

Name: Otis L Buckley
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College Writing
Professor Lux

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Homelessness In America We Need A More Righteous Roof.

Homelessness in America is an extreme issue for which socialism, capitalism or any other ism are hardly the distinctive cures. We must see extreme homelessness as the result of a porous and inefficient economic system. More importantly, our postmodern worldview of a non-transcendent God offers a topical and futile motivation. For all the sophisticated economic and grass root cure alls; they fall short in addressing and real soul impacting the many nuanced reasons why people become homeless in the first place. They help little at preventing cyclical homelessness. In some way, our deeply cherished ideologies born from American exceptionalism and individualism are the drivers for extreme homelessness.

I take no hardline political position on this matter; I only seek the same as the God of the Bible instructed the prophet Jeremiah speaking of Israel's babylonian exile, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Jeremiah 29:7. Though I'm not in a national exilic state, I will not forsake the essence of this Scripture which is to earnestly care for the well-being of my neighbors.

All of them. Homelessness can be defined as (1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence: [or] (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is—(A) a supervised or publicly operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill); (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

Given this understanding what homelessness is, we must not let our minds think of these people as anything other than human beings who are made in the image of God. No one living in this way is different from anyone else that faced these same circumstances. I'm convinced, this gives us a baseline for mercy. It very well could be any one of us who may not be homeless. There are many well known causes for homelessness that offer us a framework for thinking about the circumstances individuals and families face. Such as, foreclosure, poverty, domestic violence, financial instability and mental illness. It's possible to have each of these going on within one family. We can reasonably deduce there is an intricate connection between economics, health and homelessness.

If we assert that a family with financial means today couldn't go homeless in the near future, we deceive ourselves. I once debated with a guy at a backyard bar-b-que that just because we're presently gainfully employed doesn't mean that we'll always be gainfully employed. There are too many external factors for us to contend with. His argument was based primarily on a person's perceived marketability and the value they bring to the marketplace. Both of our points held merit, however, his position would require that we overestimate our own value almost to the negation of the uncontrollable variables. Consider those who were once gainfully employed and highly marketable before 2008 of our nation's great recession.

The Chicago Federal Reserve Bank published an article stating, "As a result of the severe decline in the housing market and the financial crisis during the last economic downturn, many Americans were unable to make mortgage payments and subsequently lost their homes to foreclosure. We estimate that between 2007 and 2010, there were approximately 3.8 million foreclosures."

To make what can feel like a distant truth more accessible, we should consider interpreted data from a CNN Money article from 2010, "The Great Recession drove more families into homeless shelters in 2009, a new federal report has found. Some 170,000 families needed shelter last year, up from 159,000 in 2008, according to an annual survey from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. There were 535,000 people in those families." Luby, Tami. "More families are homeless and on the streets."

The connection between homelessness and foreclosures is inextricable. And yes, the more the extreme foreclosure numbers are, the more extreme cases in homelessness will be. Also, the cause of homelessness due to domestic violence is equally, if not more alarming. The ACLU foundation/Women's Rights Project released data showing that A lack of alternative housing often leads women to stay in or return to violent relationships. In Minnesota in 2003, for instance, 46 percent of homeless women reported that they had previously stayed in abusive relationships because they had nowhere to go. In 2003, in Fargo, North Dakota, 44 per-cent of homeless women reported that they stayed in an abusive relationship at some point in the past two years because they did not have other housing options.

As we think about those women who did leave and numbers that were not reported, it's clear that domestic violence is a driver for homelessness. Additionally, if there are any children involved, this only to those numbers because statistically the children will go with the mother in many cases. Sadly, being that many of these women return to their abusers due to nowhere to go only contributes to the cyclical nature seen amongst many homeless. It is also well known that in the cases where these women will not leave, the children will leave and this just adds to the numbers of child homelessness. It's possible that a neighbor living in an apartment upstairs or the house across the street could be the person to become homeless from one of these hardships and we're oblivious to it.

We cannot divorce domestic violence from its impact on homelessness. Financial instability can be viewed several different ways. A person can be financially unstable due to underemployment resulting in not being compensated enough to pay their essential bills. This means if they were to have one hiccup on their job or in their management of funds. If a company dissolves a department or phases out the majority of their entry level positions; those individuals and their family will feel the immediate impact of this. Statistically, nearly 80% of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck meaning they are more susceptible to a homeless reality. As neighbors, how many of us are aware of this reality? Moreover, how many of us are aware of this being a likelihood within our own families?

