purpose was clearly to search the trash containers – for soda cans that may bring some money, for unexpected treasure such as crumpled clothing or old shoes, pieces and parts of broken appliances – often hard to identify – for eventual creative use, and – yes, food. The smelly thing.*

*Many times a day the lids of these cans would go up, a head and shoul-*

*ders would disappear in the vast depth, and after re-emergence, the lid be slammed down again – or not. If it stayed up, I would soon notice by the increased stench, and go out and close it.*

*There came to be, for me, a kind of lyrical feeling about these “secret” veins of a different but interested and often vivid life, and the little conversations I had with passing customers. A sense of affection for this little world. I came to hold the “alley” and its traffic in tenderness, and hope to sing a little ode to it in the following.*

### ***cigarette money***

An old black man pulls into the alley as I sit outside my door, on a bicycle heavily loaded with all sorts of junk, including some big, square black boxes, parts of some electronic equipment. “What will you do with these?”, I ask, interested, drawing near as he stops by the trash cans. He says he hopes to get some cigarette money for them. He freely engages with me, in a sincere way, not asking me for money. He’s hard to look at: his eyes clouded over like the eyes of a blind person, his mouth without front teeth, the naked pink gums slimy as he laughs, saliva collecting on the chafed lips. Yet there is something endearing about him, his innocence. He seems without complaint or bitterness about his fate. There seems spirit in him for his life. My heart is moved toward him. “Let me get you some cigarette money,” I say, going into my house. As I give it to him, I feel obligated to point out (Ryan has said he never gives people money, there are so many addictions): “I don’t support smoking, it’s not good for you,” then add, “but it does give you some comfort, doesn’t it,” wishing it to him, the old guy, in his hardship, after a hard life, no doubt; who could deny it to him? He thanks me and extends his hand to me, apologizing for it being dirty. I take it, then lay my own hand discreetly on the small of my back so as not to touch my face with it. After he leaves, I go inside and wash it, feeling this as my duty. I am not disgusted. All of it - the gift I gave, the pressing of the dirty hand, and the washing - seems in right order; all of it, together, an affirmation of him and of me. This man gave me delight.

### ***the hungry man***

Late in the evening, sitting out front again in the dark, I hear a noise behind me. A large man is turning into the alley and lifts the tops of the huge black tubs of garbage standing there, looking in. What is he looking for at this hour? (Collectors of aluminum cans tend to come early in the day.) I get out of my chair and step up to my little fence: “Are you hungry?” - “Yes.” Should any man among us have to stick his head into

these stinking bins at this hour, or any hour, to find himself a morsel of nourishment? In my mind, I go through my fridge to see what I have. Not much. "How about a peanut butter sandwich with cheese?" (Good bread. I have this often for lunch myself.)

"Do you have some rice, or..." His speech is slurred, I can't quite catch his words. "I have nothing cooked," I admit meekly. - "Chicken?," he inquires. Some other proposals of meats follow, I can hardly make them out. "Sorry, no meats." - "Ugh! keep it to yourself!," he decides disgustedly and walks away.

They can be choosy, these needy. A trace, a backbone perhaps, of identity, of self - what we like, what we don't, what we are used to; what is acceptable to us, what isn't; what is ours, of us, what is not.

I shouldn't blame him. He makes his way in the night, his own way, if deplorable. Jesus weeps over him because he is worthy.

### *still life in the alley*

I wake up before the alarm rings. Saturday morning. I shove to the side the beautiful yellow towel I've taped as a sunscreen over my little bathroom window and slide the pane open to let the cool morning air in. The view is of the dirt alley running by the side of my house with its two huge garbage cans. In front of one of them stands an empty baby carriage that looks to me exactly like Rose's. A little ball of crumpled cloth in it, that's all. The lid of the trash can stands wide open.

I'm consternated. What happened? Did she give up her vehicle, only yesterday her treasured possession that she sheltered in my yard?

The raised lid implies something thrown into the can. As if Rose had thrown herself into it, trash, at last, to trash. With all her other trash.

Was it her, before dawn, pounding on my door, or did I just imagine it?

Trashed lives.

A man with swollen bags hung on all four sides of him enters the alley and passes on rapidly. I wash and dress and step out. The sun has just come up behind the high-rises at the center of town to the east. Having no window to that direction, I see it first in the sharp, perfect reflection in the windows of the state government tower to the west, at some distance, making my heart soar, insist on soaring in triumphant praise, despite everything. O glorious sun for which I am here! Yes, a new day!

When I come around the corner of my little house to the alley, where I can see the sun directly and fling my arms to the sky as on most mornings, I stop. A young black man stands by the trash cans. He has picked up a small piece of clothing someone has thrown (since I last looked) on the empty child's carriage and flings it over his shoulder as his new

possession. He checks the content of the cans, then walks on down the alley eastward.

Oh, the mystery of these lives! Fresh clothing available everywhere. If I offered this man some – would he want it? Or is it the searching of the trash that is his life? (I'm thinking of the hungry man the other night: refusing the fresh food I offered, preferring instead to search through the stinking containers.)

I bend down and examine the carriage. The design and coloring (gray) make it look like Rose's; the cloth, I had thought, was heavier. I'm unsure. Then I look into the barrel with its lid up. Sure enough. *That's Rose's stuff.* I recognize the gray pad subtly sprinkled with specks of color which movers use to protect furniture and which many homeless carry. I recognize the pale yellow, dry plant debris it is covered with from Rose's nights on the ground. And a red thing, some kind of blanket. I recognize the exact color. *That's her stuff.* And more - underwear, and I don't know what else. Where is *Rose*? What is she without her load? (And why? Why suddenly rid herself of it? But "why" is not a question fitting her world.)

