

December 21, 2011
A Day for Redemption, A Day for Remembrance

First, a glimpse at the process of redemption.

It was about 3:30 in the afternoon when I wandered out of my office, looked to my left into the Opportunity Center, and spotted Larry, sitting in a chair in front of one of the computers. I knew he was sitting there waiting for me. Larry had been trying to meet with me for past week or so. To be honest, I was sort of evading him. A couple of times I told him I'd meet with him, and the something came up and the meeting didn't happen. In reflection, I was probably testing him, to see if he really wanted to meet with me, or if this was just a passing fancy. But there he was, as he said he was going to be. I waved to him and told him to give me a couple of minutes, and we could sit down and talk.

I've known Larry for the past couple of years. He's been involved with the agency for many years and lives at the Bethany Community, that remarkable environment that the Sisters of St. Joseph put together on their grounds in Framingham using the old novitiate building, turning it into a residence/community about 20 years ago, with a slight assist from SMOC. Larry worked for a time as a Counselor at the Greater Worcester Housing Connection. About six months ago, he had a major slip which led to the loss of his job. Slip - what a euphemism. Larry's behavior catapulted him right over the cliff into a Grand Canyon of misery. He lost his sobriety of 13 years and many other things. We had to let him go.

Several months ago, he came by and wanted to start again. We said, "OK, you've got to do it step by step though. Why don't you start working for RWA and do a few other things." When he asked to meet with me several weeks ago, I knew it was because he felt he had done them. Larry's a great guy, an energetic, effervescent personality. Not too many things get him down. So, as we sat in my office to talk, he said to me, "I'm ready. I've done what you've asked. I know what I was meant to do. I'm meant to help people. I've gone to counseling. I've gone to meetings. I've been

working in RWA." We talked about the incident that led to his troubles and the loss of 13 years of sobriety.

You can't help but like the guy and you can't help but believe he's sincere and means it. I listened to Larry for a few minutes and then looked at him and said, "Go talk to Lori." He said, "Really?" I said, "Yup." So we walked down to our head of H.R.'s office, sat in chairs in front of her desk, and immediately started to suffocate, because it must have been 90 degrees in Lori's office. The heat's so tough to regulate in this building. There was a steam pipe broken. It's felt like these past couple of days we've been working in a steam bath. As hot as it was, and as much as it affected me, it didn't dampen Larry's effervescent personality one bit. I looked at Lori and said, "I think he's ready. I don't know what we've got, but I think he's ready." I looked at Larry and I said to him, with a kind of twinkle in my eyes,

"Redemption time."

At that, we both burst into laughter, he shook my hand, thanked me. Lori took up the conversation and said, "OK, let's talk about it. Let's see what positions there are. If there's not something open right now, we're going to keep you first in line for the next counseling position."

Before I left Lori and Larry to themselves to work things out, I turned to Larry and said, without trying to be too pedantic, "Listen, man, I think you're probably a wonderful helper and I'm really delighted where you're at. I just don't want this to happen again. Right before you start working again as a Counselor for us, let's talk about how it doesn't overwhelm you, how you don't lose yourself in all the efforts you're putting forward to help others." As is his style, he nodded enthusiastically.

He's a great guy. He's sincere in his efforts to help others. He deserves another chance.

Remembrance.

At the end of the day, I walked down to the park on Howard and Concord for the Homelessness Memorial Service to remember those homeless and previously homeless people who have died in the past year. Died when their demons reared up and got the best of them. Died when their bodies gave

out on them. It's a tradition that started up across the country, held each year on December 21st, the shortest day of the year.

The Framingham memorial service is put together by one of our outreach workers, Jim Bauchman, who is also a street minister, and is tied into a number of the Christian churches in the area whose mission is to reach out to people in crisis and people struggling, and preach the Gospel to those whose lives have been affected by homelessness, poverty and disability. I've always been honored to be a part of the ceremony and to be asked to say a few words. The ceremony consists of the reading of scriptures, words of faith spoken by the ministers present, and the reading of names of those who died in the past year, with a commentary on each of them by the Rev. Jim.

I've always thought my speaking role is to provide a balance, to allow a secular perspective to fit comfortably, or to exist comfortably, side by side with the sacred. It's my belief that each exists as part of the other. You know, the yin/yang. I also struggle with what I should say, how I should keep my remarks brief. On this night, it's unseasonably warm with a mist. The park is located at the midst of a busy intersection with the attendant 5:00 traffic. So, the struggle is not only what to say, but how to say it briefly and succinctly. Last year, I remember, I had taken a quote from a famous revolutionary, spoke the quote, and commented on it, relating it to homelessness without ever attributing who the quote was for.

This year, as it got to be my time to talk, I thought for an instant that I would reference the lighted candles that each of the participants had in their hand. I thought of relating those candles, and the light they bring, and using those candles as a metaphor towards punching holes in the darkness, which is really part of a Robert Louis Stevenson short story. Somehow, that didn't feel right to me. The candles were religious symbols and I didn't feel comfortable turning them into the secular.

