

Michael McDonald is Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity in Tucson, Arizona. He sent the first of these letters to his friends before Christmas.

# Street Retreat



MICHAEL McDONALD

## Dear Friends:

For two days and nights I'll be living on the streets. Not really sure why I'm feeling the need to do this.

So many countless, faceless displaced people in the last twelve months, starting with the Tsunami, the Gulf Coast hurricanes, the earthquake in Pakistan. And closer to home: the thousands of migrants crossing our desert borderlands. And the four thousand homeless people on the streets of our town every night – even tonight – including some 1,600 women and children. Not enough shelter beds for them all, except possibly on the coldest of nights.

Not sure exactly why my need to voluntarily join the ranks of the displaced and homeless. Some might call it the lure of reality-TV: maybe entitle it something like, "The 48 Hour Poverty-Plunge Survivor Show." But I'd like to think that it's more than mere oddball tourism or entertainment. That it might have something to do with my recent encounters with homeless men, and specifically with one fellow's invitation to me to step into his shoes, even if for just a couple of days. Plus I've been feeling like I should get my spiritual house in order, especially as Advent wanes, which in my faith tradition is a time of contemplative preparation and housekeeping. Clean out the accumulated mess and hope something better moves in. So let me call it a Street Retreat and leave it at that.

I'll walk out of my house one day this week at first light and return two mornings later. Some bucks in

my pocket, but not many. Panhandling may need to be an option. A layer or two of clothing. A few parks and one soup-kitchen to visit in the course of my wanderings. Street people to talk to. An appointment or two to keep that I couldn't get out of – with apologies for how unkempt and sour-smelling my appearance in polite company might be, and of course contingent upon my ability to navigate various bus-routes, as well as my feet's ability to hold up as I crisscross the town. No clue where I'll spend the nights, as I'm purposely avoiding preparing for this adventure with any advance reconnaissance. The only thing that I've heard from the homeless guys at the soup-kitchen is that you need a reservation at the shelters. And those are supposedly hard to come by.

I extend an invitation to you to join me on my Retreat, at least in spirit, as together we ask, "What if someone in my family were walking the streets tonight, looking for shelter, the thermometer steadily dropping, the belly empty?"

What would we be afraid of for them? Worry about for them? What would we be willing to personally do or to sacrifice to help get them off the street right away? How long would we really let them stay out there? And if for whatever reason they couldn't or wouldn't come in out of the cold, would we be willing to get up out of our warm comfortable beds to keep our loved one company throughout the long darkness of even just one night until the crack of first light?

I'd ask you to pray for me during my Street Retreat, but that seems absurd and indulgent, given all the truly displaced homeless people with real needs out there alongside me these two nights. So pray for them. And when you drive by them in a great unseeing hurry on the streets today, do a double-take, because it might just be me that you catch out of the corner of your eye, or maybe a loved one of yours, some lost forgotten member of your own family – certainly a member of our extended family. On second thought, maybe it would be best if you said a prayer for all of us. Feel free, if you'd like, to include your own displaced unhoused spirit in the mix as well.

Wouldn't it be magical if we could finally, after 2000 years of telling it, end that homeless, displaced, refugee part of the Christmas story once and for all, so that no one in our family was still searching for a safe place to rest her head, a place to come in out of the cold and finally call home? Perhaps this *Las Posadas*, as I join the overlooked members of our family who ceaselessly wander our streets, I'll catch the faint birthing cry of the sacred as it foolhardily tries yet again to stir to life in some forgotten lost corner of a world forever rushing by.

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*Dear Friends:*

Just got back from my street retreat. It'll take awhile for the chill to leach out of this desert rat's bones. In fact, a confession: the thought of spending another long sleepless night shaking at near-freezing temperatures made me abandon my aspiration to complete night two. Actually that's not quite accurate: my anxiety, dehydration to the point of nausea, and my spiritual/emotional plunge into a palpable and surprisingly rapid sense of isolation and depression contributed as well.

