

The Manna Society Newsletter

Christmas 2019

Working with homeless people & those in need



Merry Christmas





Christmas: the festival of solidarity

By

Eleanor Smith

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



"We're each of us alone, to be sure. What can you do but hold your hand out in the dark?"

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*, Volume 1

I often see homeless people sleeping rough, huddled in doorways or asking for change and being roundly ignored by the busy public – a depressing sight, which leaves me wondering about how alienated people are from one another in the city, myself included. So when my client told me a story of every day kindness in the advice office the other day, it left me with some much needed optimism.

This client – I will call him Steve – is currently homeless and sleeping in an emergency night shelter. The system with night shelters normally means that guests need to arrive by a certain time in order to guarantee their bed for the night. This is the only way such operations can be made safe and sustainable for the (mainly) volunteers that run them. Steve was on his way to get to his shelter, and was very worried about being late, which meant he ended up running for his bus. It was a rainy, gloomy day. Because he was running, he slipped and fell badly, cutting his face, and missed the bus. At this point, Steve felt decidedly miserable. Missing the bus, and hurting himself, on top of everything else was just too much. In a bleak and irresponsible mood he decided to spend the last of his benefits money on getting a taxi to the shelter. At this point a man approached him and asked if he was okay. Steve asked if the man could call him a taxi, and the man did. Arriving at the shelter by taxi, Steve asked the driver how much he owed him. 'Nothing', said the taxi driver. 'The young man paid'. This small act of kindness meant that Steve's otherwise unlucky day ended with a sense of hope and care, balancing out the feeling of struggle and of everything going wrong. I have heard many of these stories from clients before, of meeting someone who reaches out to them, who wants to help. Even if all they can offer is a friendly chat, this kind of human contact often means a huge amount. One client told me that a man who found him sleeping in the park paid for him to replace his stolen passport, which meant that he was able to take up work.

So much of what I see at The Manna Centre makes me realise how powerful the urge to help others is in people. I regularly see day centre users, themselves in difficult and precarious situations, helping others in whatever way they can. One Polish day centre user whose English is fluent often accompanies other day centre users who struggle to communicate or who are chaotic, to appointments they have at the bank, at the hospital, translating what they are told, making sure they understand. One client, a very vulnerable person with quite complex needs once offered to give up his place on the list to see an advice worker for his friend, who hadn't got to the centre in time. He was sleeping rough at the time, and had very few resources, but his urge to help his friend was at that point stronger than his urge to help himself.

There is also the stream of food and clothing that arrives reliably at our front door from smiling individuals, ensuring cold and hungry people remain fed and clothed, and the volunteers who give up their entire hours of their time to wash dishes, chop vegetables, fold towels and make sure our doors stay open to those who need us.

These compassionate instincts I see so often in individual people are in direct opposition to much of the rhetoric, policy and actions we see, not from individuals, but from institutions and organisations. The automated voice that tells us not to give to people begging for money at train stations, the laws that criminalise and punish homelessness and poverty, the policies that dictate cuts to people's benefits. It is easy to mandate punitive actions such as these when the effects are abstract, represented by figures and charts, when there is not a suffering human being in front of you. Local policies criminalising rough sleeping in the local authority area of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) council are currently facing a legal

challenge, mounted by an individual local resident, Sarah Ward, who crowd funded the legal costs. Unlike the agents enacting these policies, Sarah has worked with homeless people, and has experience of homelessness herself. She knows the cost of these policies on the most vulnerable, the individual case studies of hardship, and this need clearly speaks to her. She feels compelled to act.

The urge to give and help others is irrepressible, and Christmas often provides us with an outlet for this instinct. At Christmas, many people cannot enjoy what they have without being able to share what they have with others, and find that when they do, the experience is a joyful one.



In this world

By

Karolina Muszynska
Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



I am not a festive person and it is very difficult for me to write something positive at this time of year. This is the time of the year when I feel very strongly about the injustice and unfairness of the human world. I struggle with excessive consumerism (that gets really bad during the Christmas period) contributing to the destruction of the natural environment; factory farming; the migrants crisis; human trafficking; homelessness; populist politicians focusing on dividing us and other depressing issues. I do feel very negative about the condition of our world, we really messed up our beautiful planet and it upsets me.