My wife and I both have spent many years serving homeless families and their children. We have created programs for continued education, GED completion and job training for them. As we talked with them and had the privilege of learning as they shared their stories, you are reminded of your own frailty. Likewise, hearing the stories of those with mental illness and their journey through homelessness. Many of those who are homeless with mental illness did not exhibit noticeable signs of a mental illness. Oftentimes, duress brought on by circumstances will cause mental illness to surface. Again, that could easily be any one of us.

On the other hand, homelessness from those with extreme cases of mental illness is profound. Harvard Health Publishing released an article highlighting the cases. "About 600,000 people are homeless on any given night, and 2 million at some time in any given year. Over a five-year period, 2%–3% of the population, as many as 8 million people, will be homeless for at least one night. Of these, 80% find a home within a few weeks, but about 10% remain homeless for a year or more. The United States Department of Health and Human Services estimates the number of chronically homeless at 100,000–200,000. About a quarter to a third of the homeless have a serious mental illness — usually schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or severe depression — and the proportion is growing."

This is without question a staggering and unacceptable reality considering the vast wealth and resources like we have been blessed with. We have the number one economy in the world and many would suggest that is due to capitalism. I can concede that perhaps capitalism has added to our barns being filled, but how does that translate to our extreme cases of homelessness? I'm clear that many of our nation's financially well off have contributed greatly to help fight homelessness and all of its ancillary issues.

By no means do I want to cast a shadow over our nation's altruistic communities and their initiatives. In fact, quite the opposite, I'm hopeful that as wealth increases so will a sense for love thy neighbor. But even if that doesn't happen, love thy neighbor was never predicated on the extent of our resources. It should emanate from our hearts as we bear in mind that God has provided for and preserved us.

America must never get beside herself (as my grandmother would say) and think she's blessed solely from her own intellect and ingenuity. While the data is clear that we have an extreme issue of homelessness in our country, it reveals quantitatively how we arrived here. But there is a less obvious culprit looming over us. It is woven into the very mindset of American culture. Our passion for productivity and first rate living has helped fuel the gulf between those sleeping under a roof and those gaze into the night sky in parks and parking lots across this country with nowhere to go. I think our materialism and consumerism has blinded us in our pursuit of the American dream.

Consider the number of college educated individuals that are homeless and those who were once gainfully employed and for whatever are no longer marketable. A homeless man once approached me at a gas station in Dallas, TX and nearly startled me with a stealth approach. I literally felt a sense of guilt for being rattled in the first place.

As I regained my composure, he began to tell how he once had a family and was married with a good paying job. He went on to mention that the company he worked for phased out his entire department. The country was in downturn during that time and it was difficult to get an entry level position due to being overqualified. Not making excuses, I understood how this could be deflating considering that we as men have a tendency to draw an identity and sense of self worth from what it is that we do for a living.

I had already determined that I would help with money even though he continued to tell me his story. Well, he explained shortly thereafter he began to drink more than usual and found comfort in whiskey. He was seeking an escape while trying to hold hope in his eyes.

His wife eventually left him and she took the kids with her. This only made the already sinking ship sink that much faster for this once gainfully employed gentleman. He said to me, "look brother, I just want to get something to drink to zone out. I don't hold the quintessential cardboard sign saying God bless you." I told him that I couldn't in good conscience purchase alcohol for him. However, he seemed physically weak and I was glad to buy him a hot meal. He thankfully accepted. I bring this up only to say We must care deeply about the people who are homeless and treat them as the sons, daughters, mothers and fathers they are. Every person has a story and our responsibility to not trivialize their stories by seeing them as a mere burden.

Could it be that our insatiable desire to be exceptional as a nation is deeply woven into our individual desire to be exceptional? Every time we willfully ignore the least of us we confirm what is the worst part about us. For all of its imperfections, the christian church because of its worldview which is largely shaped by the Bible, continues to lead the way in homelessness trench work.

Baylor University conducted a study highlighting this: According to the study, faith-based organizations provide 58 percent of emergency shelter beds in the 11 cities surveyed across the

nation, in addition to providing an array of vital services and personalized interventions necessary for long-term recovery and independence. These services include, but are not limited to, education, healthcare, job training and addiction recovery. As a result, the study estimates that faith-based organizations create \$9.42 in taxpayer savings for every \$1 invested by the government. It further shows an estimated \$119 million in tax savings in the 11 cities during the three years following implementation of faith-based Residential Recovery and Job Readiness programs.

It is overwhelmingly obvious by the data that espousing a more biblical worldview can help reduce homelessness and effectuate long-term change helping homeless families recover and escape the cycle of homelessness.

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