



# HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA

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A FORCED MARCH TO NOWHERE

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by Mary Ellen Hombs and Mitch Snyder  
with a foreword by Daniel Berrigan, S.J.

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## A Forced March To Nowhere

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*Cover by Patrice Gallagher*

*Photo by Michael Hoyt*



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# Faith as Art, or How to Remain Standing in Gale Force Winds

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## a foreword

by Daniel Berrigan, S.J.

*Sometime in your life,  
hope that you might see one  
starved man,  
the look on his face  
when the bread finally arrives.  
Hope that you might have  
baked it or bought it  
or even needed it for yourself.  
For that look on his face,  
for your hands meeting his  
across a piece of bread,  
you might be willing  
to lose a lot,  
or suffer a lot,  
or die a little,  
even.*

Theologians tell us that faith properly understood sets up resonances, contradictions, ironies. I agree. And so does art, properly understood.

This book is, among other things, a work of faith. It grows from the story of how many communities, with simplicity and patience and so large a store of courage as to seem positively unreal, set about mitigating an unspeakable injustice. Its roots are faith in action, about which we hear much from theologians and divines - and see so little.

These faithful communities are also artful. Not merely as a matter of tactic (though resourcefulness in the face of faceless bureaucracy sets one hurrahing); but as a matter of soul, principle. Their faith is an art. Which is to say, the members endure, enter upon successive stages and steps of human life, steps taken

by those serving as well as those served. No exceptions sought; high points and low, good humor and tenacity, yelling and silence, beautifully cogent convictions, street savvy and wide-eyed presumption of human goodness. All of it is here. All is genuine, modest, patient, good humored. Faith is an art.

And what of the *work* of art? It is literally a life-saving task these communities have set themselves. In the winter, homeless people are dying in the cold. Every winter, people die. Their deaths (they being poor and therefore of little moment) are taken for granted. Built-in deaths, systemic, a phenomenon of nature.

These communities would have no part in this monstrous *laissez-mourir*. Something has to be done; such deaths are criminal, a capital punishment inflicted on the helpless and innocent. People must cry out, lives must be saved. It is as simple as that; the logic leaps the cracks in the public pavement (the cracks in our souls) and lands on the other side, on its feet. On the side of salvation; and in the nature of things, sharing in setback, public conflict, deep communion with suffering.

There is no need to recount details here, they are told quite capably and dispassionately in the text. Let me say only that the story of these communities and their struggle touches the wellsprings of life, faith, art. That it touched these springs in me. And that releasing the springs, these communities also put me gently in touch with gospels, modern and ancient. With Gandhi's long trek to immortality, and King's ineluctable truth and consequence, and the Beatitudes and the Buddhist vow of compassion. Faithful art, a faith that is artful. We have here tactics, action, self-testing, social thrust, and recoil.

And something deeper. A question of soul, resources. The question arises: What keeps a community going in bad times, when "bad" means the nuclearizing of human relationships, attitudes, breakup of symbols, loss of a common language, to the point where some grow mute and learn only to shout?

The faithful community endures. Faithful, they know how bad the times are. But by no means do they allow such times free play. They salvage what they



can, they cherish and foster life. They know that a loss of this sense of the preciousness of life inducts everyone into the common madness, anomie, despair. No, they assert the power of a common life, they live it out, explore it, submit before its discipline, follow through on its task in the world. They never give up. Never give up on prayer, never give up on one another, never give up on those who have given up on themselves - whether these latter are the down and out, or the despairing, incoherent public authority.

The faithful know something more. They know that evil is no flash in the pan, no deviant occasional fall from grace. The Vietnam war was no random embolism stuck in the bloodstream, skillfully removed, health reasserting itself. The poor who die in the streets of American cities, do not die by happenstance. There is a system of evil, a self-renewing web of selfishness and cruelty, whose true character is revealed only in the Bible. Sin. The demonic historical persistence of the Fall. That web as intricate as a spider's airy parlor, strong as cabled adamant.

In it we are stuck. Or more precisely, to come to the subject of this book, in the web are stuck the resourceless, unhoused, ill-clothed, and ill-fed poor. Therefore they die, out of due time, after much suffering and self-defeat. They are people who by every canon of decency should not die. Their death being as ethically outrageous as the death of children by nuclear blast.

And in this sticky web, let me add with all haste, we also are stuck. One has only to encounter American structures to understand this. Or to encounter any of a great number of "counter" folk: communes, individuals, those making it with "simple living," the noxious Bloomingdale cliches, the psychology ripoffs, the airlifted gurus, and so on.