On the other hand, humans are capable of great acts of compassion and there seem to be an army of people who really care about others and who are dedicated to make this world a better and a fairer place for all. If you are reading this article you are most likely one of them. Thank you for that! Imagine how much we could achieve if we all shared that same principle. I know I am a dreamer but I am not the only one.

I would like to encourage you to check out a powerful poem called 'In this world' by my favourite artist, poet, playwright and musician, Benjamin Zephaniah, as it really resonates with what I feel about the world. You can find it on YouTube. In this poem he looks at the state of the world at a moment in time and he is reminding us, who live in comfort with all the devices we need, that this is not how most of the world live.

I wish you happy and conscious Christmas!

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Community or Individuality

By
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I have just been exposed to one of the first Christmas TV ads of the year. It shows an older gentleman stick in hand walking his dog. As he proceeds down the street, the neighbours “build” his present. At the end, a young girl presents him with the gift and the contributors gather round. I sense that he lives on his own and the festive period is an opportunity to reach out and for him to know that the community around him appreciate him.

It made me think more broadly about community – what it means and why it is valuable but also whether it is really appropriate to solely base your perception of someone by lumping them into one homogenous group known as the homeless. The thought arises from a recent article that I came across in The Independent.

The view from outside

It mentions a book published in 2014 by the sociologist, Richard Jenkins called “Social Identity”. He argues that some identities have a “master status” – a power that overrides other affiliations and characteristics. By making the primary label that of homelessness, we are choosing to make their economic situation their defining or key characteristic.

This is aligned with the work of an American academic - Katherine Arnold in her book “Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity” who suggests that economic identity has become an identity in its own right and that people at the bottom of the economic heap such as people who have become homeless get subsequently associated with particular characteristics asserting that they get seen collectively and politically as “irrational, dependent and irresponsible”. A 2017 report by Crisis, one of our leading charities working with people who have become homeless whose research found that many in wider society see homeless people as “victims or outsiders who become homeless through poor choices or bad luck”.

What is “community”?

In thinking about this, I started to look at definitions of community. Looking at the definitions offered by the Oxford English Dictionary, which provides about five different alternatives as to what is community, the ones that had most resonance to me were:

“The people of a district or country considered collectively, especially in the context of social values and responsibilities; society”

And

“The condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common”

Who forms part of our community?

The reality is that everyone is completely unique, complex and can be identified by any number of characteristics and that is true of everyone who has been collectively gathered under the label of homeless as those characteristics give rise to completely different needs.

Let’s look at some examples: It can be the people who migrate to the UK looking for work. It could be the trained engineer who may be working in construction but has aspirations to grow their career in the UK. They may need help converting their overseas qualifications into a UK equivalent. So, the way we would be helping

them is to link them to NARIC - the UK national agency for comparison of international qualifications and skills.

It may be to help them with the cost of the translations of their qualifications which are an expensive cost. It could be the trained chef whose contract is finished and whose accommodation that was tied to the job is no longer available to them. They may no longer have the requisite chef's uniform and the money to purchase it so they can take up another contract or job offer. We can help by purchasing chefs "whites" and the proper safety shoes needed for work in a kitchen or a set of chefs knives. We can fund this directly ourselves (thanks to your support) or we can apply for external grants to help.

It could be that person who is seeking asylum and is making a fresh application to the Home Office who in the interim is unable to pay for his or her prescription. We can help by paying for that prescription whilst they are waiting to hear the outcome of their application.

It could be that person who has found refuge in alcohol after the loss of a relationship and being less able to maintain contact with their children (whom they love dearly) but recognises that the impact on their life has been hugely negative in terms of keeping a job and maintaining those relationships which are profoundly important to them. They may ask for our help in getting them into a project that can help them to look at how they can manage their drinking or to make the choice to cut it out altogether. We can help by advising about what options are available to them. All of these people have aspirations and qualities and requirement for help which go beyond the simplicity of the label of being homeless.

So, how does community play out in our environment because it is not just a one-way street.