I slowly trail down the alley through which the sun is pouring now, the air still deliciously cool, just in my home flip-flops, leaving my door unlocked behind me. Megan's backyard first, to the right, the orderly yard of clean, chaste, Christian people. Yes, the care is obvious, her tiny flower and vegetable garden in a wooden frame, the climbing vines she just put in at the chain-link fence, to spread out green and bloom with orange trumpet blossoms, screening her "other" universe from the alley and its customers. - Later the very large backyard that is crammed full of junk of all sorts, including all kinds of used furniture. (Arizona weather makes unnecessary the separation between in and out. Things may sit out there for a long time to come.) What is the meaning of this "strange" accumulation?

To my left, shortly before I reach the next cross road, an old dumpster with half its black plastic lid ripped off and gone, the other half broken, implying that the device may no longer be in commercial use. Against it, on the ground, a large pile of used books, thrown, cast off, not offered; some half open, pages and covers bent. Books beyond respect, trash now. Their titles still glaring, still competing for a customer's eyes: *Intense Moments With The Savior.- Circles Of Grace.- Born Again.* And other spiritual offerings, including *The Holy Bible.*

I'm on 12<sup>th</sup> Ave now, the next cross street over from mine. At a distance I glimpse the lovely white picket fence of our prayer house, pure, picturesque, sweet. A charming little abode, serene in this world of trashed lives. Gazing on it, I shake my head inwardly. No. I came to this place, the A2J community, needing an anchor in my explorations, in the

exposure I was risking. And an anchor it is. But the ship remaining at anchor becomes a captive, missing its voyage.

Another one of those black tubs standing near the road, in an empty dirt lot, tall wild grasses climbing up high on the next fence, like a fur covering some shame. The can's lid is down, but lots of stuff hangs out from under it, including clothes. Colorful. I study the offering. It becomes a still life. One could make a series of still lifes of the poverty in America, the trash culture. As there was such a series by a famous photographer, on government grant, documenting the social misery in the rural areas of the U.S. during the Great Depression. Pictures that hang now in museums, admired by people from the class that has never known and will never know such misery, never see it in reality. Still lifes as I create them in words, or try to. *Celebration*.

Returned to my place, I settle on my footstool in our little parking lot with my notebook, facing the alley and the climbing sun. A small old man passes me on a bicycle. He curves it around to talk to me, asking if this is my carriage by the trash cans. I say it looks like someone is throwing it out. In fact, I say, I think I know the woman whose carriage it was, her stuff is in the can. He wonders aloud whether he might make use of it. He seems honorable and polite, gentle, pursuing his life in an honorable manner. I compliment him on his good-looking vehicle. (Was it stolen, like so many others I hear about, before it got into his hands?) He thanks me and leans it against the next property wall and sets about to thoroughly examine the stroller, folding it up, working it. It feels good, the sense of the real honest work of a man making his life, using what he has. "I do have some money," he tells me, "but..." Yes, why spend it. He is thinking, he says, of using the little thing for a cart to attach to his bike. Lots of contraptions like this around the city.

Finally, he loads the folded carriage on his back and walks off down the alley with it, pushing his bike, whirling up dust. The tiny dogs next to Megan's yard race up to their fence, yapping at him fiercely and shrilly. Poor Rose, you are rid of your vehicle, "made for a brain-damaged child."

I keep getting interrupted in my notes. Are the interruptions part of the still life? A still life ever in motion, but a still life nevertheless.

Andrew, my next-door neighbor, appears. "It's a marathon today," he says. I turn and notice that, quietly behind my back, our little street has been lined on both sides with cars. Not the cars of the poor, if there are any; good, shiny, clean middle-class cars. The whole neighborhood must be filled with them. Small groups of people, each united by a particular color T-shirt, descend from them and silently walk west, toward the state government center. "We could have made some money here," Andrew grins, pointing at our vacant parking lot, good for about five

cars (none of us in the four-plex has one). “Twenty bucks for the day,” he muses. Nobody has asked for the space.

Meanwhile I’ve lost my thread. The unraveling of the still life – is this part of it, too?

The man who took the carriage returns, riding by me and waving. The device is no longer on his back. Leaning against another black tub, probably. Exciting another seeker’s curiosity.

Megan is spraying her little garden in its box. I wave to her. It’s time for my breakfast.

The half-full bag of bagels that was left beneath the seat of Rose’s carriage now adorns the closed top of the garbage can, a solitary decoration or trophy, surreal, related to nothing. Its unoccupied portion of clear plastic above the tie flutters in the wind, glitters sharply in the sun. Gorgeous.

A car finally does pull into our vacant lot. I scan the young driver with suspicion, suddenly possessive. It turns out he is a friend of the community, Jose. The marathon is for the Heart Association. Jose’s mom has had open-heart surgery, he tells us, his whole family is walking. “She’s still alive, praise God.”

The still life lives on.

I get up to walk a few steps. On the outer limb of a palo verde tree along our sidewalk, not far from my house, I discover a large nest that looks clearly fresh, made of bristly brown twigs. It’s a desert nest, not an open cup as birds build in cooler places but a round ball with a clear round opening near the underside, about one inch in diameter and lined with mud, a tunnel of darkness leading to the cool interior. This will keep the baby birds from burning up in the sun (the tree’s foliage is so light the nest isn’t hidden at all), as well as the adult bird sitting on the eggs.