A thousand ways of falling, only one way of standing up. Systemic evil, immensely inventive and persistent; goodness, a flash in the pan. Goodness that is, so to speak, good at giving up. American goodness that partakes of the tricky time-sense of the culture itself, now stalled, now feverishly hyped, now up, now down. But seldom consistent, reasoned, patient, humanly reliable, imaginative, submissive to the long haul.

Injustice, as Peguy reminds us, is eternally self-renewing. It is reborn, it has its seductions, its epiphanies, this anti-savior, this savior of the few and executioner of the many, this demon infesting the makers and breakers of history, infesting revolutionaries gone sour, possessing the nukes and their engineers, seated in the "high places," thumbs down on our human chances.

If goodness gives up, it is not goodness at all. It is usual American conduct, good in fits and starts, good now and then. But not, as the old theology would have it, a virtue of the soul, a constant energy, a way of seeing and responding and risking.

Is typical American "goodness" enough? Let the poor judge. The one who is starving today can be fed

today. But what of tomorrow, when he will starve all over again? And the woman who is battered, cast out today; one night's shelter is indeed something - but what of tomorrow?

These are questions that grow, that distress. What of the system, the web? The system does not strike at random, strike merely once; it is a triphammer, nicely calibrated to deliver repeated blows, death on the hour, the day, the lifetime. But what fuels so horrid an engine, who devised it? And how dismantle it? And finally, what to put in its place?

The persistence of evil; that is the first understanding. And then, to counter with a persistent goodness, a life of active virtue, a community in which it is less difficult to be holy; as a sign of a holy future, available to all.

Meantime, a faith that does not give up. This, I take it, is nearly the best we can do in a time when almost everyone, in one way or another, gives up.

"It is not allowed to give up." If I could read the silence of Jesus as he makes his dolorous way toward his execution, that is the look he turns on us. We are not allowed to give up. I read the look in spite of myself, I cannot not understand.

Not giving up; no great message for sophisticated Christians in an advanced culture. Everything, every ad, every political pronunciamento, every hype, flash bulb, successful face (they are growing rarer) - all assure us, we've made it, we have a better evangel than that, a more refined "spirituality," a gospel in tune with our intellects, our egos, our gross (*sic*) products, a gospel less abrasive, edgy, primitive.

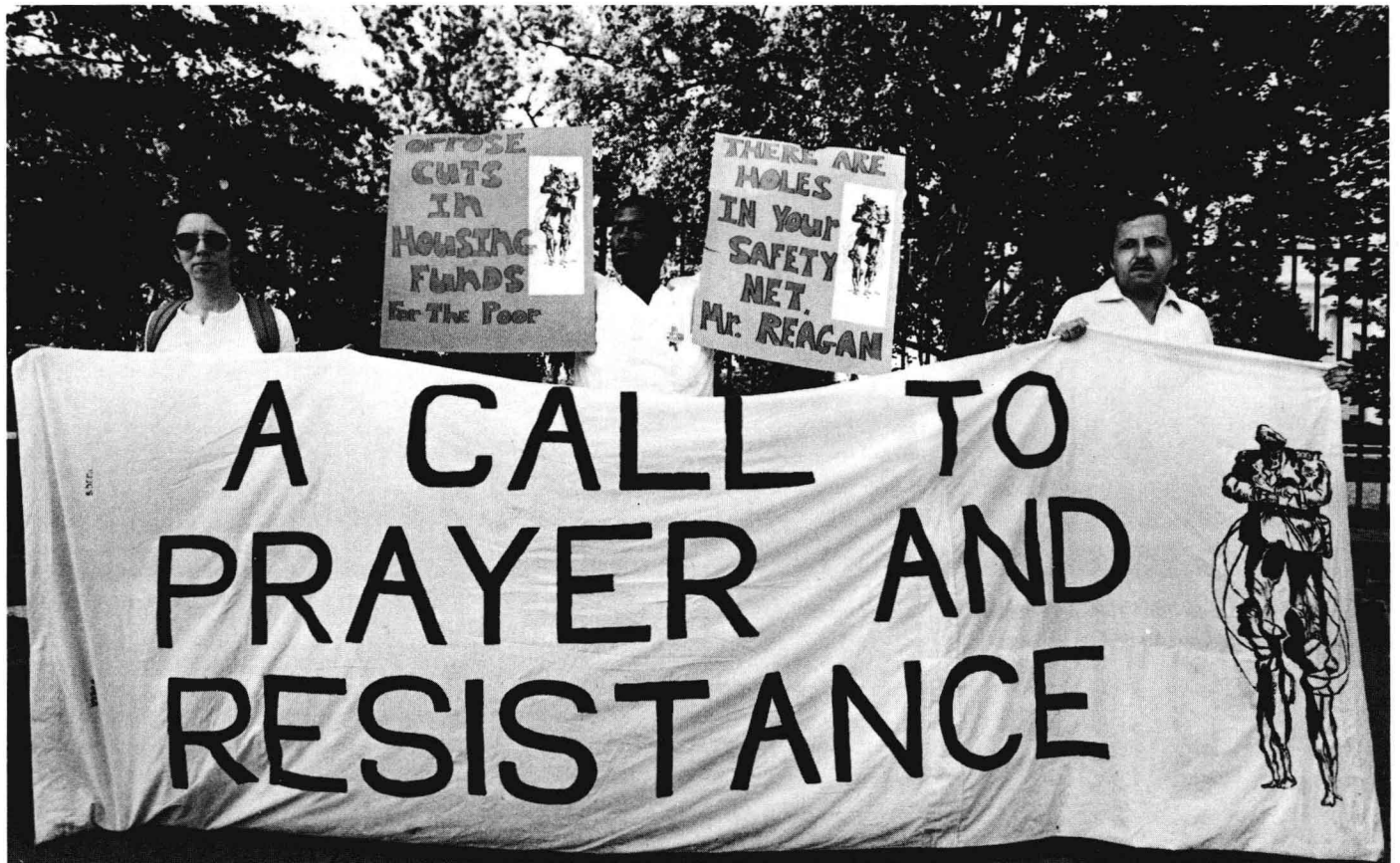
(But then again, in this case too, the medium is one with the message; and the Medium here is by no means one to engage hearts and minds. No; but a dying criminal trudging toward a just fate, solemnly enacted, agreed on by church and state. And who can stomach that?)

