

29. From Guilt to Gratitude: Spiritual Ministry with Persons Who Are Poor and Homeless

I will never forget that day as long as I live! It was a Saturday morning. I arrived at the soup kitchen about an hour before opening, willing to do whatever needed to be done. My total openness landed me the job of dishwasher. And I was given the following instructions: "In the course of the two hours that we are open you can change the water once. Our budget is tight and we can't afford to be too wasteful. For the most part, all you have to worry about are the soup bowls (which were large plastic margarine containers) and the spoons. After the people have finished eating, they'll throw their spoons in the dishpan sitting on the counter, scrape their bowls, and pile them up alongside the soaking spoons. You may have to do a few soup pots, but don't worry about them til the end. It's more important to stay on top of the spoons and bowls since we have such a limited supply." I felt pretty good about what I was going to do. The directions were clear and simple enough.

This was actually my second time at the soup kitchen. The last time I was there I was in the dining area and I helped serve drinks. I came back because there was something I sort of liked about the experience, though I couldn't put my finger on it. I had spent three years volunteering in an inner city outreach center with kids and there was something just not right with me about that experience. It wasn't the city that bothered me, I didn't think. I was more inclined to believe that it was the population with whom I was working. Though the kids I worked with were cute and lovable, I felt as though I needed to try working with another group of people.

Meanwhile, back at the soup kitchen, I saw a whole different side of the operation by being in the kitchen, behind the scenes. I had more time to observe the operation, the interaction of the staff, the

condition of the place and, most of all, the people who came in to eat. Each time I went to the counter to pick up the dirty soup bowls and spoons, I felt as if I got an up-close and personal view of those who were too poor to purchase their own food. I wondered what their story was, what they were like beneath the exterior.

About thirty minutes into the serving time, my dish water had a film of grease on top. It was impossible to get the plastic soup bowls clean. It was time to change the water, despite the fact that we still had one and a half hours of serving time left. I tried to change it when the staff wasn't looking, just in case I needed to change it again. At the rate I was going, I was sure I would.

On one of my trips to the counter to pick up the dirty dishes, I again casually scanned the eating area. Approaching the counter, and me, was a rather large, somewhat handsome, but unpleasant looking man. He was not carrying his bowl as most did; rather, he had it in the palm of his right hand, just above his shoulder. He was cranking it back as if he were going to throw it. As he approached, he said to me, "See this . . . see this?" He kept cranking the bowl back; it was almost full. "I want you to know that a piece of steak would taste just as good in my mouth as it would in yours. My taste buds aren't any different from yours . . . just because I'm homeless!" He slammed the bowl down into the dish pan of soaking spoons, gave me one last glaring look, turned and walked away. I was stunned, and for what seemed like hours I just stood there at the counter. Then, I reconnected with the present. Suddenly, the place had a whole different look to me. It looked dirty and the staff seemed a bit on edge and unpleasant. I realized that the problem with the dish water was that the soup was more grease than broth. It was a far cry from steak and had no appeal to me either.

Slowly I walked back to the sinks, with the man's words echoing in my head. I looked at the dish water, pulled the plug and changed it. It was the only thing I could do to relieve myself of the guilt I felt for being a part of a place that was serving this man, and so many others, such distasteful food. Just moments after I pulled the plug, the kitchen manager came over and said to me, "Hey, didn't you change that water once already?" "Yes," I said, "but it needed to be changed again." He shook his head and walked away. Driving home, I swore I would never work in a soup kitchen again. I was eighteen years old.

It was the first time in my life that I remember feeling such incredible guilt about what I had and what others didn't have. I felt ashamed, because of his comments, about what was being served, and, worse, that I was a part of the group that was doing the serving. My

vow never to return to a soup kitchen stemmed from my inability to deal with all the guilt I felt.

However, two years later I had to break that vow. A required college course in sociology that I was taking had a service component. The placement I was given was in a soup kitchen—not the one in which I had experienced the “steak man,” but, nonetheless, a soup kitchen. After weeks of procrastination, I finally set a date to begin at Beans & Bread, a small neighborhood soup kitchen in Fells Point, in Baltimore, Maryland. Not wanting to go through the food thing again, I decided prior to going that if the soup being served wasn’t something I’d want to put in my own mouth, I wasn’t staying. Much to my pleasant surprise, that was never an issue. However, there were a few others. The first issue for me was walking from my car to the door of Beans & Bread, past all the ill-clad folks in line, mostly men, on a twenty degree January morning all bundled up in my warm winter clothes. Once I was in and they were in, that issue no longer had a grip on me. The atmosphere inside had a way of making one forget where they had just come from. It was warm, welcoming and wonderful. The priest who founded and operated the program stood at the door and welcomed each person by name or by sir or ma’am. Their response was just as warm and respectful. Music played softly in the background, while the “guests,” as he called them, sat at tables of three and four, sipping their soup and nursing their cup of coffee. To me, the place seemed more like a cafe than a soup kitchen, despite my limited experience of both.