I stand a while before I discover the tiny architect, perched with a small nervous twitter on a telephone line nearby. A verdin, as I expected, having observed their nesting habits in the wild.

*A small dark opening to the cool within:* I’m ready for this dusky cool, after the past months of ceaseless observation and participation of heart and mind in the bright light of consciousness. Through the small dark doorway of my house and heart, to a yet stiller life within.

I thank the Lord, arrived there, for the small space of stillness that is available to us all, even to the least of his creatures. Lord, let all those out there find the door to the secret place of stillness within them, and in their lives, whatever they are, that they may find your Presence and re-unite with it, and their hearts be strengthened.

### *the sleeper*

A sight this morning as I take the route of the alley over to the prayer house, a little curious about the upholstered furniture that has been put out there from the large backyard crammed full of discarded stuff. Arrived, I see a brown sheet or blanket on a large couch, crumpled up and half rolled, then I notice a sneaker sticking out at one end, and a tuft of hair in a hand at the other. A sleeper. “Not a bad bed for a night,” I’m thinking, standing a moment and contemplating the sight. The person doesn’t stir, the sun shining down on him or her brightly.

A few hours later, taking some trash out to the can, I walk over again, wondering if the person might still be there. (Alive?) No person, but the brown wrapper is left behind in a little heap between sofa cushions – possibly provided along with the bed. Not bad.

Jacob, a homeless man who joins us at A2J, telling me how he dislikes and refuses the food offered at the Shelter, said, when I asked him how else he nourishes himself without money: “*The Lord provides.*”

## Part VII

### *easter*

(meditations, spiritual openings)

#### *the façade*

April 3

“Lord, let the light of your face shine upon us.”

This verse from Psalm 4, preserved in my heart since I first learned it at a monastery, comes to my lips as I sit down this morning in the little “quiet space” I’ve created in my present dwelling.

The sun’s light, powerfully hitting the yellow side wall of my neighbor’s building only a yard or two from me, is reflected through the screen of my window, with the blind half drawn up, into my little space, producing a lovely, soothing glow on its avocado-green walls, both radiant and mild. Shining on me in this way, it becomes a likeness for me of the light of God’s face yearned for in this psalm.

One reason why I usually keep the shade all the way down, besides shielding myself from too bright a light when I sit here, is that I don’t want to see the *ugliness* of the wall across. I want to shut it out. I sit in this space to be *away* from the “scene” of the streets and the city’s stressful ugliness, in a refuge of quiet and a little *beauty*, enhanced by a couple of small (and changing) flower arrangements I keep there. In desperate need of it.

So, to *see* that façade out there in my sitting was unusual. And I suffered a *shock*.

Not because of the poverty and (mild) ugliness of this piece of wall with its small, blind bathroom window and raw bits of plumbing. But because of a sudden perception I had of it - with a shock - as *beauty*.

No, I didn’t discover some pretty little thing on it, like a little weed growing out of a crack. The little blooming weed I look for in the concentration camp of human life, in the cityscapes of blacktop and cement, and am moved by so often. No, no little thing of beauty on that façade called to me. *But the façade itself in its reality, just as it is.* The impression came with earthquake force, rock-splitting, overturning my inward earth.

I saw this (Lord, give me words):

I have been looking for “that of Beauty” in the homeless. “That of God,” if you will; the “*real* person” within, the Imago Dei, the Seed of Christ... But suddenly I realize there is not “that within,” nothing to dig or look for in the deprived (or any other) person. That of..., or He, I am looking for is *standing before me*. That’s Him I’m looking at - in the condition I see. The servant, disfigured, Christ in destitution. I’m seeing

not only his *condition*, but *Him*. There is nothing hidden or buried in Him.

Suddenly, in one blow, to my seeing, that façade was God. An impoverished, destitute God - but God, full God, in the very condition I was seeing, and He was "pressing up against me." (I remembered the year when I experienced this in people and this term came to me: The need, the powerful spiritual hunger in people, pressing up against me.)

Here was God, Himself, coming to me as a *beggar*. Begging for my attention. For - do I dare say it? - my *love*.

I burst into tears.

I suddenly knew, it all opened, as perhaps never before - the answer to the question that had been plaguing me.

The homeless - Peter, Rose, Dolores, Christabel, and the others - are God in Christ pressing up against me, face to face, as close as this façade, begging for my neighborliness, friendship, love.

And I suddenly saw why the second commandment, in Jesus' saying, the one about *love of neighbor*, is "like unto the first." I saw it completely, at that moment: *Why they cannot be separated*.

Something had come before the shock of breakthrough. I saw, first, that the wall I was looking at *blocks* my way, my view, the freedom road of my eyes. It blocks the view of the beauty I desire - nature, trees, sky. I comprehended that *God* had set this façade before my face, blocking my way, hedging me in (like Gomer in the book of Hosea). *And then He declared this very barrier and obstruction as His own face*.

It was a revolutionary change in my understanding of my encounters and efforts with the homeless.

A little later, as I sat outside my door on my footstool, Matt of the A2J community came by. I had asked him for a talk on some of my questions. I got a chair out for him, sat at his feet, and told him about the experience I'd just had, for I could be in no other place at that moment.

"*Christ in the breadline*," Fritz Eichenberg's image I meditated on a while ago, comes to mind again. The Christ who does not pass out the bread but stands in the begging place with the poor and destitute, himself a beggar, *like them*.