With six bucks in my pocket and nothing but a jacket and cap, I walked out of the front door of my house two hours before dawn and caught a bus to one of

the "homeless" parks. That trip alone burns up two dollars for an all-day bus pass! I spend the next several hours in the park trying to keep warm.

As the shelters release their previous night's occupants, homeless men start trickling in to the park. Most quickly find the driest spot they can among the thinner patches of yellowed grass wet with dew. Unfurling their bedrolls, the men hunker down into apparently fitful sleep. A young guy who could be an MBA student – judging by first impressions – claims the concrete table nearest mine. We both stare wordlessly into the distance. Without any eye-contact among the participants, we complete our early morning dance, jockeying for position as we give one another a wide respectful berth and settle into our respective territories. In spite of the angle of the rising sun, it will clearly be hours before any real thaw.

To buck up my increasingly discombobulated spirits, I console myself with a review of my retreat's rationale. After all, I wanted to get out of my comfort-zone, both physically and emotionally. Wanted to decompartmentalize my life, my intentions and my actions, my private and public personae. Wanted to become disoriented, displaced, even vulnerable: thinking that that might open up my eyes – and maybe my heart – to others' reality. Unhouse myself for a time. Shed my usual blindness, judgment, and jaded cynicism about the status quo. Maybe a little empathy and compassion might just sneak in past my usual defenses.

How amazingly fast, though, the descent from the poetic and philosophical heights of the self-transcendent and self-actualization end of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to the very bottom, where I'm keenly aware of my basic survival and safety needs. Needs such as, "Where am I going to eat/drink, toilet, sleep?" And, "Who's going to potentially victimize me if I don't watch out for number one?" These self-inflicted anxieties are compounded by echoes of what a few people said to me prior to the retreat,

things like, “You’re naïve: You’ll be an easy mark!” Or, “If those people don’t beat you up, they’ll certainly take advantage of you. You’ve got to look harder, be tougher.” All followed by anecdotes from the advice-givers about how they’d been tricked by fraudulent homeless or frightened by them. Or how everyone knows that the homeless choose their lifestyle, either because they’re mentally ill and/or because they can’t cope with reality and don’t want to be responsible or productive. I listen and nod. I’ve heard the arguments before from criminologists and economists about “social junk,” about throwaway people who have no value from a socioeconomic standpoint because they aren’t really a part of our producer/consumer matrix.



It’s still hours before the soup kitchen opens up, so my neighbors and I barely stir from our respective roosts, conserving our energy. But when I can no longer sit tight – not only because of the trembling chill but also because I haven’t quite been able to forsake my hardwired addiction to the rush of my usual daily activity (which I suspect often simply

masks my pursuit of my own comfort) – I succumb to the need to “move on,” especially when a nearby church bell tower beckons me to sanctuary. And besides, the temptation to warm up is too great. So I spend an hour inside trying to get myself into a contemplative mindset, which becomes easily sidetracked by the huge *nacimiento* that two guys are loudly constructing near the altar, using live plants, bucketsful of dirt, and a load of fresh-cut lumber.

Now the eyes of the dozen or so saint statues around

me in their niches gaze down at me with their accusatory stares. I’m already failing in my intention to experience the hardships of the homeless. How can I be so addicted to my own comfort, hiding out in this church? But the warmth and smell of the prayer candles are tempting, intoxicating. I can envision hiding out in here for hours, except that the painful awareness of my hypocrisies drives me back out into the middle of one of Tucson’s many economically depressed neighborhoods, which by mid-morning is invaded by scores of homeless and near-homeless milling about in the stirring dust as they await the start of the 10 a.m. cup of soup, smash of thin bologna sandwich, or – if the soup kitchen workers deem their hunger great enough – a bag of bread and a few other staples. Over the years, this neighborhood’s soup kitchen has evolved into a half-block complex of old run-down houses, including clothing and food banks and an outdoor chapel. Not only the homeless, but the near-homeless or those in severe poverty housing use the kitchen and clothing bank as well. Whole families drive up in their heaps of automobiles, or are pushing shopping carts, and leave with something to fill their bellies for another day, or to keep warm another night.