It was through my experience at the second soup kitchen that I learned even more about guilt, acting out of it, living with it and moving away from it. It has taken me many years to move from guilt to gratitude, but, for the most part, I think I’ve made the switch.

In this chapter, I would like to share some of the things that trigger my guilt, what men and women who are poor and/or homeless have taught me about guilt and how they helped me to finally make the shift from guilt to gratitude. Most of what I have written is born out of my personal experience and reflection. If you are reading this and are presently engaged in ministry with persons who are poor and/or homeless, my hope is that some of my experiences and thoughts will touch yours and assure you that you are not alone. If you are reading this prior to entering into this type of ministry, I hope that this article will give you some hints as to what you might expect to encounter along the way.

In Henri Nouwen’s book, *A Cry For Mercy*, he says, “Fear and anxiety never totally leave us. But slowly they lose their domination

as a deeper and more central experience begins to present itself. It is the experience of gratitude.” When working with persons who are poor and/or homeless, most of us, at least initially, experience some levels of fear, anxiety and guilt. We tend not to even think about what deeper, more central experience will present itself, and, even if we do, we’re probably not thinking that it will be the experience of gratitude. Certainly this was true for me as I encountered the “steak man” in the opening story. Though the fear and anxiety were present, it was the guilt that really lingered.

My encounter with him stimulated much thought about what people who were poor liked or disliked, needed, wanted or dreamed about. Could they really want the same things that most people, in my middle class world, wanted? Were these people, who lived on the streets, really like me? I found these thoughts and questions, which I had never had before, rather uncomfortable. I really was not sure I wanted or needed any answers. However, I was prepared for them to surface again as I began my work at that second soup kitchen, Beans & Bread.

And they did. Unfortunately, because the place was small and others waited outside to come in, their stay usually only lasted about twenty or thirty minutes. Then it was time to bundle up, with what little they had, to re-enter the January chill. That was so difficult to watch, thinking of all the clothes that filled my closets at home. It was another haunting thought. I have, they don’t. And what I have would not be of much help to those who had the need.

Then it was time for me to leave. No matter which route I tried, the scenery was the same: our meal guests, sitting on a park bench shivering in the cold. I felt great sadness driving by them in a car, not to mention a car with heat!

Prior to going each week I tried to dress more simply and lightly, leaving scarves, gloves, sometimes even my winter coat, at home. I thought about where I could park and how early I had to get there so I didn’t have to walk through the line each time I came. However, once inside and the serving began, I felt better; actually, my guilt was somewhat relieved. I was doing something. I was offering them a warm place and a hearty, hot bowl of soup. Week after week the director suggested I sit down with our guests and have a bowl of soup with them. He did. I couldn’t. How could I eat their food? What if we ran out before all our guests were served because I ate? Yet, regularly, he sat with them, sipping soup and breaking bread. I began to wonder why I resisted eating with them. Was it really a fear of us running

out of food? Or was it a matter of trying to maintain my separateness from “them”?

Finally, I took the risk. I began sitting, eating and talking with our guests. Ironically, I descended deeper into guilt. This time it wasn't based on the externals that I had and they didn't; it was worse. It was because I started to see and experience them as persons, some with backgrounds like mine, some that resembled my own relatives. One person in particular who had a profound effect on me was Patricia.

Patricia was a regular. She was always very proper and spoke very well. Each time I placed a meal in front of her, she would thank me, and then carefully spread her napkin out on her lap. Her beginning conversations with me were not about where to find additional food or shelter, but they were about my clothes, particularly the sweaters I wore. She often remarked, “That sweater looks like it's 100 percent Shetland wool. Is it?” Embarrassingly, I would nod, I think so. And she would say, “Come here, dear. Let me check the label. Huh, I was right. I know my sweaters, don't I?” However, through the years and the course of our conversations, I learned that her background was not a whole lot different from mine. She had once attended private schools and went on summer vacations. Patricia's sharing with me bridged the gap I thought was between us and our lives. Though I was intrigued by her sharing, there were times when I wasn't sure I really wanted the apparent gap between us to be bridged. I didn't want to know that some of the people who were homeless had histories like mine. But Patricia persisted and was key in creating a bond between us that spanned thirteen years and much deeper issues than brands of sweaters, until her death.

