

Variations on Home and Homelessness
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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I do not know the name of the photographer who managed to catch mealtime dynamics at the Bird home (the photo on the cover of the Order of Service). I do remember this: When the image reached me after being forwarded multiple times across the interconnected Internet web of existence of which we are all a part, the photograph had a title: “Not Mom’s Favorite.” The caption writer identified with the baby bird whose body provided mom with a good perch from which to feed her favorite child. As we consider the theme of home and homelessness this morning, I invite you to take turns identifying with *each* bird in the photograph, for we are not always victims, nor are we always perpetrators, nor is it always clear what “right action” is in given circumstances.

One of the most influential sermons that I have ever heard was delivered by the Rev. Jack Donovan at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Gainesville, Florida. He preached on the Bible verse where Jesus says, “The poor you shall always have with you.” I had previously heard various interpretations of the verse. Sometimes the interpretation was a subtle variation on this view: If you’re poor, accept your lot. If you’re not poor, help the poor a little, but don’t worry if the poor outnumber those who are not poor. Rev. Jack, however, had a different take. “The poor you shall always have with you.” What if this is a command? What if these words are meant to be understood in the imperative? Perhaps if we lead lives in close proximity to the poor, we will be next door to a source of feelings and facts that may help us discern what our relationship with wealth and poverty could be.

Fifteen years ago, I stumbled upon a modest way to keep the poor with me. I started living in trailers (mobile homes). Next door to my first trailer, in Florida, lived a young couple, their daughter, and their dogs. I saw how many hours the husband worked as an electrician for a small company. I saw how the only way they could get by is if he would work side jobs, taking him away from home for even more hours each day. From my neighbors in Vallejo Mobile Estates, the mobile home park in which I lived during my seminary years, I deepened my understanding

of what it's like to be disabled, to be a Vietnam vet, to ride a Harley, to be Filipino, to be a fundamentalist Christian, to be proud, to be resourceful, to drink a lot of vodka, to take care of potted plants.

On Friday mornings at Vallejo Mobile Estates, the clubhouse was a distribution site for day-old bread and for vegetables that were edible though slightly past their prime. When I told my mother this, she asked, "Do the poor people come there to get the food?" "No," I said. "The food comes to where the poor people live." Across my back fence, just outside the mobile home park, there were several junk cars and vans in my neighbor's back yard. Transients occasionally slept in them. I introduced myself to one of the transients, who cheerfully volunteered that sometimes people used drugs and had sex in the vehicles.

I wrestled with what to do and how to reconcile my conflicting feelings and thoughts. I have always been concerned about poverty, drugs, and homelessness, but my feelings were more complicated when these issues were lived by real people in my back yard. Sometimes I felt anxious about what might have been going on. Would I be caught in the crossfire if a drug deal went sour? One morning, I saw a father lead two young children out of the blue van, where the three of them had apparently spent the night. The wall of fear around my heart collapsed like a house of cards.

What if my neighbor was providing a service by allowing transients to have a dry place to sleep and a measure of security at night? What if my neighbor, with his junk cars and open gate, was doing more for the down and out than I was? Upon reflection, I decided that it was *not* OK with me for people to be staying overnight in the junk cars in my neighbor's yard. However, I read newspaper stories about poverty and homelessness and drug use and unsafe sex with a greater sense of engagement and concern. I saw those problems as my problems. I did not have the consolation of distance.

My new mobile home in Upland Meadows is the Ritz Carleton compared to my Vallejo home. At \$700 per month, the space rental is high, but the mobile home park owners are subject to a version of rent control by means of an agreement with the City of Upland. As a renter or a

mobile home park resident for most of my adult life, I care about rent control. I commend Dwight B. for his activism inside and outside of the congregation in encouraging a “no” vote on Proposition 98 and a “yes” vote on Proposition 99. I believe that thanks primarily to his activism, the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry has taken a stand against Proposition 98 and in favor of Proposition 99. Inside the congregation, the lobbying regarding the propositions has been “de minimis” and does not threaten the congregation’s tax-exempt status.

There are, however, other points of view on rent control which deserve respect and a hearing. About a month ago, I received an anonymous letter by a someone who objected to the recommendations on Propositions 98 and 99 found in the printed announcements in the March 15 Order of Service. He wrote, “[My wife and I] own rental property. When I was in my 40’s, I realized that we could not retire on my small pension and Social Security. So we scrimped, saved, and borrowed, and bought a run-down vacant rental unit. We worked on it evenings, weekends, and vacation, and eventually rented it. After a few years, we refinanced and ought a couple more. We repeated this several times, and now own enough rentals to retire comfortably. We thought this was the responsible thing to do. We did not realize that some people would want to penalize us for this.”

“Rent control needs to be examined in full context,” he continued. “Reasonably, if one has rent control then we must also control what the plumber, roofer, gardener, appliance repair man, utility companies, and mortgage companies can charge. How about controlling taxes and gasoline? These continue to increase a lot faster than rents. Would you favor regulating the salary of the pastor? Rent control is effectively managed by supply and demand and the need of the property owner to maintain a steady income. Raising rents inappropriately causes tenants to move and the units may be vacant for months with loss of income. That will take months, even a year to recoup. No property owner wants to lose income. Normally I would sign my name to a letter, but since we may decide to continue attending the church, at least until something like this happens again, I will just sign off as . . . Concerned and very disappointed.”

While we personally may or may not own rental property, this congregation owns property. The board of trustees is grappling with two major proposals regarding use of the congregation’s land

which lies north of the parking lot, and they would like to hear from you. The names of board members are listed on the back of the Order of Service. One project is called the “Arts for the Earth Project.” The Arts for the Earth Project is a cultural arts grassroots project located in Claremont. Its mission is to transform vacant land into urban farms and gardens and use the transformed space as a place for community self-expressions, according to Dr. Sam Fassbinder and Anthony Ortega.

They propose that, in collaboration with the congregation, the Arts for the Earth Project could create a community garden as a laboratory for community members and congregants to study everyday living practices which contribute to environmental sustainability. To create gardens, they will need equipment to transform plots of land into social and environmental living spaces: irrigation materials, fruit trees, compost, plants, and tools. Funding for individual plots, cob benches, vegetable garden materials and curriculum materials can be obtained through grants, they believe.

Another proposal for use of the congregation’s land has not formally come before the board, but has reached the board through various emails. Homeless activists are mobilizing support for the creation of a Tent City on land owned by San Bernardino County or on land owned by other cities within the county. I understand that some of the homeless people are interested in living for a period of time on the congregation’s land or in spending time on the land during the day as they continue to organize.

During the “Congregational Response” element in this service, there will be about 10 minutes for members to comment on these or other possible uses of the congregation’s land. If additional time is needed, the pulpit microphone will be left on, and you are welcome to share your thoughts after the service. As your minister, my top priority is to encourage healthy congregational dynamics, communication, and decision making.

As if you did not yet have enough to keep in mind, I conclude with an excerpt from an article by Anthony B. Robinson entitled “Seven Habits of Highly Ineffective Churches.”¹ [I read the seven habits.]

I have served this congregation for eight months. From what I have observed, you have *failed* to master the seven habits of highly ineffective congregations. Hallelujah! I feel energized by the choices now in front of us, and I have confidence in your elected lay leaders to use their power wisely and well. How fortunate we are to be in this together. May we treat ourselves and each other with respect. May the congregation’s sense of vision and mission cause us to look outward to the needs of those outside these walls. May it be so!

¹ See http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/local/354143_faith08.html.