Meeting Christ in the very poor (and depraved) does not mean to search for some noble part within them. It means to accept, and see, these estranging figures as Christ - in his destitute form.

It was a moment of deep contrition for me, a dissolving of a barrier, an obstacle, deep within me, leaving me lightened.

When I met Rose, crazed and violent and abusive, I met *Rose*. I do not need to search for another Rose within. *Precisely not*. This is the acceptance the homeless need and ask for - Peter, the Native, so clearly!:

as who they are *now*, at the moment in which I meet and witness them, because it is *them*, the person I look for. *The person disfigured, depraved, preyed on by Satan in all ways*, eaten into as if by vultures for all I know, yes, but in all that, *remaining the person*, crying out to me, in their twisted ways: "See, it is I, recognize me, accept me!"

Rose, you are you and I will not say otherwise just because your appearance and manner are marred. (And it explains, only this explains, the love I felt for you as we sat side by side drinking coffee together in my dooryard after your fit, peering into your distressed face that appeared lovely to me.) - And so, Christabel, with you. You are you, image of God, do not forget it. Lord, do not let me forget it. Nothing needs to be rescued, you are right there, looking at me like this façade this morning. You, too, Peter, forgive me.

O Lord, let not this knowledge be taken from me. How easily it can be chased away when we are confronted with horror, and the fright and revulsion it induces.

The flowers I put on the window sill where I sit are lovely, praise God, I need them. I need the beauty of babies and young women and men and so much more. But the façade behind the flowers, glaring at me now in the midday sun, has become holy.

God, I believe you have taught me this winter. I have not *achieved* anything in outward works, and I have been sad and oppressed by this. But do not let me forget what you have taught me. Let it be some good in the world, helping the suffering people, helping the world.

You showed me this morning that you come to us begging for our *love*. Not begging for our *works*, our hands and feet which, as has often been said, you do not have. No, you beg, quite personally, for our *hearts*, our love of you. And you do this, right now in my life, through these most suffering people, these "least worthy" in society's eyes. Showing me your "lowest condition" in the landscape of men.

*Help me not to reject you in this condition*, as you step up to my face in the way this façade did this morning, blocking my view to all else I would desire to see - would desire more.

There is no point, I told Matt, in denying the condition of these persons of the street. In ignoring it or repressing our revulsion and instinctive recoiling. There is no point in romanticizing or in any way idealizing these people in their state. (Jesus, I declared to Matt, was a *realist*, a hard-core realist.) Nor is there any point in denying, hard as it is when facing this reality, the image of God in which each of these people has been made. Not a little image buried somewhere in the innards of their human form. No, this form I'm looking at as it is, is formed in this image through and through and remains so, however disfigured it gets. (An ancient view the Eastern Church holds regarding a true icon

created in the Spirit: however marred or painted-over or cracked it gets over time, the icon remains holy.)

Lines from a poem that came to me years ago have been ringing in my mind lately, and they now seem to reveal their meaning at a greater depth: "...*the only thing we can do / about life is to love / it through and through and through.*"

We do not need to come up with some superhuman love to love life, or people, into something good. They are already loved through and through and through in the way they were made, and continue to be so. We need to *correspond* to this, to answer it accordingly.

If our own child were injured, I said to Matt, mangled in a car accident or horribly disfigured by human violence or disease, we would not turn away from this child and say, no, this is not whom I recognize as my child (anymore). Rather, we would be moved all the more powerfully toward this child and his care, we would not shy away from touching and kissing him in his very disfigured state, we would claim him as our child all the more (maybe even as if for the first time). This, I said, is how I have come to understand *Saint Francis kissing the leper*, even his wounds: Not in an effort to overcome natural disgust or abhorrence, nor in adherence to an ideal of Christian love, but in recognizing, with his whole heart and mind - jubilantly! - *who that man is*.

Lord, I know from experience that even the most powerful and deep-reaching spiritual openings you give only make the smallest change in our actual relations to people and our conduct in the world. In humility I acknowledge that I am a *hard block* for you to carve. Make me patient as you are patient when my "progress" on the Way I desire seems very small and slow, help me not to forget what you have shown me and to be faithful to it, in patience, as best I can.

Help me to know also, and to allow, that others, even those my charity yearns toward, will *help* me in this, will be truly the bridge, in their very condition, on which I may walk closer to you.

Father, I thank you for the little window you pushed open today in my understanding, enough to break my heart toward my new neighbors.

### *spirit of friendship (the gentle yoke)*

April 7

Resting outside my door, back from an early trip for groceries including a walk on the Canal, I contemplate the wonder of human encounters possible in a simple little outing like this. The landscape seems dotted for me these days with friendly human presences - and what *delight* it brings, mutually, to engage with them!

On the Canal, an elder man with a beautiful dog, and a long con-

versation about the practice of walking and the Canal wildlife. At the grocery store, the slow, humble, talkative clerk, polio-injured, at the cash register, and her gentle and sweet complaining about her tiredness despite coffee and energy drinks, while she attends to my order. Later, the black man waiting with me on the bus stop bench at 19<sup>th</sup> Ave and Van Buren, who expounds to me on his beautiful, simple philosophy of life - "do unto others as you would have others do unto you" - which he tries to adhere to. (He wants to become a surgical assistant, he says, because it is so *interesting*. He is squeamish, he admits, but then he thinks of the *person* his work will be helping, and how he would like his mother or sisters to be treated if they were on the operating table.) - And even as I sit here finally in my place again, the nods, the small greetings and sweet remarks as people pass by.