Patricia taught me many things, but that which I am most grateful for is how to cut through guilt. Through my relationship with her I found that my guilt about *her* situation lessened. That is not to say that I didn't often feel sadness about her situation, but I learned to focus on her as an individual, in need of assistance at a particular time in her life. She was not just one of “them,” living on the streets, looking for handouts. Patricia was an individual, and like all individuals, she had a right to decent housing, food and clothing. Once Patricia was off the street, with her basic needs met, and her life was somewhat stable, we continued to spend time together. Though the relationship began because of guilt, it did not continue because of guilt. She became a grandmother-type friend, offering guidance, imparting her wisdom and giving me special treats whenever I went to visit.

Another teachable moment occurred when I was twenty-four,

two years after I had moved into soup kitchen work full-time and purchased a brand-new car. I had had my share of used cars and it finally seemed that I was in a position to make a monthly commitment to the bank for several years and purchase a brand new one. Though I purchased a small, stripped model, stick shift, I was nonetheless aware of the fact that I had a car and my friends from the meal program didn't even have bus fare. My overriding guilt caused me to park the car several blocks from where I worked. I thought I was pulling it off. Then, one day, four men whom I had known for about three years were all sitting together and called me over to their table. They wanted to congratulate me on buying a new car. They also wanted to know why I was parking it several blocks away. With all the nerve in me, I said, "Thanks, but how did you know, and, how can you guys be happy about me getting a new car when the only way you can afford to get around town is by foot?" They laughed and said, "Are you kidding? We're so happy you finally got a decent car to travel around town with. Now we won't have to worry half as much about your safety and which neighborhood you might break down in!" Their response shocked me! Regardless, I immediately began parking my car behind the soup kitchen.

In this situation, it was first the relationship, then the honesty, that cut through my guilt. The relationship allowed the honesty. And taking my lead from them, I responded. I responded by putting a stereotype, a judgment, on the table—the stereotype being: How could anyone who doesn't have (a car, for example) be happy for someone who has (a car), and has good quality (a brand new car)? Once again, I was surprised—surprised by their honest questioning and surprised to see them focus on me as an individual. They didn't stereotype me, but I had certainly stereotyped them. The lesson Patricia had taught me was reinforced: each person is an individual, with a story that, when really listened to, builds bridges and breaks down guilt.

However, when guilt is present, I have experienced two kinds which I suspect others who are in ministry with persons who are poor and homeless have experienced as well. While I believe it is possible to experience these two types of guilt no matter whom I'm with, I seem to experience one or the other most when I am with persons who are poor. The two kinds I experience are self-imposed and other-imposed guilt.

My self-imposed guilt is usually stimulated by thoughts from within me, as a result of something I am observing outside of me. It happens when I compare my life and living conditions with those with whom I'm working. Often I have gone as far as to respond to those

who are poor based on my own inner thoughts instead of the reality of their responses. Good examples of my self-imposed guilt are the two stories I just shared, the story of Patricia and my new car. As I mentioned, I felt badly about getting a brand new car, when those among whom I minister have to travel all over the city by foot because they can't afford bus fare. I presumed what others might think or feel, then proceeded to respond in that manner, specifically by parking my car several blocks away. Other daily experiences/examples are: when I sit up in bed on stormy nights, wondering where persons who are homeless are staying and I feel guilt that I have a roof over my head and a warm bed to sleep in; being able to go into a shoe store, try a pair on and walk around, knowing that people who live on the streets probably walk further in one day than I do in one week, yet all I can offer them is a referral to a thrift store where they have little to no choice in style, color or size; when I throw my dirty clothes into the washing machine and realize that they have to throw their dirty clothes out because they can't afford the laundromat and they don't have access to the washing machine of a neighbor or friend; when their holiday is spent at a shelter or meal program and mine is spent with family and friends; when I passed by a person who was panhandling because I felt as if I had been "taken" by someone else the week before; and/or, when I realize how many choices I have and how often I have them while those who are poor have few to none. Self-imposed guilt is haunting, but can serve a purpose. I will explore its purpose a little later.