Do not give up. Not much of a command. Nothing attractive, negative, a burden, a pain. Hardly calculated to make a noise in the great world, or bring disciples or a cash flow.

Still, given the times, given the nukes, given the waste of talent and brains in slavery to extinction, given the dying poor and the tottering social system, given Reaganmadness, given all this (and more to come) - not such a bad gospel after all.

Thank you, CCNV. My thanks, dear friends, to all who reach out in faith and in compassion. Please do not give up. Or to put the matter another way (but the same way), please allow that Thy Kingdom Come.

Daniel Berrigan, S.J.  
New York City





*Part of the month-long June 1981 presence at the White House  
in response to the Reagan budget.*





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# Homelessness and the Hundredth Monkey: A Preface

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*The Japanese monkey, **Macaca fuscata**, has been observed in the wild for a period of over 30 years. In 1952, on the island of Koshima, scientists were providing monkeys with sweet potatoes dropped in the sand. The monkeys liked the taste of the raw sweet potatoes, but they found the dirt unpleasant.*

*An 18-month-old female named Imo found she could solve the problem by washing the potatoes in a nearby stream. She taught this trick to her mother. Her playmates also learned this new way, and they taught their mothers, too.*

*This cultural innovation was gradually picked up by various monkeys before the eyes of the scientists. Between 1952 and 1958, all the young monkeys learned to wash the sandy sweet potatoes to make them more palatable. Only the adults who imitated their children learned this social improvement. Other adults kept eating the dirty sweet potatoes.*

*Then something startling took place. In the autumn of 1958, a certain number of Koshima monkeys were washing sweet potatoes - the exact number of monkeys is not known. Let us suppose that when the sun rose one morning, there were 99 monkeys on Koshima Island who had learned to wash their sweet potatoes. Let us further suppose that later that morning, the hundredth monkey learned to wash sweet potatoes.*

*Then it happened. By that evening, almost everyone in the tribe was washing sweet potatoes before eating them. The added energy of this hundredth monkey somehow created a breakthrough.*

*But notice. The most surprising thing observed by these scientists was that the habit of washing sweet potatoes then spontaneously jumped over the sea. Colonies of monkeys on other islands and the mainland troop of monkeys at Takasakyama began washing their sweet potatoes.*

*Thus, when a certain critical number achieve an awareness, this new awareness may be communicated from mind to mind. Although the exact number may vary, the Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon means*

*that when only a limited number of people know of a new way, it may remain the consciousness property of these people. But there is a point at which if only one more person reaches a new awareness, a field is strengthened so that this awareness reaches almost everyone.*

So it is with the problem of homelessness in America. We see this book as part of a process to propagate and deepen awareness, an awareness which, when carried to its inevitable conclusion, will result in the elimination of homelessness. Our ultimate enemy is evil born of ignorance, itself a product of distance from suffering's reality and source. In the following examination, much will be said about homelessness, but here our job is as much to tell "why" we have written as it is to tell "what."