*Spirit of friendship* - taking away fear - the fear of "friend or foe?" - affirming the *hope* that is in that question.

The young man presently hosted in our four-plex, just out of jail, circling our block restlessly, shy, ashamed, confused perhaps: slowly opening up to the spirit of friendship surrounding him, finding comfort.

Fred again, too, whom I've befriended in the streets over all these weeks - walking west on Van Buren, maybe going home from a night shift. When I see him, a *sign* around the city, I feel: "All is well. Here is Fred. All is well with the world."

Yesterday, in late afternoon, I found myself walking over to CASS spontaneously, just somehow drawn in that direction, gently. An atmosphere of a lazy, quiet Sunday afternoon, not too many people in the yard. All seemed at rest - lying in bits of shade, sleeping, some sitting and talking. I went inside the Human Services Center and sat in the large, dusky lobby among a couple of dozen clients sitting around. Just sitting there among them, relaxed, at peace.

How much has happened since I needed my young friend Ruben's accompaniment last winter to even *dare* to enter what I imagined then to be a hall of horror! How easy and fearlessly I moved among the folks now, and what I was thinking was: "Normalization." *Normalization of relationship*. As if this was what had been achieved in these two winters - in me, inviting the same in "them" who are no longer "them."

As if a constraint around my heart had given, and there was ease, simple ease.

So little... Yes: "*My yoke is easy*." He is right, he spoke truth. So little - and so much, when I think of the place where I was. His yoke was easy then, too - but now it feels so on *me*.

Lord, with trepidation I say this - trepidation comes as soon as I say it. *Will this remain with me?* Will I remain in this relationship - to life, to the world, to people? In this freedom of moving over the earth, in the

spirit of George Fox's famous admonition - "cheerfully," answering the true person in everyone, our true life.<sup>6</sup> Light, easy, enveloped by grace and meeting it everywhere.

The man on the bus bench this morning, getting a bit into preaching fervor as I listened to him, and when I suggested that meeting the world in the attitude he was describing might open life to *ourselves*, too, and make *us* feel treated well by others, so that life becomes easier for ourselves as well - he asserted that, no, the devil gets in all the more as we live in that good spirit, trying all his wiles on us. - Yes. The ancient saints have found and acclaimed this.

Lord, protect me. As often as I swerve from this walk under your gentle yoke, in openness to the world, bring me back under it.

It's no longer a matter of the "kind of people" I meet. A threshold being crossed, a door standing open, the door through which the Guide walks with ease, carrying his cross. The yoke his Father makes easy for all who love Him.

### *Easter breakfast at Andre House*

*April 20*

The mockingbird no longer sings on my telephone tree, its season seems past, but the tree still stands, dead and upright and solid, and will all through the long season of the heat.

How still the neighborhood is. People do not make much noise, those who haven't gone away for Easter or to church. The traffic makes the noise, but there is little of it on Van Buren this morning, and almost none in the other streets. One can stand in the midst of the broad avenues further south, and in the wide intersections, for as long as one likes. The vistas of their emptiness open to the horizons.

A hush of holiness settles here, too, on this piece of cityscape, the mystery becoming palpable as I sit alone in the silence - an only listening presence in the stillness. Alone - not having accepted any of the Easter invitations that came. "Church" - right here. Here, God, the message you give me.

And behold - there *is* a mockingbird, warbling away! I look up to the phone tree - yes, a bird on it: a small dove, then another. Doing their love feast, up there in the lofty seat. The singer is placed across the street somewhere.

No desolation allowed today. I am not alone.

But all this experience may be due to the visit I had this morning - my Easter visit to the Shelter for "Easter breakfast." Actually, just ordinary breakfast, but one brought to Andre House, too, where they don't usually serve it. A group of Asian-Indians passing it out, with quiet

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<sup>6</sup>"Then walk cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in everyone."

nobility of gesture, clean and beautiful-looking people, one woman in a sari; their black hair glistening in the sun.

I had hesitated about what to do on Easter. Then last night, when Squirrel Woman on the curb told me about Andre House breakfast, that felt right. Sharing Easter with *these* folks - those to whom I was sent. Who else?

But when I went, I didn't feel that connection right away. I felt - my tiredness: how it is *enough*, how my seeing is full, how I cannot "look" any more - on these masses of the miserable, ragged, mad, depraved. Pressing in the "overflow lot" in two long breakfast lines, and under a large canopy set up for a religious service, rows of chairs with a few scattered attenders on them; an old bearded guy in a Beduin outfit and an ample-bodied old woman in a flowery skirt leading. As the man sang into a microphone, a black fellow reading his Bible in the front row began to loudly shout praises and hallelujahs, lifting his hands, all in his own bubble of worship. The old woman approached him to quiet him, but to no avail.

Another big crowd over at Andre House, where I did stand in the food line, then settled with what I got on a bench in the sun, next to a woman who drew me. She was not accessible. Notable: how alone most of them are, apparently wishing to remain so. Often talking to themselves.

Then a figure that seemed familiar, in the line - Jacob! His tightly curled African hair bound up straight to the sky, his scraggly beard gathered in that festive sheaf of turquoise beads he sometimes wears. He waved and joined me briefly, smiling brightly; I commended him for the nice clothes he was wearing. He said he was to join Ryan for church, was I coming, too?