Other-imposed guilt is a result of an interaction I have with someone who points out our common humanity, yet highlights the differences between us, usually due to financial status. He or she highlights what I have and what he or she doesn't have. It almost always feels like a below-the-belt punch. An example of other-imposed guilt is the story I began with, the man pointing out that steak would taste just as good in his mouth as it would mine. Other-imposed guilt has two purposes, in my experience. The first is to manipulate the one, seemingly in control, into bending a rule or doing something that will only benefit the person who is asking. Examples of other-imposed (manipulative) guilt are: the person who is panhandling asks you for money just as you are pulling out your wallet for something else; those men and women, especially the ones who are visually physically challenged, who stand on the street corners holding up signs that say, "Will work for food"; and the persons who overwhelm you with the details of their life and family, so that even if you give them something, you still feel awful when you leave.

The second purpose of other-imposed guilt is to act as a means of venting. An example of this is someone arguing about an injustice he or she believes is happening in the meal program or shelter. And when someone agrees and offers to rectify it, he or she says, "I'm not just talking about what goes on in here, but what goes on everywhere." Other-imposed guilt can be every bit as haunting as the self-imposed guilt, but both serve a purpose.

As a matter of clarity, all of the examples I have used come from my ministry and my life's experience. In no way am I judging the truth or reality of the needs presented by the person. I am using them strictly as illustrations of its impact on me and possibly others involved in ministry with persons who are poor. Having said that, let me explore a little further the purposes of the two kinds of guilt I've been talking about.

Guilt, whether self-imposed or other-imposed, has/should have similar types of impact on us. First and foremost, it should help us to take a long, loving look at ourselves and at the way we live our lives, especially as Christians. It's a way of keeping us in line. Some things we should feel guilty about. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that no one was without the necessities of life because all things were shared in common. Those who had enough, or even had more than they needed, shared with those who did not have. Can you imagine what our cities would be like if we operated on the same principle?

For the past year, I have worked with a family, a twenty-seven year old mother and her four children who range in age from four to twelve years old. I met them on a day that I was working at Beans & Bread in the Outreach area. They came to us because they needed a good, hot meal and assistance with their rent; they had already received an eviction notice. Initially, it seemed that all we had to do was find some money, not that that was going to be easy, but it was doable. However, as her story unfolded throughout our first week of working together, I realized that getting rent money was only the tip of the iceberg.

Of all my years of working with people who are poor and homeless, I had never seen a family so very poor and so trapped! Trapped by a system that gives a family some money, but not nearly enough to get on their own feet. Every way we tried to budget the monthly welfare check we came up short. I also realized that there were other factors such as racism, addiction, lack of education, and self-esteem issues that would keep the family "poor" long after the welfare benefits began to flow and the rent was paid. The more I experienced with them, where they lived and how they lived, the more guilt welled up

inside me. Guilt about what I had and what they did not have. Guilt about where I lived and how I lived. Guilt about being in a religious order, taking a vow of poverty and still having everything I needed . . . and more.

In an effort to relieve my guilt, I felt moved to share time and things with them. In the beginning I shared from my excess, but, as time went on, it was more from my daily supply. Clearly, this guilt produced positive results for the family and caused me to search my soul and, to some extent, change my lifestyle.

The second, less desirable, type of impact that guilt can have on us is one which overwhelms and immobilizes us. We see the need, we feel the guilt and we freeze. Instead of trying to do our part, we do nothing, as I almost did in the earlier story, vowing never to set foot in a soup kitchen again. We may be so overwhelmed or so frozen that we can't even speak about the need or the guilt. Yet, if only we could try to speak about it, something might be accomplished—a need met and guilt relieved. My hope is that, more times than not, whatever we do, we will understand the motivation and the act will be fruitful.

Potentially worse than what we experience when we act out of guilt is the impact it may have on the recipient of our supposed good will. Their responses may range from distrust of me to distrust of all social service providers. However, it is my belief that no one of us can act out of guilt, sincerely and effectively, for a very long period of time. We will either burn out, get caught by those we are working with or have to face some very hard truths about ourselves.