There was a time when we did not see the homeless around us, even though their broken bodies littered our city's streets. There was a time when we did not make an effort to understand what we did see. We coasted, accepting the imprints that others put on what we witnessed.

Somehow we have come beyond that, each by our own route. We have moved closer to the people on the street, and we have been able to discern some of what their lives are about; some of us have lived that life ourselves. On the journey we have taken, we have learned a basic truth: we cannot change what we do not understand, nor, in turn, can we begin to comprehend what we have never seen. True power, it has been said, flows out of true knowledge. It is where and with whom we stand that largely determines what we see and, therefore, what we know.

Where has this brought us? In the following pages we try to report what we have seen. But it is not enough to recount our own experiences or recite the sad vignettes or heroic details that describe the homeless people that we know. We cannot assign their plight to individual accidents, sponge their wounds, and hope

for a better day. We must look beyond what finally pushed each of them onto the street; we must give a searching examination to the policies and indifference that sustain such cruelty. Only when we put these diverse understandings together can we take whatever simplicity, patience, and courage we have and begin to alleviate the unspeakable injustice that is homelessness.

We offer first the basis for our own belief that the pain and misery of those on the street is more than the product of personal circumstance: both the roots and the branches tightly grip all that can be described as "American Life."

The forces, systemic as well as superficial, that have had long and short histories in the building of the army of the homeless - mental health policies, the Reagan budget, a deteriorating economy, a national history that has not always meant "liberty and justice for all" - can be seen as predecessors and determinants. This foundation is established with facts and personal stories that focus on the economic, political, and social sea-swells of our time.

Quite a few words are devoted to institutionalization/mental health and Reaganomics. That is because both factors have had a profound effect on the size and composition of the homeless population.

The world around us shapes us, forming our perceptions and our responses. Having once established such an understanding of the framework that regulates personal circumstance - despite our desire to believe otherwise - we look at five cities where awareness has begun to take hold. In each of these places, some people have rejected a punitive or passive relationship to the homeless. Anxiously, cautiously, with fear and apprehension, the haves and the have-nots inch their way toward one another. As that space is reduced, hope and understanding grow.

Each of the cities represents a somewhat different approach. In New York City, for example, litigation has been successful; in Atlanta, the religious community has carried the standard. Richmond and Chicago represent an earlier stage of development, while Washington, D.C.'s story is unique. In addition, we take a brief look at nearly 30 other cities from coast to coast, where a massive upsurge in the street population has elicited both positive and negative responses.

Problems and possibilities are spelled out in this way. The picture is grim, yet we cannot, need not, must not give up. We offer what we have found in the hope that it will carry each of you over that edge of understanding that will change life for you - and the homeless.

Mary Ellen Hombs  
Mitch Snyder  
November 1982



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# Acknowledgements

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Many people graciously helped to make this book possible; others inadvertently contributed to it by their words and actions. To all, we are grateful. Help with sources, critical expertise, moral support, and constructive commentary have pulled us through the months of work. We could not possibly mention everyone who has helped; others we cannot fail to name with thanks:

\* Kim Hopper, Ellen Baxter, and Bob Hayes, for their unfailing willingness to be with us spiritually and physically.

\* For their assistance in preparing the special local sections, Peggy Hombs and Valerie Marsh of Richmond, Virginia, Elaine Lamy of Chicago, and the Reverend Eduard Loring of Atlanta.

\* Mark Lee, who tirelessly read and critiqued several versions of the manuscript, with special thanks for his attention to detail and quality.

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\* Beth Goodell, for her invaluable help with typesetting.

\* B Wardlaw, for his patience, dedication, and careful attention with proofreading.

\* Most of all, we humbly thank all the past and present members of our own community, whose willingness to pick up our share of the load made this book possible, and without whose individual and collective pursuit of justice this story would not have come about.

We dedicate this book to all the John Does and Rebecca Smiths of the world. May our blindness to you end here.

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# About the Photographs

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The Community for Creative Non-Violence has maintained a firm policy in regard to photographs of our homeless friends. We do not permit the intrusion of cameras into places where we offer food, shelter, or friendship, for these places offer some of the only refuge available. Nor have we ever encouraged photographers to use homeless people as subjects; the need is for more than photos.

