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Our National Shame

Christopher R. Fee
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

I spend a lot of time with my students working at soup kitchen and homeless shelters, and each winter, when it gets really cold and dark, my thoughts more often turn back to Dick. Dick died on Jan. 31, 1988. He was a veteran who served in Germany in the 1950s and was a graduate of St. John's University in New York, where his father has been an English professor.

Dick had completed most of the work for his MBA during a career which included positions at Procter & Gamble, Federated Department Stores, and National Cash Register. At the time of his death, Dick had been bunking with friends, and he seldom had to sleep rough on the streets. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Opinion

Our national shame

I spend a lot of time with my students working at soup kitchens and homeless shelters, and each winter, when it gets really cold and dark, my thoughts more often turn back to Dick. Dick died on Jan. 31, 1988. He was a veteran who served in Germany in the 1950s and was a graduate of St. John's University in New York, where his father had been an English professor.

Dick had completed most of the work for his MBA during a career which included positions at Procter & Gamble, Federated Department Stores, and National Cash Register. At the time of his death, Dick had been bunking with friends, and he seldom had to sleep rough on the streets.

Still, the fall from grace of this quintessentially middle-class man — charming, smart, educated, and popular — provides a cautionary tale for us all. Dick came of age in a corporate world much like that depicted in "Mad Men," and like many of his peers, he drank far too much. Unlike many of those peers, however, Dick's life eventually unraveled, and he ended up at the bottom of the heap.

Dec. 21 is National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, which is commemorated every year on or around the longest, coldest night of the year. The National Coalition for the Homeless and its allies ask us to take some time on the first night of winter to remember and honor those among us who have died homeless.

No matter how they got there, each of these people was special to someone, and the death of each represents both a personal tragedy and a failure of our society to confront some of our most uncomfortable truths. For me, Dick represents the face of those truths.

"Homelessness" is a term that conjures up unsavory images in the popular imagination — flat, generic, clichés that owe as much to fear as to fact. The truth is that children account for a shocking proportion of the homeless in America today, as do women fleeing abuse, as do the working poor, many of whom find it impossible to secure affordable housing in many of our cities.

Even as recent federal numbers suggest a drop in overall numbers nationally, the number of homeless people continues to surge in cities such as New York. Most estimates indicate that there are between 500,000 and 1 million homeless children in America, which is believed by many to be a conservative estimate. If trends continue, half of all people experiencing homelessness may be in families which include children.

If working men and women and school-attending children number among the homeless, why do the stereotypes of the pushy panhandler and the drunken skid-row bum continue to dominate our collective vision of homelessness? Is it simply easier to

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reason that "it's their fault," and shoulder past frightening reminders of the threat of the failure of the American Dream? Why does this population continue to grow? What can be done to alleviate the circumstances surrounding homelessness in America? Should we act? Should we care?

The recent move by Columbia, S.C., to force street people out of view in the city center, from which the city thankfully reversed due to the public outcry, reflects a very old American practice of sweeping this problem under the rug; it is reminiscent of the infamous New York City practice of issuing indigents one-way bus tickets to New Jersey.

Here in Gettysburg, a historic town of only 7,645, visited by a couple of million Americans a year, dozens of our most challenged neighbors, nearly half of whom are children, bedded down last year in church basements when our one tiny homeless shelter was overwhelmed. When one considers the alternatives available on a frigid, arctic night, one shudders, yet I know of at least four families with children living in their cars; more make do from time to time in cheap motels, and even more "couch-surf" or double-up with relatives and friends. One military veteran at the soup kitchen claims that several dozen of his comrades inhabit the local hills, refusing to come in to a shelter. The great majority of these folks work hard, often at more than one job.

We all learn many lessons, good and bad, from our fathers, but the most lasting things my father taught me speak volumes to both the promise and peril of the American Dream: I learned to work hard every day not just to get a job, but to secure a job I could never lose. I learned the value of retirement savings and the 30-year fixed-rate mortgage. I learned to buy as much life insurance as I could possibly afford. Most of all, I learned to teach my children and my students to value each person they meet on the street as precious, and to work to build a society which reflects this value.

Giving back to our community is a responsibility of citizenship, but volunteering is not enough. We must have sustained conversations about how these problems arise and how they may best be addressed. Fear and shame encourage us to deny poverty, homelessness, and addiction in our lives, in our families, and in our nation.

We must face up to painful truths, and we must believe that "we the people" includes those less fortunate than ourselves, even those who have made poor choices. The best way to learn that "they" are in fact "us" is to get out and meet "them," not simply to do good and to feel good, but to develop meaningful human relationships with those most touched by America's social programs and least in touch with her promise.

I think about these lessons each day when I think of my dad, Dick Fee. Dec. 21 will be no different.

The good news is that all of us can step up and help: Founded just last year, Gettysburg C.A.R.E.S. is a coalition of local churches determined to address homelessness by offering overnight shelter and welcoming hospitality to all who need it; dozens of our neighbors have availed themselves of this aid thus far, and an even greater number has volunteered to help, including 17 of my students so far this fall, along with a number of my colleagues from the college. As Julia Davin, a first-year Gettysburg College student from Newtown, Conn., notes: "Through their compassionate efforts, members of this community are making it clear that Gettysburg really does care. This valuable organization is more than willing to offer a helping hand to anyone in need, and I am honored to be part of Gettysburg C.A.R.E.S."

As Christmas approaches, Gettysburg C.A.R.E.S. offers area churches an excellent opportunity to put their faith into action: Christianity was founded in a stable precisely because there was no room at the inn, and hospitality offered to those who most need it is a fundamental responsibility of its followers. Moreover, providing this basic need offers something to everyone involved; as Megan Decker, a first-year student from Yarmouth, Maine, put it, "I was glad that I could play a small part in making sure that the guests had a warm place to sleep for the night." Megan also points out that C.A.R.E.S. provides a stop-gap measure that is a blessing for those who may be down on their luck, but who are not by any means ready to give up. As Megan said, C.A.R.E.S. offers a helping hand to folks who want nothing more than to make it on their own: "I am happy to be volunteering at an organization that is working to help people get back on their feet after experiencing financial trouble." We always need more helping hands, and we invite you to join us in this effort.

Chris Fee is Professor & Chair of English at Gettysburg College, is a member of the boards of Pennsylvania Interfaith Community Programs and of the Upper Adams School District, and belongs to the Menallen Quaker Meeting. This piece originally appeared in the Huffington Post.