The hardest truth I might learn could be that direct service ministry with persons who are poor and/or homeless is not for me. An even harder truth might be: I need to accept this truth and find a way in which I can still respond to the gospel mandate to be in solidarity with persons who are poor and homeless. This could take many forms. It could be as seemingly simple as educating myself about who the poor and homeless people really are, and then committing myself to speaking up when I am in the company of someone who makes a stereotypical comment about them. Even if the comment may be true of *some* people, is it necessarily true of *all* people who are poor and homeless? By speaking up, I become an advocate for people who may not have the opportunity to speak or to be heard by my middle-class society. While this could seem simple, the reality is that it is not a simple thing to do at all, even if you are in "polite" company. One thing that can make this action difficult is the media, particularly TV and newsprint. For the thirteen years that I have been involved in this work, the media has made precious few changes in the pictorial

version of what poor and homeless persons look like. They continue to film the ones who “look” homeless, those who are dirty, unshaven, layered with clothes and are carrying bags or pushing a cart. Those who are very poor or homeless and don’t “look” the part don’t get filmed because they don’t look any different from you or me. All this is to say that people who are poor and/or homeless, just like spouse abusers or alcoholics, can’t/should not be stereotyped, despite the fact that persons in each of these groupings do have some commonalities. And if I am aware of this truth, then I believe I have a responsibility to speak up and to share my piece of the truth.

Another way to be of indirect assistance to persons who are poor and/or homeless is to contact a shelter or food program in your area and inquire about its needs. Some things to do may be to make food or small item pick-ups, donate a bag of canned goods, a bag of bus tokens or personal hygiene products, offer to do filing, stuff envelopes or write an article for the newsletter, and, always, pray. Other needs may require a group effort: a painting or clean-up project, a fundraiser, assisting with a bulk mailing, coordinating a prayer vigil or organizing a canned food, blanket or personal hygiene items collection at work, at school, in your neighborhood or in your church.

Though prayer is included in the suggestions mentioned above, I don’t want it to get lost in the crowd. In *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, McNeill, Morrison and Nouwen suggest that “without fully realizing it, we have accepted the idea that ‘doing things’ is more important than prayer. . . .” However, those of us who have been in ministry with persons who are poor and/or homeless for quite some time believe that prayer is doing. I could tell lots of “multiplication of the loaves” stories that I do not believe are mere coincidences—that just the right things arrived at our door when we were most in need. I believe it is God’s loving response to all those who have promised to “pray for us.” Though service providers often do not put prayers at the top of our “Wish List,” it is indeed our wish and our greatest need. Prayer resources which I have found helpful include: *Not Just Yes & Amen* by Dorothee Soelle and Fulbert Steffensky and *Singing in a Strange Land: Praying and Acting with the Poor* by William Lindsey. The second book is particularly good because it offers, among other things, first person narratives and prayers from the religions of the world.

The suggestions I have mentioned are ones that were helpful to me and to the guests of the shelters and meal programs of which I have been a part. Many more ideas can be found in the book *What You Can Do To Help the Homeless* authored by The National Alliance

To End Homelessness. Simply purchasing this book helps people who are homeless since a portion of the book's earnings goes directly to The National Alliance To End Homelessness.

For whatever reason we are first attracted to direct service with folks who are poor and/or homeless—guilt, curiosity or call—we may find that this is where we really feel we belong. If you are at that point, I would first encourage you to spend more time with them at a shelter or meal program. Additionally, let me offer a few suggestions of things to do and of ways to be with this population. The following are things I have been taught through the years, mostly from my friends who are poor and/or homeless:

Look for God in Everyone—Working with poor/homeless persons is not always pleasant. Sometimes it may be difficult just to get past the externals, be it physical or attitudinal. So we must focus on the God that lives within her or him (which I realize presumes a faith life on our part).

Make Eye Contact—When we look someone in the eye, we are acknowledging his or her personhood. Most folks on the street tell me that people act as if they are “invisible” and literally will not give them “the time of day.” If we are choosing to be with them in ministry, then we must present ourselves differently from “everybody else.”

Ask a Question, Wait for an Answer—In today's society, we move about quickly. Often that means hurrying by someone saying “Hi, how are you?” but not waiting for a response. People who are poor, and especially those who are homeless, rarely have the caring, supportive network of people in their lives that we do. So if you ask a question, stop and wait for an answer. You may be the only person expressing care or concern that day, that week, or that month. If you don't have time to wait for an answer, don't ask the question.

Wait for Them To Share “Their Story” with You—I remember back to my first weeks and months of working with poor/homeless people. I'd look at them and wonder: How did they end up on the street or coming to a free meal program? It was the question that was always on my mind and on my tongue, but that I didn't have the guts to ask. While I believe that that curiosity is normal, I do not believe it is appropriate to ask. Their lives are already public enough by virtue of the fact that they have to stand in lines, usually outside, for the basics in life: food and shelter. Additionally, they have to tell “their story” to just about any person or agency from whom they are asking for help. Trust them—they will tell us their story when they are ready.