**Till Bartels**

xviii, 5, 12, 35, 52,  
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**Justin Brown**

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**Cleveland Plain Dealer**

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**Jon Siverts**

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**Ed Spivey**

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All of the pictures of men and women on the street were taken by Rufus Wysong - "Pepper" to his friends. He has himself spent time on the street, come to know the people whose lives he depicts in pictures, and photographed no one who did not wish to be photographed. In spite of that, it is with extreme hesitation and a nagging sense of infidelity that we share these photos with you.

**Lisa Turkfeld**

99, 110, 111, 120

**B Wardlaw**

15, 35, 36, 53

**Rufus Wysong**

i, ix, 1, 19, 46, 50,  
57, 60, 65, 69, 76, 79,  
83, 85, 86, 87, 88, 98,  
107, 109, 119

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# Homelessness in America: One Year Later

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Nearly a year has passed since we first released *"Homelessness in America: A Forced March to Nowhere."* During that time, \$50 million was appropriated in the Jobs Bill for the provision of overnight emergency shelter. Those funds "bought" 2.2 million nights of shelter - one night for each American estimated to be homeless.

In February 1983, the White House announced that federal buildings under the control of the Department of Defense, the General Services Administration, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development would be made available for use as emergency shelters. To the best of our knowledge, only one building has been put into service under this plan.

From every indication, there are more people on the streets now than there were a year ago, when this book was released on December 15 in conjunction with the first Congressional hearings on homelessness in 50 years. What has decreased, as a result of the emphasis placed on economic recovery, is the awareness of the urgency and magnitude of the problem. Thus, Congressional hearings entitled "Homelessness in America: One Year Later" are scheduled for December 1983.

While these events and developments might be construed as devastating blows to the effort to shelter the homeless, there is, in fact, cause for hope, and it

springs from its customary source: the reduction of distance between human beings. Lives - both of the homeless and those who care for them - have been changed. We see and hear, in all corners of the nation, a modest increase in bed space, warmth, and compassion. In times such as these, it is absolutely necessary that we maintain a sense of proportionality and humility. There *have* been positive signs. They are a beginning.

Mary Ellen Hombs  
Mitch Snyder

*I am done  
with great things  
and big plans,  
great institutions  
and big success.*

*And I am for those tiny invisible loving human forces  
that work from individual to individual, creeping  
through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets,  
or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which, if given  
time, will rend the hardest monuments of human pride.*

William James



*I have encountered nothing in 15,000 miles of travel that disgusted and appalled me so much as this American addiction to make-believe. Apparently, not even empty bellies can cure it. Of all the facts I dug up, none seemed so significant or so dangerous as the overwhelming fact of our lazy, irresponsible, adolescent inability to face the truth or tell it. . . . If we, as a people, are to go down helplessly in a fatuous and seemingly unnecessary chaos, it will be this where-life-is-better daydream that ensnared and tripped us. . . .*

James Rorty  
*Where Life is Better*  
1936

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# Introduction

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Americans, more than many people, are severely addicted to some very dangerous myths. Yet, we cannot address reality, or hope to change it, until we free ourselves from the fables that entrap us. Perhaps nowhere is this more true than in regard to homeless people. To see them clearly, to understand what their existence says about us personally and collectively, and to comprehend what their needs are requires this: we must face facts as they are, peel away stereotypical prejudices and delusions, boil off foggy thinking, and listen to the voices of those who have known and seen.

We must work from a single point: this is America, 1982. Homelessness is a national problem of massive and increasing proportions, affecting at least 2 million people.\* As a fabric, it is made up of the consequences of a number of elements and conditions basic to the way our nation and our society function. We do not always choose to see these clearly, but we will examine them here in as current, authentic, and non-academic a fashion as we can.

It is significant that only two years have elapsed since we prepared the report for Congress. In that time, homelessness has begun to smolder and then ignite as a national issue. The signs of our time can be read in a few events.