On my slow way back, I felt drawn to an old black woman, her close-cropped hair graying, sitting in the dirt by the road with her legs stretched out before her, leaning against a telephone pole, sheltered by its slender shade. "You found shade?", I addressed her gently, moved by the care expressed in her appearance, the cleanliness of her long cotton dress. - "Yes." - "You had breakfast?" - "Yes." She extended her dark dry hand to me, I took it gratefully.

But it was a sight on the strip of gravel between the sidewalk and the adjoining waste lot full of trash that finally arrested me in my track. A huddle of filthy, shredded blanket under which something like a knee seemed to be sticking up. (It was that knee-shape, for some reason, that fixed my eyes on it.) *Was there a person in there?* I noticed some heaving in the heap, then a faint whistling sound. On one end of the bundle, a tuft of matted hair sticking out; on the other, a sneaker with a short piece of bare leg. - A woman?

I kept standing. I don't often wish I had a camera, words are my picture-taking, but here I wished I did. Just for this one image. I yearned to take it away with me, a picture without words. Some things cannot be said in words. This image seemed to say it all.

The sun was shining brightly on her.

By the blazing-green expanse of the Carnegie Library lawn, I broke down.

The cool shade of some of its trees was falling across the cast-iron fence into the street, and I was standing in that shade, feeling the breeze, feeling the beauty. *But no one else was.* They walked on the other side of the street, the hot side, as if this were appropriate to them. The old black woman in the shade of a telephone pole, surrounded by waste lots and trash, in the mercilessly hot barrenness, was not seeking, perhaps not *daring*, to use this free offer, available to all.

"The homeless are always on the go, they shoo us away, there is no place for us," a young fellow over at Andre House breakfast, crazy but full of cheerful wit and smarts, had been shouting, roaring with laughter. (I offered him my untouched plate, eating only my oatmeal, which he grabbed gladly, gobbling it down after his own - most of them, I noticed, ate with appetite.)

With fresh power I realized, standing there by that empty park, how in all my time here I had found *no answer* - not a single answer to any of my questions regarding the life of these people - *nor my own*. Tears came, running, a cry rose: "*Give me answer! Give me answer! Give me answer!*" Desperation was full. No answer had been given, hard as I sought, turning the question at every angle. Nothing.

But God hears. I don't know about those ears, but they hear - the cry from the depths.

A man went by on a bike. I saw his cart attached to it, some little improvised thing fortified with sticks of wood fastened together. A neat little job. So many wild little creations like this around the city. So many ideas, tirelessly conceived, ever changing. Engaging people's creativity, maintaining their spirits. *Folks working at their lives!*

I smiled! *There was joy!* Suddenly I knew: God was there. God is here! *Here in these lives and the way people make them.*

I suddenly knew the answer had come. I was in it! This was the answer: *God is here.* There is no other.

Resurrection. I had found Easter, my church, the message.

Everything changed.

Stillness, beauty, majesty opening all around me as I slowly trailed my way home, picking a blossom here and there off a tree, resting on a low cement bar bordering a parking lot, in the long shade of an office building reflecting the world's beauty in its big, shiny windows. Noth-

ing but beauty wherever I looked - yes, God is here.

Prayer came.

*God, I know this is why you sent me here. Not to change things, not to make them "better," but to find you in these depths, too, the depths of this low, presented this Easter morning to me by the woman under her blanket in the dust. If I've come to "share Easter," I've come to share your Presence with them, that's all. Not to tell them about it, not to call them into it, not to convert them. To be saved by it, once more, in my own heart, and grant them this salvation by which they, too, live.*

Yes, they live, these people. Each in their way. In the shade of a telephone pole, under a shoddy blanket in the dirt, pulling a home-made cart of worthless stuff.

And then, too, there was *Rose!* How would she not be? Calling to me from across an intersection. Crazy Rose, recognizing me before I did her! I greeted her in joy, then joined her. Rose made over, all new again: new bag ("I buy them," she said eagerly), on wheels; new clothes ("I get them..." - I don't know where); a bright green baseball cap, brand new, shielding her eyes efficiently. *Rose making her life* - God knows how. Yes, God with her.

What do I need an answer for? What answer would I need, if God is present, at work?

Not a trace of resentment in her against me. Cheerfulness. Her usual obsessions of mind. Her zeal to be on her way, driven, drawn, who knows. *Rose knew me!*

That's two "friends," two neighbors I recognized and was recognized by in this visit to bedlam. I breathed with the gladness of it.

"Where is Dolores?," I thought.

I care.

God has not abandoned us. All of this shows it.

As the shouting black man in the tent said (I didn't know then he was right, suspecting him of "compensating"): *Hallelujah!*

Should have shouted with you, brother.

### ***post Easter***

*April 24*

On rereading my account on "Easter breakfast", the term "*sharing Easter*" springs to my eye, triggering some thoughts.

So far, it might be said, I have shared the *Crucifixion* with the homeless. The humiliation, disfigurement, destitution of Christ, in their suffering. I've tried to stand with them under the cross that is theirs as well as mine, to *share the condition*, be present to it, feel it in myself.

The experience of the "façade" opened more clearly to me what this is I tried to look at so intently, to be so entirely present to.

The Easter opening brought the *Resurrected* and his presence. The hope, the *joy*, and my being present to this.