So, as I accepted the mic, and looked out into the sparse gathering, I gave a welcome to those in attendance in English, Hebrew and Arabic, saying that it didn't matter what faith we came from, or if we were totally secular, as in my mind, we were all part of the one, and, as part of the one, we needed to work toward a day when there were no

names to read. Since one of the earlier speakers talked about the role of faith in her life, I offered a hope that I wanted to share with everybody. And I framed that hope with a lyric from a Dylan song (you know my motto - when in doubt, always go to Dylan), and I simply said that I hoped for a day where we could all come together and instead of remembering homeless people who passed away, we would be there holding our candles in a ceremony that would allow us to dance under the diamond sky with one hand waving free.

Less than an hour later, my dream of dancing was brought back to earth when, on the drive home, Darlene got hold of me to let me know that Wayne, a nearly 25-year resident of 154 Union Avenue, had passed away earlier in the day at MetroWest Medical. In another path, in another life, Wayne would have made the list, if not this year, then certainly the next, but, thankfully, that was not Wayne's path. He'd lived in the room in the second building we bought in early 1987, right after we bought it. He had worked at Bethany until recently. I had heard from Darlene that our staff was concerned with him because he had taken ill. I suggested to her that she write something and send it to me. The next morning she sent this over. I want to read excerpts from what she said.

"In 24 years, we had only had to raise his rent a total of \$15 a week. It was \$75 when he moved in; it was \$90 when he died." (Those of you who know Darlene understand that paying rent is a big piece of self reliance.) "He'd worked at Bethany (ah Bethany and the wonderful nuns) for 26 years. Wayne was a person who always kept to himself. We had just replaced the furniture in his room last year and painted it. Got him a new bed, dresser and carpet. Allowed us to paint his walls, which, because he was such a heavy smoker, were literally yellow."

What follows are excerpts from what Darlene wrote about Wayne.

"Wayne was an individual who always kept to himself."

"He walked to and from work every day."

"He was a dishwasher, or the correct term is dietary aide, at Bethany."

"He was a private man, but built relationships with the nuns over the years."

"He was kind, funny and generous."

"In his room, he did not have a television, landline or cell phone."

"What he did do was listen to music and read. The books he liked to read were mysteries and historical fiction. The music he listened to was rock and roll."

"I would see Wayne periodically when paying his rent and would ask him how he's doing. He always said "fine." We would chat. I would joke around a little with him and then he would be on his way."

"Toward the end, a staff from Bethany Health Care called Michelle (Housing Coordinator) because they had not seen or heard from Wayne in over ten days and hadn't checked on him. Michelle went over to see him and a very sick man stood in front of her. Michelle talked to him for a while and he told her he had COPD. He did not want to go to the hospital or see a doctor. He was done with all that. Michelle offered to bring him to get medicine or food. He told her he would be fine. He walked to CVS and it took him an hour and a half. She continued to check on him just to make sure he was OK."

"Nora, our newest Housing Coordinator started in November, and one of her challenges was to engage with Wayne, and she met that successfully. I saw Wayne one day paying rent and tried to talk to him about seeing a doctor and applying for his retirement from Bethany. He told me, 'Darlene, do not worry. I have plenty of money saved to pay the rent.'" I told him that was the last of my worries. We started to talk about how long he was a tenant at SMOC Housing. I introduced him to our newest Housing Coordinator and told him if he needed anything, Nora would be working with him as well as Michelle, that they would check in on him."

"Wayne came to pay his rent and asked if someone could take him to the store to get a new pillow and comforter."

"On November 6th, I saw him standing in front of the building when I went to visit 154 Union. Wayne was there at the front door. We started chatting and he said,

"Nora's coming to pick me up to go shopping." She took him to Target and then to Newbury Comics at the Natick Mall. This was the first time Wayne had ever been to the mall, but he wanted to get some CD's in addition to a pillow and comforter. When I asked Nora later about what CD's he picked out, she told me, 'Well, he got a Led Zeppelin CD and a Jimi Hendrix CD and a Rush CD.'"

"Rush, you're kidding," I said, "and we both chuckled."

"On December 15th, Nora and Michelle thought Wayne would attend the Holiday Luncheon. They told him they would pick him up. When Nora went to get him, he said he was not feeling well and needed to rest. After the luncheon, Nora brought him a plate of food."

"Nora reported back to me that Wayne did not look good at all and we decided that every day we would check on him."

"I knew he was going to die. He was telling me through his eyes. That was why I wanted to make sure we checked in on him daily. I asked him about an emergency contact. He would not give me one. He said, 'When I die, then you'll know who that is.' He was estranged from his family. I didn't know why. He never spoke about it. Deep inside, I respected his wishes to die. Nora and Michelle were his angels at the end. The 9-1-1 call at 154 Union Avenue came in at 10:30 yesterday morning."

"I think Wayne did it his own way with dignity and had a couple of angels who were able to engage him in the system and along the way."

"May he rest in peace."

Wayne will be remembered, but not as a casualty of homelessness.

Year's end, redemption, remembrance and faith.

I hope each of you has a chance in either the real world or your dream world to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free.

Jim Cuddy
December 23, 2011