Be Consistent—In my experience, the best way to gain/build trust with persons who are poor/homeless is to be consistent, especially in our commitment of time. Once people see us coming on a certain day and at a certain time, they will begin looking for us. We can be sure that a bond has been created when they miss us and ask where we were last week or the other day. If our schedules allow us to remain faithful to the same day(s) and time(s), the consistency will act as a trust builder. Trust is the beginning of any good relationship.

Show Compassion—Compassion in Latin means “to suffer with.” The Bible tells us to be compassionate as our God is. A critical learning for me throughout the years, that sometimes I still have to be reminded of, is that it is more important to be compassionate than to solve the problem. My middle class mentality which says this isn’t right, we have to *do* something about it, often gets the best of me and denies the person who is sitting with me the compassion he or she needs/deserves given his or her situation. If we don’t offer compassion, who will? I worked with a man once whose only possession was his car, without gas, that sat on our shelter parking lot. I bumped into him one evening as he was pacing the halls of the shelter, having discovered two days ago that his car had been stolen, possibly by another shelter resident. He talked and talked at me for twenty minutes. All I kept thinking was: What can we do? When he finally calmed down, I suggested we do a number of things. Yet, he gently turned to me and said, “You have already done something. . . . You listened! My car has been gone for two days and no one has taken the time to listen to me. You’ve done a lot!” It was hard then, and sometimes it is even hard now, for me to believe that I have done enough by “just listening.” However, maybe if I really listened to people, I would discover that that is what they are really requesting. Compassion may be best expressed through the “ministry of listening.”

As you begin or continue to work with people who are poor and/or homeless I hope you find that which I just shared helpful. After a while, you will be able to put together your own list of tips and things that we all need to be reminded of now and then.

Finally, I realize I have spoken at length about guilt and said very little about gratitude. I’d like to conclude then by sharing with you how all the guilt I have experienced, and sometimes still experience, in working with people who are poor and/or homeless has led me to gratitude.

In the beginning it seemed as if I were going to live forever with the guilt of all that I had, materially, educationally and spiritually. It wasn’t until someone suggested that I talk to God about it that I did. I

began by questioning God about the huge gap between the rich and the poor. There was silence. Then I heard the line I hated, “The poor you will always have with you.” That was probably the reality check I needed, lest I was thinking that if I, and a few others, worked hard enough, we would, at least, rid Baltimore City of all poverty and homelessness. So I sat with that for a while, wondering: Why will we always have to have poor people with us? The next response was, “Come and see.”

For me, come and see meant, immediately after graduation from college, moving into full-time ministry with people who were poor and/or homeless. The years that I have spent since then with my sisters and brothers who are poor and/or homeless have been my years of gradual transformation, of moving from guilt to gratitude.

My gratitude is to God and is a direct result of several things that my sisters and brothers who are materially poor have taught me. First, they have taught me what really matters—a relationship with the God who is always with us. They have helped me to see that those things which I thought were liabilities—a middle-class background and a good education—are really assets when it comes to finding resources and being a good advocate. They have helped me to live my life with much more perspective, yet never minimizing my pain or my joy. They have led me to have a more human, conversational and deeper relationship with a God that I once thought wanted only my praise and not my pain.

When I began this work, this ministry, I never expected to be led to all the people, places, challenges, new ways of thinking, new depths of relationships, that I have already experienced in this life. Most importantly, though, I never expected to be living from a stance of gratitude—a stance which, for me, has accomplished much more than my stance of guilt. Specifically, I never expected to be remembering, with gratitude, the “steak man,” the one who taught me my first, and one of my greatest, lessons about working with people who are poor and/or homeless.

Again, I refer to Nouwen’s words to conclude: He says, “Gratitude is the awareness that life in all its manifestations is a gift for which we want to give thanks. The closer we come to God in prayer, the more we become aware of the abundance of God’s gifts to us. We may even discover the presence of these gifts in the midst of our pains and sorrows. The mystery of the spiritual life is that many of the events, people, and situations that for a long time seemed to inhibit our way to God become ways of our being united more deeply with him. What seemed a hindrance proves to be a gift. Thus gratitude becomes a

quality of our hearts that allows us to live joyfully and peacefully even though our struggles continue.”

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