*\*No one can say with certainty how many people in this nation are homeless. Not until they come inside will we know for certain how many there are. However, in 1980, we prepared a report, for a Congressional committee, on the national dimensions of the problem. At that time, we concluded that approximately 1 percent of the population, or 2.2 million people, lacked shelter. We arrived at that conclusion on the basis of information received from more than 100 agencies and organizations in 25 cities and states. That figure has since been widely used by the media, politicians, and organizers. It is as accurate an estimate as anyone in the country could offer, yet it lacks absolute statistical certainty.*

*In gathering information for this book, we have learned nothing that would cause us to lower our original estimate. In fact, we would increase it, since we are convinced that the number of homeless people in the United States could reach 3 million or more during 1983.*

*Big Red used to be a professional country and western guitarist. Now he is middle-aged and an alcoholic. After eight years of living on Washington's outdoor heat grates, Red's hands are so badly burned that his fingers make crackling sounds when he moves them. His usual place of residence is the grate at the Corcoran Art Gallery. Surrounded by billowing clouds of steam, in a scene reminiscent of Dante's "Inferno," Red needs only look up to see the home of his nearest neighbor: the President of the United States.*

In March 1982, a photo of Red on his grate ran in a two-page story on the homeless in *U.S. News and World Report*. The story was one of several similarly-timed media accounts. Among others, "60 Minutes," *Newsweek*, "The McNeil-Lehrer Report," and *The Christian Science Monitor* have carried feature pieces. If the winter of 1981-82 represented anything, it was an incalculable multiplication of media focus on the

homeless. Most stories served the useful purpose of throwing a rope into the quicksand of our illusions, offering us a first step out of our ignorance. If we listened and read carefully, we could know that the traditional and persistent picture of street people as "dirty, lazy, drunken bums" bears scant resemblance to today's chronically homeless person. Wino, tramp, hobo: these are images from another era.

Homeless people are a complex group; their identities and the circumstances of their "previous" lives frequently do not match conventional stereotypes. Thus, shock meets the announcement of the opening of a free soup line for destitute children under age 12 in Washington, D.C. Among the first guests was a 3-year-old boy accompanying a 17-month-old. Within three weeks, "Martha's Table" was serving 30 children a day in a neighborhood that, not surprisingly and not untypically, has seen little change since it hosted the 1968 riots.

If these events awaken us to reality and to action, we must remember that others have paid with their lives to make it so.

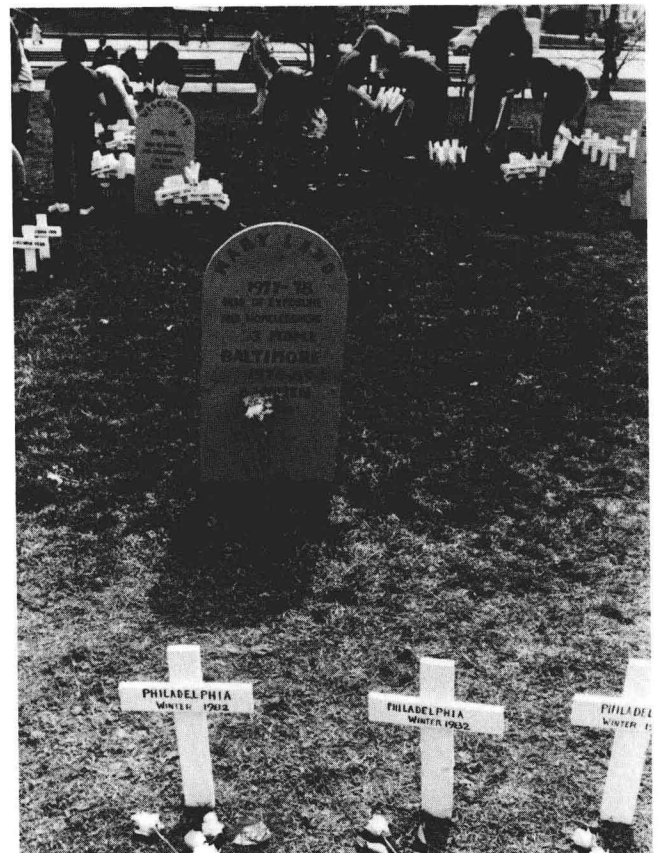


*Big Red*

*There may be a message in the 34-year-old Chicago man who was killed recently when the out-of-order trash compactor in which he had been sleeping for weeks was mended without his knowing it and the man, having conceived of himself as an ally of refuse and having been for all practical purposes refuse, finally became refuse and was compacted. But if there is a message, I'm not sure that I want to know what it is.*

Ebenezer Hob  
"Confessions"  
*Washingtonian*  
July 1978

There is indeed a message contained in the life and death of the man from Chicago, just as there is in the story of Big Red and Martha's Table. And, as Ebenezer Hob confesses, most people are not quite certain that they want to know what it is. The discussion, documentation, and reflections on homelessness offered here are for those who realize that they must decipher that message, regardless of where it may lead.



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