

Vision Keepers Dinner

Keynote Address

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Let Me Start with a Story

In 1980 I was living in New York City on the Upper West Side and was in search of a church. Actually I wasn't so much in search of a church as a croissant and a cup of coffee, but that is another story. Still I found a church and the experience changed me profoundly. All Angels was a small Episcopal parish on the upper west side which had been through the traumatic experience of having to sell off its church in order to survive. The original structure, built in the 1890s was a magnificent building built for a thousand and by 1979 housing about 50. Today, all that remains of it is the pulpit which is on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the American Wing. By 1980, the church had been demolished and a high rise apartment building had been put in its place, and All Angels had retired to its parish house, just around the corner on 80th street. The Sanctuary was in the living room and the rector's study had been turned into a gathering room—a very elegant room for coffee and cookies. You know the type, raised panel wainscoting, leaded, stained glass windows, leather covered wing backed chairs, an oriental carpet. I think what attracted me to All Angels is that everything seemed out of sorts and was still in survival mode when I came upon it. The rector was a woman of all things—still quite a new phenomenon in those days. There was no organ—just a bunch of people standing around in a big circle with someone strumming on a guitar. We did not sing from the 1928 hymnal, and for the communion, the priest sanctified a loaf of bread from Zabars, the local deli just around the corner on Broadway. All Angels was also a terrific community of people, largely young working professionals—some just starting out families, but all of us searching for something more meaningful in life than getting the next promotion. That's not to say that we were above promotions, only that we were after something that you probably only find in faith communities, a desire to take our faith and see it at work in our day to day life.

It was at All Angels that I met Donald.

Donald was not the first homeless person I had met. I used to volunteer at a soup kitchen in Pasadena California when I was a graduate student in the mid seventies, although at the time the word "homeless" had not really entered popular parlance. Donald was a different story. I can remember the first day I met him as clearly as I can remember anything in my life. We were all standing around the rector's study sipping our coffee out of Styrofoam cups, chit chatting about nothing in particular. Donald was sitting across the room in one of the elegant wing backs. Alone. Donald was a big man with a big voice. Perhaps he was no taller than me, but he was at least a hundred pounds heavier. And he always had a scowl on his face, the sort of scowl that someone has when they need glasses but don't have any. He was intimidating to talk to because he liked to stand very close to you, and he was always shouting—Donald was partially deaf. He also wore all of his belongings on him. He had gone to prep school and Wharton, so he had decidedly preppy tastes. The first day I met him he was wearing three blue oxford button downs, one on top of the other, two pair of tattered khakis sort of tucked up under his enormous belly in front with the tops of his boxers sort of peaking out above on the sides. His swollen feet were squeezed

into a pair of battered wingtips without laces. And he wore them without socks. Many years later I wrote a story about Donald called “The Anglican Without Socks”, because that’s how I will always remember him.

At the time, Donald was living in Needle Park, a sliver of pavement at 73rd and Broadway where Broadway and Amsterdam Avenues intersect. Al Pacino once made a memorable movie about this seedy but very vital part of the Upper West Side—Today, of course it is long since gone swept aside by three decades of gentrification. In any case, this was Donald’s home. He had a piece of card board that he used for a mattress, and he would sleep under a park bench at night. At three in the morning the news trucks would start delivering the newspapers to the local news stand at the 72nd street subway station. Donald liked to help out unloading the truck, and in return would be given a cup of coffee. Donald had a safe deposit box in which he kept stamps. He collected a social security disability check. He wrote letters to Prince Charles. He occasionally sent a one page story scribbled out in pencil on a crumpled piece of paper to the New Yorker. I have hundreds of Donald stories. We became very good friends because he was a genuinely wonderful person and ...what I said above...at All Angels we were all trying learn how to live the gospel in our daily life.

So most nights on my way home from work I would meet him at his “office” in Needle Park and I would take him some place for a bite to eat.

During that first year of knowing Donald, I had two experiences that had a tremendous impact on me. One experience was that I took Donald to a restaurant across from Needle Park, and they refused to serve us. This wasn’t a particularly good restaurant. In fact it was a dive. But for some reason they felt that their standards didn’t permit service to a homeless person.

The second experience was even more troubling. One night when Donald was asleep on his cardboard mattress under his park bench, a bunch of kids decided to set fire to him as a prank. He wasn’t injured and the fire was put out quickly, but I think for the first time it dawned on me how dangerous life on the street was—and how absolutely cruel people could be.

