

WHERE THERE'S HOPE THERE'S LIFE

WOMEN'S STORIES OF
HOMELESSNESS
AND SURVIVAL

WITH THEOLOGICAL AND
PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

ANTHONY J. GITTINS



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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness From the Inside and the Outside

Among the very many people lumped or dumped into a category and then labeled as a social problem (women in prostitution,¹ people with AIDS, sexually abused children, or addicts of every kind) are “the homeless.” Sometimes they are the dubious beneficiaries of “do-gooders,” victims doubly victimized by condescending treatment or patronizing attitudes. But most homeless people, as a lapel badge of the eighties proclaimed, are “HOMELESS NOT HELPLESS.” It is critically important that they find their own voice rather than have to suffer someone else speaking for them. But how can they be heard if nobody listens? How will they ever touch others’ lives unless people actually hear their own voices and acknowledge their own experiences?

Even if all their whispered voices were, literally, recorded, and their opinions respectfully gathered, what then? That is the central dilemma that delayed production of this book. Over two decades many homeless women have freely and enthusiastically shared their stories with me, but a privileged white male in a world of deprived and victimized women cannot presume to tell these stories, to speak for the women, or to edit their lives. These stories cry out to be told, unmediated and almost unexpurgated, in the first person. So they remained untold, though lives continued, ended violently, or even began again.

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THE BACKGROUND

Inspiration from three sources provided an unexpected focus. First, a reference from the *International Association of Mission Studies* back in 1988. Its *Network for Documentation, Archive and Bibliography* recommended that IAMS take seriously oral tradition and oral theology in the pursuit of missiology.² As anthropologist/theologian, I was struck by the applicability of this remark to the lives of homeless women. They operate with a very unformalized or informal theology, largely unacknowledged and unstudied by the academy. Yet their experience and wisdom might touch the consciences of people with no personal experience of homelessness, and even contribute to a renewed missionary *praxis*. Their stories might stimulate practical theology: theology that starts with actual life situations, reflects on them in light of contemporary theological (and anthropological) insights, and thereby causes a modification in the pastoral approach and in the minister.

This book is a case study of homelessness that engages with it as a social fact and shows homeless women as real people. The stories are not intended to cause a reader-response provoked by guilt or pity, but to evoke compassionate understanding and social responsibility. Good will alone is never quite enough, so I try to show (part 2) how practical theology suggests an approach, a set of strategies for pastorally concerned people.

A second inspiration occurred in the course of thinking about oral theology and also reading a dissertation³ that mentioned a book on African church history.⁴ One of the editors (Weller) lauds the individual case history approach as a way to understand broad historical trends, since local events are intrinsically significant and cumulatively provide a composite picture. He also advocates looking beyond what he calls the “inner” world of dogma and liturgy for explanations of ecclesial reality: the “outer” world of politics and protest are just as likely to provide enlightenment. The other editor (Ranger) speaks of the need for both outward-looking and

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inward-looking perspectives. This book is organized with the help of their suggestions, into two complementary sections: part 1 articulates an “inner”—or “insider”—story or experience of homelessness; part 2, an “outer”—or “outsider”—perspective and commentary.⁵

The third contributing reference was a work on self-consciousness.⁶ Anthony Cohen talks about the “reflexive self”—the particular, inviolate, very specific aspect of a person. This is a helpful antidote to a tendency to speak of “women” or “the homeless” generically—or “Americans” and other national groups or cultures—as an undifferentiated collective. Cohen speaks of “the irreducibility of the self”⁷ as a crucial concept for anyone trying to understand and value individual stories: they are not incompatible with the production of some generalizations, and they certainly help to put flesh and blood on statements that otherwise tend toward the bland or anemic. Part 1 presents a dozen “irreducible selves,” demonstrating the impossibility and presumptuousness of speaking of “the homeless” outside of specific contexts and particular cases. To the imaginative reader, these twelve may symbolize the inner core of Jesus’ disciples—the *twelve*—called, healed, and commissioned for God’s purposes and mission. These stories of real women should leave readers appropriately distressed, disturbed, and determined.

Periodically, over the last few years, a woman has asked about “her” story, fretting that it still has not been published. To the women (since I said their stories *would* be more widely circulated), this is yet one more instance, it seems, of broken or unfulfilled promises. Only recently, the first woman I ever interviewed returned to the shelter, fallen on hard times after years of relative independence. Her first concern was about the fate of her story, recorded and held by me these many years. My decision to ask her for another interview, perhaps involving painful details of her recent history, implied that this work would be completed and that the women’s stories would finally see the light.⁸

Part 2 consists of reflections on homelessness, victimization of

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women, responses of churches and volunteers, the possibility of an integrated pastoral theology, and the shelter where these women have stayed. They were written over several years, and there is a simple reason for including them: although part 1 has its own integrity, the autobiographies are not explicitly related to a wider social or theological context. Part 2 offers that, to stimulate theological reflection and pastoral response.

THE FOREGROUND

The holder of my passport is a “resident alien” (a designation rich in biblical associations, categorizing an underclass for whom Jesus made a public and preferential option).⁹ A British national, and trained in anthropology and linguistics, I ministered in West Africa for much of the 1970s among poor (not destitute) people in remote rural communities. Since 1984 I have taught at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and worked with poor (and destitute) people in the richest country in the world. Given that the United States prides itself on freedom, equality, and greatness (and a Christian heritage), this apposition, not to say opposition, is striking and challenging.

In 1979, a shelter opened in the Uptown Baptist Church in Chicago, with a large room for men, a smaller one for women, and the use of kitchen facilities. Every evening at 8:00 PM, a ragtag and bobtail group filed into the basement where each person grabbed a thin mattress and staked a claim on the cement floor. The space was cramped, the number of people barely legal, and the amenities Spartan.

There was no paid staff; and food—most from the food repository—was prepared and served by volunteers. But it was frozen or canned, and a standard meal would be repeated on successive nights until a consignment was finished: a dozen nights with defrosted chicken *sans* dressing, or canned soup that almost everyone found unappetizing (there were cases on cases of oxtail soup, which almost everyone disliked), did little to lift the spirits of people who lived largely by their wits, were often ig-

PART I

AN INSIDER HISTORY
OF HOMELESSNESS:
REAL-LIFE STORIES
AND CHALLENGES

TINA

Earnest and open, Tina is acquainted with grief. Within three years she has lost her oldest brother to cancer, her mother to premature old age, and her only son to a murderer's bullet. She is alone yet indomitable.

Tina's earliest memories are of brokenness and discrimination. She remembers precious little worth cherishing, but easily identifies her shattered dreams. When she was five her parents divorced, and she was shuttled between two homes: one in Texas (where she was born and her father still lives), and the other in Illinois (where she, her mother, and two siblings lived until her mother remarried and everyone moved to Wisconsin). Tina was very close to her mother, but her loyalties were divided because her father always remained part of her life, but her mother's new husband (about whom she is silent) evidently claimed the attention of her mother—attention that Tina desperately wanted and needed.

Her father indulged her. "I used to see him all the time. He would come and get me, give me my allowance, and take me wherever I wanted to go. He'd take me cross-country with him, to lots of places." She was his only child: her two (half) siblings had other fathers.

Her eyes brighten as she remembers something, and she tells

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me that her father “was a very nice person. I thought the world of him. And still do. He came to visit me, and left just a week ago.” But her memory is bittersweet: he came to visit her, *and he left*, knowing that she was in a shelter! How often was this kind of tale repeated over the years: parents, or siblings, or children would visit, or send a little money to people like Tina, and *then disappear!* It was the story of her life. Her father sends her thirty or forty dollars a month.

This brings to mind another woman, white and in her eighties, who told me—beaming with pride—that *her* son had just sent her forty dollars! She did not know where he was; he did not keep in physical contact with her; but he sent her forty dollars. And he *left his mother on the street!*

Meanwhile, Tina was living with her mother, her mother’s new husband, and two siblings, in her maternal grandmother’s house. Her grandmother did not seem to love Tina because Tina was dark-skinned, while both siblings were “high yellow” like their grandmother. Tina seems to have been very bewildered and torn, which may partly explain why, by her own account, she never accomplished much and never felt very good, academically or morally. She was not affirmed much or often. Yet she did receive her high-school diploma, which is no small achievement. But she never went to college: and she wears that particular memory like an albatross.

There is no bitterness in Tina, despite her being scarred by life. Her grandmother is dying of cancer now, and Tina is solicitous: the old lady is alone. Only a few moments before, she had said, sadly. “I didn’t love her”; now it seems clear that really she does.

“Tell me about your son,” I say, gently. She does so, willingly, pouring it out in a torrent, purging herself—and bonding with this virtual stranger, as she goes back to the beginning of her sorry saga. Even back then, her hopes were not very high, and clouds were already gathering over her little life.

“I was eighteen. I had gotten married when I was sixteen. I

was pregnant, and my dad told me I needed to be married. I was a teenager, and this guy was doing all these wonderful things for me.” But then things began to deteriorate.

Tina has never been divorced, so technically she has been married for twenty years. “But we were only together for five. He hit me. I left.” A pause: “I can’t say I ever loved him.” She talks about his decline into drugs and crime. “He had not been arrested in his teen years,” she says, “but then drugs got into his life, and he started to do bad things. He is in the penitentiary now.”

At least she is not being beaten up now: at least, not by him. Yet, although they have been apart for fifteen years, he has not been far from her mind. When her son (whom she believes she loved more than her life) was only five, her husband absconded with him. “He said they were going to the park. It took us two years to locate him.” Tina has a way with the pregnant pause, the dramatic twist.

“I found him one day at the library,” she says excitedly. “I showed his picture to a lady, and she recognized him! Here, in Chicago: he lived right next to this lady!” The pain in Tina’s eyes burns some deep part of me, as I recall another mother, long ago, looking for *her* beloved son, and finding him after three long days.

Tina never regained custody. Such is the lot of people without the varnish of respectability or the veneer of privilege. The police came, she had to return her son; his father was given custody, but his paternal grandmother and her sisters raised him. It only broke Tina’s heart once more. She admits, bleakly: “My life was really screwed up by then. So, I let it happen. By the time he came back to me he was a teenager.”

Teenage wife and mother, Tina had not had much chance to grow up herself. She recalls the tension between herself, her mother, and her mother’s mother. “I didn’t want to put pressure on my mother, due to my fighting with my grandmother” (who favored Tina’s lighter-skinned siblings). “So, I kinda raised myself. My mom just let me out. But freedom was a bad thing; I had no structure,

nobody to say, ‘No, Tina, you can’t do that!’ ‘No, Tina, that’s not right!’”

Tina is very perceptive. She knows many things that went wrong but feels that she was powerless to prevent her decline and fall. The catastrophe approached in slow motion, inexorably.

“My grandparents had lots of money. I didn’t really have to work. I had the good life!” Still, she had strong emotional (though not necessarily healthy) bonds with her mother. “I got my first job when I was fourteen: watering plants. I had many kinds of jobs: lifeguard, babysitter, cleaning laundromats. I cooked for Northwestern University for seven years. That was *wonderful!*” Then her mother became sick and she took time off of work: “It was my mother or my work, and I wasn’t ready to neglect my mother.”

She remembers the other person she never wanted to neglect: her son. He was five when he was taken from her, though she had lost him for the two previous years. She would not see him again until he was eight.

“I would send money, birthday cakes...and they sent them back. But he never forgot me. Still, he knew his dad was not there [“aunts” raised him], and in his mind he asked: ‘What’s happened to my mom?’ But he didn’t have any animosity to me.” I note the word *animosity*, notice Tina’s assurance, and know how animosity has marked her life so deeply. “Even when he was thirteen, he still knew the number to my grandmother’s house, God bless his little soul!” But now her eyes are filling up, and it is not the thirteen-year-old she is seeing in her mind’s eye; it is the murdered young adult.

Fighting tears, she continues: “He was very smart, but going through many problems.” With insight and honesty she says, “I think that came from me and his dad separating, and him not seeing either of us.”

So many children’s lives are torn apart as their own parents’ had been. History repeats itself. A sense of inevitability pervades these women’s stories. There are so many people whose statistical

chances of survival, not to say happiness, are miserable-to-virtually-nonexistent.

Tina is also caught in reveries and thoughts—about her son. She never tells me his name. Never once does she utter it. I do not ask: it is the only thing she has, and I have no right to take it from her. “His father was a drug-addict and an alcoholic. I was too—addict and alcoholic.” Now she has said it, admitted it, and perhaps purged some of the guilt and shame. As far as Tina is concerned, I am not there: she is alone with her memory.

“He was sent to all kinds of private schools. He would go to school and just goof off. He was messing up. He was always arrested. He was just not paying attention. He was the only boy in the house of six women. His grandfather was never around. They were all telling him: ‘Wear these clothes, don’t wear that,’ and so on. He didn’t want to be there.”

A classic story: a disaster is waiting to happen. Tina knows what happened, of course, but as yet I don’t. I don’t even know how she came to be homeless, which was what I thought we would be talking about. I don’t know much about her at all. I don’t know anything. And she has never told her story before.

I ask her about her son, how he came to be killed. She wants to talk, to share the burden, maybe redistribute the pain just a little. “It was in January [nine months before], just three weeks after I buried my mother. I was with him three days earlier. He was nearly twenty. He had left home and was staying with different friends. I’ve never seen so much of him! He would use marijuana and stuff. He didn’t use alcohol because he would get sick. I couldn’t stop him. I tried to tell him what it had done to me. *But he couldn’t listen.*” Then she remarks, parenthetically, that his father’s family ‘spoiled him rotten’ and tried to stop him from contacting her. She feels that more contact would have made a difference. She knows she was powerless to change fate, but she also has flashes of brilliant insight: “I don’t really think it was the freedom...; it was the restrictions [early in his life, the indulgence-but-with-rules, and later, the peer pressure] that harmed him.

“He was with his friends and was shot in the head. It was gangs...maybe a setup by some girls. He died; he didn’t even make it to the hospital. They said my son was in a gang. He told me he wasn’t and I really wanted to believe him. He wanted to do something with his life. He was going to join the Navy. But he didn’t want to work. He was really spoiled. My dad gave him so much of everything. I wish we had spent more time together...”

“I wanted him to get counseling, anything that would open him up a bit. He was real quiet: didn’t talk a lot. I think he was lonely. He had a lot of friends, and people loved him, but he was led by the crowd. He did what anyone wanted him to do. People came around him because he got so much. So he was popular.” Here speaks the universal mother-philosopher, grieving for a dead son for whom things might have been so very different.

Tina came to the shelter almost immediately after she buried her son. That was not the first time, only the most poignant. When her mother died, she had a ten-thousand-dollar insurance policy, enough to give Tina a new start and a new infusion of hope. She was so excited! But her mother’s funeral cost six thousand dollars. Tina says, “She had been there for me and I was there for her. She was my heart and I was her heart.” So, not merely from duty but out of love and at great personal cost, Tina laid her mother to rest. Now she could at least look after herself. She had four thousand dollars left. “I was going to use that money for an apartment for me and my son, so that when he came home from the Navy we would be together. It was Monday; on that Wednesday, he got killed. So I used the four thousand dollars to bury my son.”

Tina is very distressed. It is as though a Greek tragedy has just been played out in this small room. But Tina wants to continue. I ask: What can she possibly have to look forward to? And amazingly, instead of wallowing, she metaphorically stirs, shakes herself, and sets off on another track, with vigor, focus, and not a trace of self-pity. It is a remarkable sight and an endlessly touching story.

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