

HOUSING FIRST
A BRIEF MEDITATION

"Jim, Patrick has been homeless for 17 years."

Beth and Sarah are sitting across the table from me in my office.

"Really?" "That long, are you sure?"

Patrick is in his late 30's, born and raised in Framingham.

"We've come up with a plan to house him. We want to run it by you. We think it will work."

I knew that they'd run this 'plan' by Jerry and Susan who raised, let us say, substantive concerns.

Patrick is 6'4", 250 lbs. and could be mistaken for a retired football linebacker.

"Can we tell you about our housing plan?"

Beth and Sarah are doing exactly what they need to do: advocating for Patrick.

"You know guys, Patrick is one of the few people I've ever met who can literally scare the crap out of me. He's banned from this building (7 Bishop) and he has a long history of making hateful comments to others, interactions that qualify as threatening, racist and misogynistic."

Saran and Beth are well aware of Patrick's effect on others.

"Where's he now, outside?"

"No, he's up at the Turning Point in one of the four person rooms."

"And..."

"He's doing OK, no recent incidents."

The census at Turning Point has hit 50 over the long winter. It's worse in Worcester and Lowell, double that number.

It wasn't that long ago we had the census way down in both MetroWest and Worcester.

Scaling housing production, Housing first, case management, CSPECH, Pay for Success, Recovery Coaches, Ready, Willing and Able. It worked.

Things have changed. Did we run out of gas? Should I write more or fewer essays? Would it matter?

Beth and Sarah's housing plan is both well thought through and ingenious. They have managed to identify the one unit in our Metrowest portfolio that might work for Patrick. A one bedroom with its own entrance at Hollis Street where we have staffed programs (PDPR and YARCM) along with transitional housing.

Maybe.

"How are we going to case manage Patrick?"

"We were thinking Timmy, he has a great relationship with Patrick."

A wise choice. Timmy, like Beth, is an 'old soul', a state attained by those who have never lost their belief that everyone can lead a better life.

Many of our housing case managers are young and learning. Borrowing from pop culture I envision them as apprentice Jedi knights, learning how to use the Force to cut through the web of misery that often engulfs those who are homeless.

We have a long talk about medications. While Patrick regularly keeps his appointments at BHS, he refuses to take the meds that are prescribed for him.

"Jim, when he's on meds, he can't ride his bicycle, he's miserable."

What are the elements of the cocktail that will enable Patrick to ride his bike and control his impulses?

It's true, the few times I've seen Patrick on meds, usually when he returns from his increasingly frequent, short term incarceration, he's a zombie. I decide to have a second meeting.

"Let's meet with the Police, we need to be on the same page with them if we're gonna' do this. I'll have Jerry call the Chief and set it up."

While Patrick may despise the Police and authority in general, the feelings are not mutual. Like us, the Police are respectful and purposeful in their dealings with him.

We are allies, not enemies, we both may see things through different lenses but at the heart of the matter we both want Patrick and any other member of the community to respect themselves and respect others.

The meeting happens. It is positive and productive. A final decision is yet to be made.

The discussions on housing Patrick continue.

"I've been walking that lonesome valley trying to get to heaven before they close the door."

- Bob Dylan

A full color mug shot of Patrick, culled from the media following his latest arrest for creating a major disturbance at a local convenience store rests on my desk. His hair is tightly coiled and rapidly graying, his face has taken on the attributes of constant exposure to the elements yet it's his eyes that linger with me.

They are haunted.

Patrick knows, feels and senses that time is running out for him.

This is a decision that weighs heavily on me. I find solace in a song lyric written nearly half a century ago.

"If I knew the way I would take you home."

NOTES:

- Patrick's name has been changed.
- "Tryin' to Get to Heaven." Bob Dylan
- "Ripple" written by Robert Hunter. Performed by the Grateful Dead, 1970