Walking up the olive grove toward the center of town with these thoughts this morning, I felt how being in witness to Easter may be harder - harder to *sustain* - even than keeping Christ company in his misery and suffering and hideous state (hard as this is). The latter state I can see readily, with my physical eyes; I can only deny it by looking away. But the other? *That* seeing and *believing* appears to be dependent much more entirely on *grace*. (Though it was grace, too, that enabled me to look on the suffering state.) The seeing and believing of Easter can only be *given*. Until he says: "*Mary!*"<sup>7</sup> how can I see, how can I know who it is I see?

The "answer" I've been waiting and crying for: it can only be *given* - to those who faithfully visit the tomb against all that reason can see, preferring to be with him dead to not being with him at all.

So, child of little faith, be in that visit. To witness the misery, the pain, the hopelessness every time, and join yourself to it and to him, dead or alive. Even in your own hopelessness, your own inability to feel hope - or even to believe the words you have heard.

It seems amazing - the gospel's *honesty*. The women didn't go to the tomb, his last station for all they knew, with any hope or expectation of seeing new life. They did not. They went to do for their beloved dead what they could do for the dead.

Isn't this how we are in relation to those whose condition we deplore most deeply? In love for the Beloved to do for those, dead for all we can see with the physical eye and sense, what we can do for them - a little dignity, a little honoring, our poor expressions of love and loyalty extended to them. Without hope that it will change their condition.

The rest - as we read in Romans yesterday at A2J - *is with the Father* ("... just as Christ was raised from the dead *by the glory of the Father*," Romans 6:4). That unfathomable, invisible, inexplicable grace that at the oddest moments, just when things appear to us more hopeless than ever, can suddenly touch us, without further preparation - and everything is changed, from tears to joy, jubilation, and thankfulness. And we feel in the *truth*.

Truth below, where Christ went. And truth above, where he also went, touching us, calling us, on the way.

To live in this patience, this steadfastness of the Easter women. Ultimately, our faith is neither in the up nor the down, these are only the manifestations. Our faith, like that of Jesus, is in the Father, the One in whom all this is held, with no harm to us, if we cling to Him.

To share this, this confidence, neither in human pessimism nor silly

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<sup>7</sup> John 20:16

human optimism, with all those we meet, whatever manifestation they express at the time - Lord, grant it.

**“be healed”**

May 25

Not far from my departure from Phoenix now, it felt right for me, this Sunday morning, to go and share breakfast one more time with the folks at the Shelter. It was served in the overflow lot and at Andre House. Great crowds of people, in the usual conditions. I felt no appetite. Lingered around the long, limp line in the Andre House lot, just hanging.

A fairly young woman approached me, claiming she was blind, completely blind, and deaf, which didn't seem true. She had no white cane, and I asked her how she got on without it. “Blind faith,” she said. She asked me to help her get into the line, since she was blind. We worked our way along slowly, chatting. She kept saying she's trying to be *positive*, not think about her ex-husband, no, not about him, just to go day by day. I felt little energy for engaging. She got food, I took a cup of lemonade. We sat on a bench together, until she suddenly stood up, grabbed her pack (out of which she had taken strange things to show me - but everything looks strange in a context of insanity, even the most ordinary objects, displaced, disconnected from sense and purpose) - and disappeared into the House. I figured she needed to use a bathroom and waited, as I would for a friend. She wasn't returning, and eventually I left.

(I did wonder, though, whether she might look for me later. I hated the thought of contributing to the experience of discontinuity, meaninglessness, disappointment or puzzlement, by not being present when she would reappear.)

Yesterday, Todd asked me, in one of our neighborly chats across the square post, what I was “taking away” from my time here. “Oh! So much!”, I blurted out, sincerely.

As I'm writing this on my couch in my living room, my eyes turn to the “Healing Commands of Jesus” listed in the book lying next to me, which we were reading from at prayer. The various *words of authority* Jesus spoke when healing individuals from their afflictions, as recorded in the gospel stories.

He did walk among the crowds I saw this morning, among all that suffering and despair and these awful outward conditions.

“Be healed,” I see on the page.

Shouldn't I be with him in that command as he gives it, walking with him on my visits? Should I be in anything else?

I was thinking about “hope” on coming back from the breakfast.

What is “hope” in me?

It isn't, as far as it depends on me only.

Jesus didn't hope. He had the *command*, because he had complete faith, authority, and will to heal. True, without him, I am worthless in that crowd over there, only one of them (for which I am often taken).

Some of us, here in the A2J community, have heard that command, have received it, through the community in which “God is working,” as Nick has said. They have picked up their bed and are walking: several former CASS residents.

This, Todd, is what I'm taking away. Here is the Hope, held out to us, all of us being weak: *through each other continually*. It is what Jesus left us with, in trust. His legacy of the Spirit in and among us.

What if that prayer were continually in me, ever afresh - a kind of “Jesus prayer” - as I walk among these people, and in each encounter with individuals: “*Be healed*” - in faith, trust, confidence, in joining my will to my Savior's - as best I can?

*To move from seeing, sympathy, empathy - to healing in and with Christ.*

### ***by law of grace***

June 2

*How do they ever do it* - the people of the street, of the alleys, the homeless - how do they ever get by and get on - these lives that, as I've learned, escape the “laws,” the rules of behavior, “we” in regular or “normal” society know and generally tick by? The question keeps assaulting my mind, not letting up, plaguing me.

An answer seems to be hovering. *By law of grace.*

Grace is not “logical,” its course not predictable. It does not obey the guidelines of human rationality and reason. The Spirit blows where it will.

Why is this so hard to learn - to believe?