I take a seat on some railroad ties at the outside fringe of the service. My immediate neighbor keeps muttering curses in response to what he hears from the church-goers under the adjacent *ramada*, and I chuckle a bit every once in awhile at his wit. An instant unspoken kinship develops between us, and we try to keep some measure of decorum throughout the ceremony. Later, after the Mass ends, he offers his hand and we talk about such practical matters as the weather and where one might get a day job. After we’ve talked ourselves quiet – after all I’m not there to press anyone about the details of their lives and how they’ve wound up where they are – I start to take my leave, but not before he admonishes, without looking up from his cup of soup, “watch yourself, and we’ll see you back here soon.”

I think he's on to me, but I'm not sure, as I say, "thanks" and move on. I head to a park in the downtown area.

At one point in my travels, on the outskirts of downtown, I run into Keith. Actually I practically sit on Keith. I don't notice him until I sit down at an intersection with a low decorative wall and discover him fully reclining on just the other, non-traffic side of the wall. He's wedged face-up in a concrete drainage crack behind the wall. I can't believe that anyone is there. It doesn't seem physically possible. But there he is, gazing up at me with startlingly blue eyes. I say hello, and he smiles and says hello back. He asks about the volume of traffic on the other side of the wall. Can't he hear it? I tell him that it seems to be increasing. He nods slightly. I ask him if he's OK. His face seems to freeze for a moment, and I notice that his eyes tear up a bit. I don't mean to upset him or throw him off guard, and so now I'm disconcerted. Where is this going? He whispers a weak "yes" and then says, "thank you for asking." I tell him that he's welcome and ask – breaking my vow not to pry too much during the course of my retreat – how long he's been on the streets. He tells me three weeks. He says he can't find a job. He asks if I know of any. From underneath his left side, he pulls out a creased Classified Section of that morning's paper. Clearly

he's been doing some research. We talk about different types of jobs he's done. He also talks a bit about the routine of his days since hitting the streets. Again he tears up.

When we both realize that we're both having a hard-time continuing our conversation – now that it's entered an emotional area best left unspoken when one is in survival mode and talking to a stranger – we stop and turn our eyes away from one another. Keith

says again, "thanks for asking," and I know it's time for me to move on again.

And that theme of moving on continues into the dwindling light. I spend the remainder of the night moving from landscaped area to landscaped area, vacant lot to vacant lot. I try to stay put for awhile, but the increasing cold and the night's odd, startling noises keep me awake. At one point in the middle of the night, I walk for three hours straight to keep my limbs and my spirits warm. I run into other similar walkers. We avoid looking at one another, although I do catch the quizzical look in a few eyes that seem to be asking, "Just what is he?" I'm wondering the same thing myself, since a sense of failure has been rising in me all day. Failure to have my walk match my talk. Failure to see, to speak out, to stand in another's shoes. Failure to act. Failure to be the man I was meant to be. Failure of our community to take care of the least among us, even while demonizing the Other. Failure to be the people we were meant to be.

The morning light is unbelievably long in coming. Later I will discover that the second day of the retreat will bring a repetition of much of the first. For now, though, I'm profoundly moved and thankful for the dawn when it finally arrives as the merest of pinkening hints in the eastern sky. The proudest of my accomplishments – what I egotistically think I've ever earned by my own labor or skills – has never looked as appealing as this quotidian, unearned gift of another sunrise equally available to us all, the homeless and the housed. And perhaps, for me, this is the meaning of this year's Epiphany as I write these post-retreat reflections: that the gift of the sacred and the ineffable – in spite of our individual or communal failings – is indeed unearned and regularly breaks through, unnoticed and unappreciated, in the most ordinary of throwaway moments and the most overlooked of places. Now, if only each of us could come home upon the break of dawn, after the exile of our long night. ❀