That night I took my first real step into my current life. I invited Donald to stay at my place. I didn’t have much more than a room in those days, but it was enough for the two of us—and Donald was at least safe from marauding juveniles. The arrangement didn’t last for very long. Some weeks later while I was away on a trip, Donald had a psychotic break, and in a panic to get out of the room had broken down the front door. The landlord was not especially pleased and I had an eviction notice in my box when I returned. I also found that Donald had been hospitalized. So I found a new apartment to live in, and when Donald was released, I helped him move into his own room in one of the single room occupancy hotels in the neighborhood.

I was Donald’s best friend for 17 years, until I moved to Evanston in 1997. Although he promised to call me once a week he never did and unfortunately that was my only means of communicating with him; so I never spoke to him again. In 2000 on a visit back to New York, the first thing I did when I got to the City was to go to his SRO to see him. But he had died a year earlier. To this day I am sad that I wasn’t there for him. The only promise that he ever extracted from me was that I would not allow him to be buried in potters field on Hart Island. I failed. Still I live with the memory of Donald almost every day. And I am honored to have known him.

Meeting Donald changed my life, and frankly it changed life at All Angels. I went to Carol Anderson, the rector at All Angels, and insisted that we start doing something about the problem—and to her credit she gave me and what was now a solid group of 10 young parishioners the reins and told us to go to it. We started a soup kitchen, and then a shelter. We met as a group at our homes and discussed what more we could do, and argued about whether we should get officially organized or simply leave it to the Holy Spirit to bring the food and the volunteers to make our acts of mercy real. It may surprise you to know—given the role I now play—that in those early heady days I was in the “leave to the Spirit” camp. In any case, within no time, it seemed we were serving 200 people at our soup kitchen and sheltering 10.

Separate from All Angels but using the platform that All Angels gave me I started going to other churches and synagogues, trying to organize the Upper West Side to do more of the same. I went to Jim Morton, the Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and persuaded him to give us some space for a shelter—and everywhere people responded. Volunteers came out of the woodwork to help out. In 1982, I started the Jericho Project, a housing and service agency for the homeless, sponsored by three Episcopal parishes on the Upper West Side.

Why Was Donald Homeless?

I have had many years to think about this, and of course have worked with many others who were homeless since 1980, so my answer doesn't reflect what I knew then, but what I know now.

At the time, I think I believed that the reason that Donald was homeless was that he was mentally ill and couldn't cope with being housed. In other words it was part of his illness. But since within the first year I was able to get him into an SRO, and while he had over 50 subsequent hospitalizations over the next 19 years and never again became homeless, I eventually came to understand that mental illness doesn't really explain much. His mental illness made him vulnerable. But the question is: vulnerable to what?

The “what” is now known pretty definitively. Enough has been written about it that there is hardly any controversy. Here is the explanation most often cited. In the 1950s, pharmaceutical researchers discovered a group of antipsychotic medications which transformed the way we treat mental illness. These medications (things like lithium, haldol and thorazine) allowed people to control—at least for a time—the worst symptoms of their illnesses. Lithium seemed to cut out the wild mood swings of bi-polar disease. Thorazine and haldol seemed to moderate psychotic ideation. By the 1960s the dialog about how to deal with mental illness was undergoing a paradigm shift from the traditional idea of long-term hospitalization to a new idea of community treatment; and by the 1970s a process of deinstitutionalization was well underway. Tens of thousands of people who had been living in mental hospitals throughout the United States were being “released” to the community, with a packet of pills in hand and the promise that there would be community treatment available when they arrived.

During this same period—1950 thru 1980—there was a massive shift in urban planning which was trying to modernize and rationalize poor people's housing by tearing down slums and pushing poor people into public housing projects.

In both cases neither project was ever quite carried through to its planned end... Deinstitutionalization never created the network of community services that could support the tens of thousands of individuals

who were arriving in cities all over the country—and public housing never replaced all the units of housing that were destroyed in slum clearance. As for Donald the type of housing which would have been the most appropriate for him, a poor single adult living on disability in an urban center, the SRO, was among the first housing demolished. By 1980 in New York City, 85% of the SRO housing had already been destroyed; and Chicago was not very different.

