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Essay – 569 words

Out of Sight – Out of Mind

Homelessness. We who have homes tend to think of homelessness as an inconvenience to witness, sometimes, if not always, judging those who live on the street, classifying them as lazy losers, an eyesore in the downtown areas of our cities. I wonder how we would adjust our point of view if the world slid out from under us for even just one night and we had to exist on the street without comfort or shelter.

I was listening to CBC Radio not long ago and they were discussing Abbotsford Municipal Officers ordering the spraying of a park with chicken manure to chase off annoying pesky inconvenient homeless people that use the park for shelter because the park is close at hand to an emergency shelter. These officials didn't opt to think of solutions to find these few individuals a place to live and a means of supporting themselves, nor did they consider human decency and respect before desecrating the piece of geography these homeless people felt safe in, but instead chose to chase them away. Out of sight, out of mind, problem solved.

Other communities have used similar tactics, embedding metal spikes under bridges and in building alcoves so no one can rest in these spaces, can't lie down, can't find shelter. The benches in these same cities are sloped and are now sporting dividers in them so individuals can't stretch out and this precludes anyone trying to sleep on the benches. Again, the mentality is if we make it impossible for homeless persons to find comfort and shelter then the homeless problem will be solved.

Less than 6% of the homeless population are there by choice, and most often those 6% are there because of mental illness and without access to help, yet we disregard them, look away, make sweeping statements that if we give them money they will just

use it to buy drugs. I can't tell you how often I have heard that particular statement that makes me want to scream until glass shatters.

There is good news. Vancouver is leading the way. An organization called RainCity Housing is putting shelters over benches, shelters that serve as cover for the rain during the day and a place to sleep dry during the night. Clever painted lettering lights up in the day saying, "This Is A Bench" and at night the visible letters declare "This Is A Bedroom" and further below the sign reads "A Place To Call Home Should Actually Be One". At the very least, this organization treats homeless individuals as real people, with respect and dignity. It's inspirational.

We seem to have no problem dishing out \$6.00 for a specialty coffee, but hesitate to share a loony with those who are living without. Why is that I wonder? It is within our power to solve world poverty and yet we don't, we continue to judge, we continue to worry about helping all in case we help someone who doesn't really need it, as if such a risk is just too much to bear.

We can't leave the responsibility of solving homelessness to the government, because the solution needs our input of humanity, of respect, of empathy, and government has but a spattering, if any, of these qualities. My hat is off to the Vancouver organization RainCity and I thank them for reminding me there is hope. Now to figure out how I can help.

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