It allows us to support one another, interact, share experiences and our modern life struggles. I am amazed how the people who use our centre support each other and give a welcome to the newer users who may be having their first experience of homelessness – where to go, encouraging them to ask us questions about how we can help them. I often hear people giving very sound advice and as things constantly change in our area of work we often get to hear about new services that have cropped up or issues that they are having that help us to focus on what we might do when in campaigning mode. I often get inspiration about what I might write in the newsletter and it encourages me to do some digging for background and some hard facts.

Having this open bond with others is what builds valuable relationships, and gives us a deeper sense of belonging. We have worked with some of our clients for many years and over time, we are lucky enough to get to know about their lives and because of the work we do, there is an ongoing relationship that evolves and the individual shines through - you get to know who's hoping to train as a football referee with the Homeless World Cup Federation for example. Or the person who is a great self-taught guitarist who will be accompanying a Christmas Carol service at a nearby community centre. Or the person who has a much-loved but aging pet at home that needs some veterinary care at the moment – a perfect opportunity to refer them to the Dogs Trust Hope Project who can help with the cost and make sure that their pet is micro-chipped and vaccinated.

Communities are also rich in resources. Your strengths may be someone else's weaknesses and vice versa. We are lucky enough to have someone at the centre who is a dab hand at computer problems. Their mind has such fantastic logic and they are so practical that it is a source of wonder to a technological dunce like me. I suppose what I am saying is that despite the fact that somehow or another we have all be thrown together in our little centre – everyone's personality is so different but it is because it is so different that it makes the centre what it is. So, I just wanted to wish you from our little "community" here, a peaceful and joyous holiday season.



Does Christmas still mean anything?

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



Christmas time gives most of us an opportunity to pause from our everyday activities and spend quality time with our loved ones. Christmas has long been a family affair, often celebrated with family and close friends. This gathering recreates what has gone on during the first Christmas when Jesus was born. Family and friends came together to celebrate the birth of Jesus, just like we have done since. We share moments of love and give each other presents in honour of Jesus, just like the Magi brought their gifts to Jesus, those many centuries ago. The spirit of love this tradition embodies and displays speak to even those who do not consider Jesus as God. When Jesus is born, we are told, although the Son of God, he is as vulnerable as us, ordinary people, he needs his family to look after him. He does not come as an all-conquering God, but as a child needing love and care. This vulnerability enables us to identify with him and feel close to him and not look at him as far removed from our human experience. It is his Spirit who leads us to be concerned for others who are as vulnerable as he once was when he was born. It is quite telling that most charities report that they receive the biggest donations during Christmas time. The meaning of Christmas is still found in all the acts of love we express through our presents to each other.

This heightened Spirit of love during this period enables us to look beyond our immediate circle of friends and family and see strangers as deserving of our attention and care. Our love overflows and we begin to pay closer attention to those who sleep rough on our street corners and public places. We feel a renewed sense of social justice, that everyone deserves a home and no one should be sleeping rough, outside, on a cold winter night. Sometimes, this leads us to appreciate more our own personal circumstances and feel a sense of gratitude, but we can feel a sense of guilt too, that we are having it too good when others are not. The perspective is of course different when you are struggling. With a world in celebration, our suffering and misery can feel more unbearable. We become more conscious of our poverty and what we do not have. We may be struggling financially and yet be expected to act as if we are not. Buying expensive gifts or engaging in expensive social activities we know we cannot afford. Christmas can force us to spend time with family and friends with whom our relationships are strained but from whom we feel unable to stay away. The time spent together can bring us closer or drive us further apart. Also, our health may be so poor that our pain numbs any joy we could feel.

Having said that, the reality tends to be more mixed than clear-cut, black or white, happiness or misery. Even the most contented people experience misery and suffering, and those we may regard as most miserable have their moments of intense joy and contentment. And contentment does not depend on having friends and family or money, even if having them make life more bearable, on balance.

Our usual encounters with people who beg on the streets, in public places and in public transports, and tell us that they are homeless, inevitably shape the image we have of homeless people. Thus the stereotypical image of homeless people becomes the person who begs for money or is addicted to alcohol and drugs. Whilst this may be true, in many cases, it is not always true. The people we meet may indeed be struggling, but they may not all be homeless, although they may tell us that they are to win our sympathy. Knowing this has led some charities to discourage concerned people to give money to people who beg for money and claim to be homeless. These charities say that people who give money to beggars may be inadvertently feeding their addiction. Whilst I understand why they say so, I however advocate for people to trust their own instincts and judgement. There may just be instances when a receiver of our money does not feed an addiction but uses the money for transport or food the next day.

