



A Glimpse of the Homeless Heart

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Photo by Winslow Martin

It seems like a lifetime ago when I met "Josephine," a "bag lady" whose home was a few square feet on a Ninth Avenue sidewalk near the Port Authority bus terminal in New York City. She would sit on top of a crate amid a complicated arrangement of boxes, smoking and talking to herself. It seemed as if she'd lived there for years.

I was a Franciscan nun — 35 years younger than I am today — beginning my career in nursing. It was an exciting time. During the day, I worked as an ED nurse. Responding to the lack of shelter beds for women, four other sisters and I opened a women's shelter called The Dwelling Place in a five-story walk-up just around the corner from Josephine's home turf. We lived there as well, and we eventually convinced Josephine to give up the streets and stay there, too.

She was very quiet and would often sit alone in the dining room. One night, she offered to help set the table. She had lost several fingers to frostbite, but I remember noting how gracefully she did the task. Eventually I understood why.

Apparently, Josephine's choice of where to make her home for so many years had not been random. Long ago, she had worked as a waitress at a diner that had operated on the very spot where she set up her boxes. When the diner closed and she lost her job, she was devastated. Her mental illness spiraled out of control, and she took up a vigil on the sidewalk there. She later shared that her parents had been missionaries in Africa.

Josephine was one of the many homeless patients I have cared for during my career. As I began to learn about my patients' pasts, I realized how little separated me from them. Often it came down to one simple fact: They lacked a safety net and a support system when times got tough.

Men and women like Josephine have taught me some poignant lessons about loss, the tenacity of the human spirit, the many shapes of love, and the need for connection.

I am no longer a nun. Presently, I work at the Barbara McInnis House, a medical respite care center for homeless patients in Boston, but my patients continue to amaze me.

For instance, "Bernadette," had lived on the Boston Common for many years before she was diagnosed with head and neck cancer. No matter how sick she felt, she would always alert me when one of the other patients needed a little TLC. She was eventually housed, and I heard that she would regularly invite the most vulnerable homeless people to stay with her. Sadly, she recently succumbed to cancer at age 50.

I have seen this empathy and caring again and again with my patients. I think about "Sharon," a tough-talking homeless woman I cared for in New York, who showed up years later at the Pine Street Inn, a downtown Boston shelter where I was a volunteer nurse. We recognized each other immediately, and she told me she was working as a self-appointed "bouncer," as she called it, at a downtown cemetery, keeping watch over homeless women as they slept.

I have been the recipient of this caring as well. A detoxing patient had become angry with me because he felt he wasn't getting his medications quickly enough. While I tried to calm him down, another patient, "Angelica," approached me. Angelica was a tiny woman in her 20s who was frail and dying of AIDS. As the situation began to escalate, I told her I would talk to her in a moment and asked her to move away. She took a small step away. I repeated my request, and she took another baby step. Later, I asked her why she hadn't listened to me. "Gerry," she said. "I didn't want anything to happen to you."

Like each of us, every homeless person has a unique story. They have fears and concerns, regrets and memories. Their acts of beauty and love never fail to move me. We could all learn from them. My patients inspire me. I count myself blessed.

Gerry Mullin, RN (left), is a nurse with Boston Health Care for the Homeless.