What an apprenticeship: to observe and experience this continually in my interactions with this population, experience also my continual failure in attempting to “pin” these people to the law I know, and behold their continual survival by a law that is hidden from me, not known even to them, but operative.

This morning at A2J prayer I found myself “alone” with three people emerged from the homeless population, a woman who has been sheltered by this community for quite a while and now proudly holds a job; a man who, by Nick's unfailing ministry of love in the CASS yard, has moved into a small place in the four-plex and, among his neighbors' loving support, has finished a course of professional training and is now working and paying rent; and a man who has become, by his natural inclinations and gifts, the master gardener in the A2J community plot,

still living at CASS but increasingly gaining foothold among us. No one else was present - none of the committed "core members." We didn't know who would lead us in prayer. Shelly, the veteran among this motley crew, took it upon herself, looking to us for approval as she went. I kept low, only intimating that we may trust the Spirit to lead us. Shelly proposed the texts to be read and took the Leader's part in the liturgical readings; I gave a little nudge here and there that may have helped to keep us from running too fast and rigid a course. We did come to experience an invisible leadership; Shelly acknowledged it in wonder. We grew close in it, shared intimately. Starting as a little lost flock without a leader, we were led into a lovely, heartening, nourishing time.

At McDonald's last night, where I went after dark for an ice-cream cone to escape the heat in my house, three little brown children came in, very lively, under the patronage of a taciturn elderly gentleman with thick white hair who seemed of an entirely different social formation. He ordered their food, asking for their preferences. Each child received a pretty cardboard box with a handle on top. The man sat with them in silence while they, in unabashed rapture, unwrapped the gift, discovered the toy inside, put it together, arduously played with it, and ate their food with great relish (the middle boy ravenous as if he hadn't eaten all day, which may well be the case). The man didn't look or act like a relative; perhaps a volunteer from a church or agency of charity. What *joy* the children had! In peace and safety. Grace had come along, into their lives, whatever these are.

At a table near me sat a Native woman, a big meal on a tray before her. She didn't touch it, just sat, put her head down on her arms. Our eyes met briefly a couple of times. She seemed deeply depressed. I thought of offering her an ice-cream while I was licking mine, but didn't. (The "Reasoner" got in: She might nod yes but then not eat it, like all her other food.) At some point she vanished before I noticed, and her tray with the meal was sitting on the next table. A young black man came in and saw it. "Whose food is this?" He asked around: "Is this anybody's? Did they leave?" Someone volunteered that they had. "Did you see them going out the door?" He wanted to be sure. Then he sat down and heartily availed himself of it, with big bites into the rolled sandwich, ravenous, he, too. Grace had set the table for him.

Another came, stood by me with a big cup of soda in his hand. His mouth moved, I couldn't understand what he was saying. A young man, his mind not sound. "Can you buy me a Big Mac?"; it finally was, in a very soft voice. - "What do they cost?" - He didn't know. I told him to ask at the counter. I had only brought a five dollar bill with me and wasn't sure I had enough left. It turned out I had just enough. We stood by the counter together, I had him put in the order and paid the bill

before returning to my seat. He waited for the paper bag with the food to be handed to him, then walked out with it, turning his head toward me (he had not forgotten) and sticking up his thumb as a sign of thanks.

(The Reasoner told me later this man might have wanted to save his money for cigarettes or drugs, but also needed to eat, so he decided to beg the food and save his money. Fortunately, that objection came too late.)

And another experience this morning, on the Canal. There had been an amazing thicket of bamboo and thin trees near the 15<sup>th</sup> Ave bridge, at the side of the walkway, utterly gone wild, much of it dead. A haven for birds. A few days ago as I passed there, a landscaper's pickup pulled in from the bridge and parked in that spot. I moaned in foreboding. The driver saw the look on my face, smiled apologetically and said something in Spanish. Today, I found only stumps left. A big dog off the leash was investigating them, flushing out a female mallard. She was directly before his mouth, ran, and flew into the Canal. On returning from my walk, I found her back at the spot and flying into the Canal again. I figured the thicket had given shelter to her. Contemplating the ravaged place, I suddenly perceived a roundish shape in it and stepped closer: a nest, flat, made of the materials of the thicket and so, almost invisible, except for some small downy feathers. And in it - a clutch of six eggs! Brownish-green, about the size of chicken eggs. I had often wondered where in this Canal environment ducks would find enough protection to nest (for I had seen tiny ducklings on the water). Where would there be safe shelter for them, from dogs and other intruders? The nest, with the brush cut down, was now totally exposed, but apparently neither the dog nor the men cutting the plants had harmed it. The duck had not abandoned it and was still trying to bring her brood to fruition.

"We," the "normal" in our society, expect to live and "succeed" in our endeavors by our own effort, wisdom, logic, persistence in a chosen course. Why, Lord, did you give me this other experience this winter, not letting up in this hard lesson, however my mind squirmed, however hard I tried to discover the "law" by which these poor - these "least ones" among us - exist?

I am beaten, defeated in my endeavor, and at the same time - miraculously enriched.

Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.

*Joy*, the joy of these children at McDonald's, an eating establishment "we" often despise, will have the last word.

### **Author's note**

It is not the intention of this book to accuse or criticize any organization seeking to attend to the needs of the homeless, an enormously challenging task. Any comment made on such organizations only reflects the writer's personal experience.

Since the time of this printing, efforts have been made, with the support of an activist group, to improve the overflow situation at CASS.

The names of homeless persons mentioned in this text have been changed.

Any missteps in this text are the sole responsibility of the writer.

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