It may just be enough to acknowledge the people we meet. You never know what a smile can trigger in a person's psyche, a conversation, or a warm cup of tea with a croissant, as I see so many people do when I

walk around London. Christmas is the time to do this even more, not that we should stop at other times of the year. The point is that in these moments and acts of love, we can still find the meaning of Christmas.

For those who would like to go an extra-mile, this Christmas, you can enquire about what is being done in your local area about reducing homelessness as it keeps on rising. Charities in the sector place the number of people who have slept rough, from July to September 2019 alone, at over two thousand. Raising questions with our Local Authorities, MPs and Central Government is what we should all be doing as concerned citizens. You would be surprised how much some of your questions would unlock much needed resources for homeless people.

But, there may be times when you feel someone needs to be attended to quickly. A dedicated service, Street Link, exists for such situations to enable members of the general public to connect people sleeping rough with the local services that can support them. The helpline, 0300 500 0914, can get busy and they advise people to get in touch via their website www.streetlink.org.uk

We are of course happy to receive your donations. For those of you who can afford to the time, please consider working with us as a volunteer as we help reduce homelessness. Volunteering with us mainly consists of washing dishes in the kitchen and supervising the use of computers by our clients in the IT room.

This Christmas, let us rekindle the love we have for each other, that is the timeless meaning of Christmas.
Merry Christmas!



**From a homily given by
Saint Oscar Romero
*On Christmas Eve 1978***

This is the Christian's joy:
I know that I am a thought in God,
no matter how insignificant I may be –
the most abandoned of beings,
one no one thinks of.
Today, when we think of Christmas gifts,
how many outcasts no one thinks of!
Think to yourselves, you that are outcasts,
you that feel you are nothing in history:
“I know that I am a thought in God.”
Would that my voice might reach the imprisoned
like a ray of light, of Christmas hope –
might say also to you, the sick,
the elderly in the home for the aged,
the hospital patients,
you that live in shacks and shantytowns,
you coffee harvesters trying to garner your only wage
for the whole year,
you that are tortured:
God's eternal purpose has thought of all of you.
He loves you, and, like Mary,
incarnates that thought in his womb.

Manna Centre - Christmas Appeal 2019

It costs approx. **£40,000 a month** to run the Manna Centre. The work we do here is a compassionate response to homelessness and poverty. We are dependent on the goodwill of our supporters for our continued existence.



Would you like to support the work of the Manna Centre by making a one-off donation (either by cheque or online via our website)

or

perhaps consider funding our work on a longer term basis by filling in a **Standing Order** form?
If you are a taxpayer and would like to add another 25% to your donation, at no extra expense to yourself, you can do so by simply Gift-Aiding your donation.

Perhaps you would consider leaving us a legacy in your will?

However you choose to support our work we are indeed most grateful.

May God bless you in this holy season & throughout the coming year.

I would like to donate £ _____ to the Manna Centre. (Cheques payable to "The Manna Society")

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Email address: _____

If you are a taxpayer and would like to Gift Aid your donation please tick here ☐ and sign below.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Standing Order Form

Name and Address of your Bank/Building Society;

To the Manager of _____ Bank/Building Society

Address: _____

Post Code: _____

Instruction to your Bank/Building Society Manager:

Please pay into the account of the Manna Society – Co-operative Bank plc Account No. 50109537, Sort Code 08-92-99,

The sum of £ _____ (amount in words: _____)

Commencing on (date) _____

And also the same amount in every succeeding MONTH / 3 MONTHS / YEAR (circle one as appropriate)

On _____ (date of month)

Until further notice, charging the same to my account:

Name _____ (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signature _____

Address _____

Post Code _____

Bank/Building Society Details:

Account Name:.....

Account Number:.....**Sort Code:**.....

If you are a taxpayer and would like to Gift Aid your donation please tick here ☐ and sign below.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

*** Please return completed form to The Manna Society, 12 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP **