

CHOOSING VOLUNTARY POVERTY:

Healing a Poverty Not Chosen

by Julia Occhiogrosso

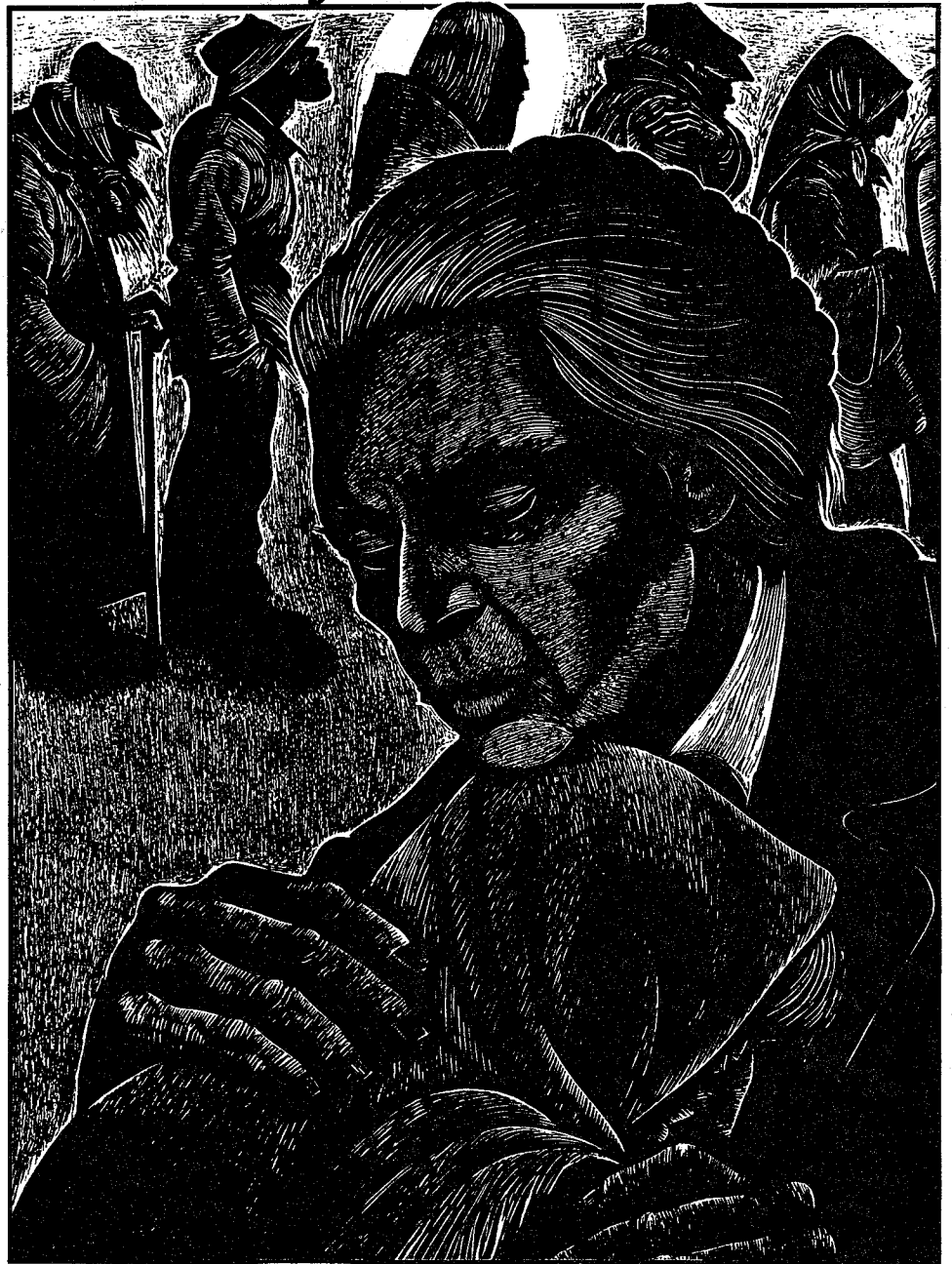
I awoke to the sound of gunfire. It came from outside. Probably, a few blocks away. I listened attentively for more shots. It became quiet. I turned on my side and tried again for sleep.

I have lived most of my adult life in neighborhoods like these. In my twelve years as a Catholic Worker I lived in an East L.A. barrio, a hospitality house on L.A.'s skid row, and presently in a segregated poor African-American section of Las Vegas. From its beginnings, sixty years ago, the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality have been located in predominantly poor neighborhoods. It was and continues to be a conscious decision to live in community with the poor. Attempting to follow the way of Jesus, the way of being among the poor outcast, many non-poor individuals have chosen to live voluntarily a life of "poverty" in the Catholic Worker movement. They have chosen to embrace the lot that for the most part has been inflicted on the poor themselves. And in this important moment of choice, lies the distinction between a poverty which can heal the soul and a poverty which violates the soul.

Among the poor who I have come to know are those who graciously choose to accept their poverty. They are not ashamed of it nor does it violate their humanity. These are truly the saints of our time. For many others, poverty is not just having less than, but it has come to mean being less than. It is an area of shame which damages the soul.

I could expound on possible explanations for this unfortunate perception of soul worth. We learn to believe that we are what we eat, drink, wear or drive. It does not take much imagination to understand where the ones who cannot eat, drink, wear or drive fit into this equation. And while it is important to think about this sad circumstance, I have come to give more attention to *feeling* the pain that poverty carries. It is a heaviness that I have no words for. It often leaves me silent without ways to respond. It is a burden that is breathed in with the lifeless dust of vacant lots. It leans and drags on my arms like neglected children desperate for attention. It stings my eyes like the smoke rising from a trash can warming hands in the cold. It shatters dreams like automatic weapons fired by youth upon youth.

When I first joined the Worker, voluntary poverty was introduced as a call to live simply with the poor. Certainly this meaning still holds. And while voluntary poverty will have consequences for my physical reality, the greater challenge is to allow the call of voluntary poverty to impact my interior reality. Receptivity to feeling the suffering of the poor can take me into the darkness of my own suffering, there I encounter the poverty of the soul. Choosing to embrace this interior poverty becomes more difficult. Yet when I have the courage to be with and grieve my own



DOROTHY DAY (FROM HOMAGE TO DOROTHY BY FRITZ EICHENBERG, 1984)

pain along with the suffering of others I am opened to God's healing power. I become more compassionate.

I learn to suffer with. . . , but not to suffer with in a neurotic desire to be victim, rather to be with and embrace a suffering that flows out of our efforts to love. In this place of love we will also be unafraid to face our true selves. We will have no illusions that our voluntary poverty resembles the culture of poverty which surrounds us. My experience of this distinction is a place of struggle as well. I am humbled by children in our neighborhood who visit our "simple" home and see a mansion. Though I value the challenge of voluntary poverty, I also recognize there will always be a disparity between my life as a Catholic Worker and the lives of the poor in our midst. Yet, this experience of disparity awakens in me a place of holiness that lives in each of us. To feel inner conflict in the moment of this disparity is to know that this place of holiness is alive within us. This place of holiness cannot be content in a world of injustice and hatred. For this place of holiness sees the world as God sees. Living

in the midst of this disparity stirs the desire in me for justice and God's peace, and in this way becomes the seed of transformation and healing.

This tension between voluntary poverty and the imposed poverty poses many questions. Dorothy Day wrote in 1945, "we must keep on talking about voluntary poverty, and holy poverty, because it is only if we can consent to strip ourselves that we can put on Christ. It is only if we love poverty that we are going to have the means to help others. If we love poverty we will be free to give up a job, to speak when we feel it would be wrong to be silent. We can only talk about voluntary poverty because we believe Christians should be fools for Christ. We can only embrace voluntary poverty in the light of faith."

When we choose poverty, we begin to heal the wounds of a poverty not chosen.

Julia Occhiogrosso is a member of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker community.

Notes Beneath the Bridges

by Toni Flynn

Imagine for a few minutes that you are seriously mentally ill. Your name is Joe. In other cultures and in times long past, you would be considered a person with a holy spirit and you would be given a sacred place in the community to live out your life. Here, you are homeless, scattered, split, absorbing the psychic shadow of modern society.

Now, imagine that you're a person working with homeless people. You leave your own house—and perhaps your family—each morning to enter what is literally another world—a world incomprehensible for the most part to the rest of the community.

When you enter the unboundaried, unwashed, unacknowledged world of the disenfranchised, you can learn a tremendous amount about human life.

The homeless human beings who stand before you eventually challenge every value, notion, and ethic you have acquired. They force you to see the world and its inhabitants in unfamiliar and uncomfortable ways, like clothing turned inside out with knotted threads and ragged seams.

The truly needy, the vulnerable, and the seemingly disposable, and despised are mirrors reflecting all that is contained in the dimensions of yourself that you try to deny.

Can it be that they expose the woundedness of our society, which cultivates itself by excluding some people and embracing only those who conform to the acceptable framework of the times?

When you become aligned with the homeless, you yourself begin to experience poverty. Not the poverty of a person with no income and no home. Rather, it's the poverty of being part of an alienating society.

Who is poorer? The question falls on you like winter rain.

You stand next to a panhandler on a corner and watch shoppers, businessmen, and tourists rush by, averting their eyes. You can't help but wonder why it is so offensive for us to be asked for a buck by a man in rags on a street—when a little farther down the same street, we happily accept a display ad's command to buy the newest shade of raving red lipstick.