Why was Donald homeless? He was homeless because there were too many poor people seeking too few rooms, because he was awkward and scary and vulnerable and that made him easy to turn away. What I did was pretty unexceptional. While Donald was in the hospital, I went around to various SROs and asked if they had a room available. I said that I had a friend who was getting out of the hospital and he needed a place to stay. That's all it took. And a little money. I paid several months of rent in advance for him. When he got out, he checked into his new room, and never left.

I don't want to minimize the struggle that Donald still had before him. As I said before, he was hospitalized many more times in the last 18 years of his life. He continued to get up at three in the morning and unload the papers from the delivery truck and get his cup of coffee. There were social workers who checked in on him, and doctors who saw him quarterly, and friends, and All Angels. He had a community and network of support. These were all needed. But the key was the room.

Where Are We Today

Thirty years have now passed since I first met Donald, and as I look back over that expanse of time there is one thing that is crystal clear to me: Donald was lucky. He was lucky to have been homeless in 1979 and 1980 because the forces that were at work creating his homelessness then, have only increased in power and destructiveness since then.

In 1980 it was possible to live off of SSDI. If I remember correctly social security paid approximately \$580 a month back then. It was still possible to rent a room at an SRO for under \$200. Today, while SSDI has gone up by another \$100, the cost of housing has tripled. The numbers no longer compute. The benefit simply is insufficient to buy housing, food, transportation, utilities, and all of the other costs of living. So people do without. They do without food, and without employment, and without clothes, and eventually without housing.

What has brought this about? Many things that are too complicated to go into here, but suffice it to say that like the explanation of deinstitutionalization which I gave before, these reasons are related to social policies which have all but destroyed the rationale for affordable housing. For thirty years, this country has gone out of its way to eliminate affordable housing, and as a result in cities like Evanston, 50% of renters now spend over 30% of their income on housing, and 40% of that 50% spend over 50% of their income on housing.

Think about it. 1 in 5 of us in this room may well be living on the edge of homelessness.

My point is simple: no single factor has contributed more to the rise of homelessness in the last thirty years than the demise of affordable housing.

Asking the Right Question

In 1980, I looked at Donald and asked myself, what can I do to help this guy in his hour of need. I thought, he's in crisis, find him a shelter, buy him a meal. But while Donald may have been in crisis personally, his homelessness wasn't caused by a crisis, rather it was the only option that seemed open to him at the time that he lost his housing. Looked at in a different way, you could say that by 1980 homelessness had become an acceptable option offered up by modern consumer society for people who have nothing. In looking at it as a crisis, I was trying to force it into a different more acceptable mould—the Haiti mould, where an earthquake kills hundreds of thousands and leaves hundreds of thousands more homeless, where we are able to send in the Red Cross and the Marines, where we can believe that short-term, targeted actions will solve the problem and allow us to go back to our own lives. Donald's homelessness wasn't like that. So in addition to whatever I was willing to do to help him out, the question I should have been asking was **how do I make unacceptable this new option that modern society has cooked up for vulnerable people like Donald? How do I convince people in this society that homelessness simply should not be allowed to exist?**

I don't know the answer to these questions, but I do know that we have to find them—and I suspect that we will find them if we are willing not only to volunteer our individual efforts, but to recognize that we also express ourselves through our faith communities and institutions and that we have to demand of them that they too become engaged in finding answers.

If in 1980 I had known that the absence of affordable housing was the principal cause of homelessness, and that over the next 30 years this country would be hell bent on destroying what remained of it, I would have marched myself down to All Angels and I would have said to Carol Anderson, "Something truly bad is going on in society today. We have invented a new way for people to live, and it should not be allowed. I am talking about life on the streets. What can we do as a congregation to make this not acceptable?"

The Challenge

There are millions of Donald's out there today. Those of us who volunteer at the hospitality center and the soup kitchens and the warming centers know them. What we do as volunteers and workers is extremely important. We bring a moment of human compassion into the lives of those who are isolated and alone, we embrace them with a sense of community.

But is it enough?

If we perceive homelessness as unfortunate but unavoidable,

if we accept it as something that will probably persist in spite of our best efforts,

that may be rational, but our efforts are not enough.

If we only ameliorate the deplorable conditions in which people live while allowing those conditions to exist,

we may be doing good,

but we are still not doing enough.

I have spent the greater part of my adult life not doing enough. Tonight I am asking you to help me find a way to do more.

Thank you for having me.