You are increasingly aware that the homeless are easy targets because they have no possessions and no walls behind which to hide their brokenness. Why is it that more public outrage is sometimes exhibited over a homeless man urinating in his pants on a sidewalk than over all the local newspaper stories about murder, rape, and child abuse committed by people in houses?

You go to the park and see Dean drunk again, beaten and rolled of his welfare check. He is going nowhere but down. He asks you for a sleeping bag,

and you ask yourself, "What is it in him that resists change?" Could it be that the alternatives are worse?

You have expanded your vision beyond the "homeless problem." You see as well the societal problem. Even if Dean sobers himself up, he must then face a society rooted in narcotizing itself with not only drugs and alcohol, but with consumerism, escapism, materialism, and a million and one distractions. If he sobers up, must he then try to integrate himself back into a society whose underpinnings are plastic charge cards, freeway on-ramps and competing for the shiniest car on the block?

Will finding him a job and a house be enough of a solution? Is it justice to ask a wounded man to re-enter a world of conformity at the cost of whatever individuality the park bench now provides for him?

Sometimes these questions burn so deeply into your heart that you throw up your arms in despair. Yet authentic spirituality requires that such questions be asked. Authentic community does not suffocate the freedom of the individual soul. An authentic relationship invites one human being to be completely present to the reality of another human being. This is essential to anyone's recovery process.

No organizational charts, no statistical information, no sophisticated formula for success, no amount of funding can ultimately heal a human being. If you choose to work in the world of the homeless, you learn to help a person achieve *their* own dreams and goals, not the community's. You learn to honor their ability to survive in the face of all the alienation homelessness brings. You learn to respect the long haul of relationship- and trust-building versus the quick fix of task accomplishment. You learn sometimes painfully—to let go of trying to control the destiny of another human life, and paradoxically, you learn that it is a cop-out to label *anyone* hopeless.

You learn to hear the wisdom of the ancient sages who, referring to life as a procession toward compassion, urge only that if someone in the procession can't keep up, you slow down the pace for them. If someone falls, you stop and pick them up. You learn that. And you get up in the morning with the wisdom resonating in your ears. And you go out to the streets and bridges looking for Joe.

(Edited from a longer article)

Toni Flynn has worked with homeless people for 15 years and is a friend of the Catholic Worker. She is the author of the book *Finding My Way: A Journey Along the Rim of the Catholic Worker Movement*.

THE MIRACLE OF THE LOAVES AND FISHES:

7,000 meals monthly and a House of Hospitality thanks to you!

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	TOTAL
DONATIONS-----	2,807	2,824	2,060	1,966	1,140	2,828	13,625
T-SHIRT SALES-----	66	7	77	37	-	17	204
TOTAL INCOME-----	2,873	2,831	2,137	2,003	1,140	2,845	13,829
SOUP LINE EXPENSES-----	925	1,317	1,543	1,218	962	2,136	8,101
HOUSE & UTILITIES-----	483	741	168	533	170	173	2,268
HELP TO OTHERS-----	354	193	230	135	28	766	1,706
COMMUNITY EXPENSES (A)-----	175	240	175	216	375	339	1,520
VAN EXPENSES-----	471	198	712	462	96	605	2,544
SUPPLIES-----	227	208	134	292	378	402	1,641
TOTAL EXPENSES-----	2,635	2,897	2,962	2,856	2,009	4,421	17,780
SURPLUS/DEFICIT-----	+238	-66	-825	-853	-869	-1,576	-3,951

(A) INCLUDES \$10 WEEKLY ALLOWANCE TO 3 FULL-TIME COMMUNITY MEMBERS

PLEASE JOIN US:

Tuesday-Saturday, 6:00 a.m.

Morning Prayer at the house.

Tuesday- Saturday, 6:30 - 7:30 a.m.

Serve breakfast at E and Washington St. to 200+ homeless persons.

Wednesday 5:30 p.m.

Mass or Liturgy at Catholic Worker house, potluck following.

Thursday, 4:00 p.m.- 5:00 p.m.

End Nuclear Testing Vigil in front of downtown Federal Building.

Friday, 7:00 a.m.- 1:00 p.m.

Hospitality Day. We bring up to 6 or 7 people home from the soupline for showers, lunch, conversation.

Las Vegas Catholic Worker

St. John the Baptist House

500 West Van Buren

Las Vegas, NV 89106

(702) 647-0728

GOODBYE ERIC

Eric Smith leaves the Las Vegas Catholic Worker after generously giving a year of volunteer service to our community. We send prayers and blessings with him as he continues to walk in God's light. We are thankful for the ways Eric contributed to the growth and strength of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker.

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