

Questioning the Question

The book, *The Man in the Dog Park: Coming up Close to Homelessness*, by Cathy A. Small with Jason Kordosky and Ross Moore, presents a unique and insightful perspective on the “causes” of homelessness.

Born out of an unexpected friendship between an anthropologist and a homeless man, this true story knits together empirical truths and scholarly research.

We are informed both by the unique friendship that deconstructs embedded assumptions and by the scholarly research which has even the most socially conscious among us reconstructing our own way of thinking on the subject: What causes someone to be homeless?

We see this as an important read which resonates strongly with what we have perceived from over thirty-five years of connection to the homeless and those on the margins.

What follows is a brief excerpt that reflects a portion of the wisdom and insights that fill the pages of this book:

What causes a person to become homeless? It was a question that dominated my early interviews. It is also the question most asked by friends and acquaintances when they discover I have interviewed homeless people. Let me say that I have come to question the question. It sounds like a neutral inquiry, but consider the common cultural assumption behind the question, namely, that something about the person—an individual trait or condition—is at the root of his or her homelessness. We want there to be a reason, a personal cause. When we know the cause, we can then address the problem. The person is a perpetual drug or alcohol abuser; he got sick and didn’t have insurance; she was laid off and had no job prospects because she dropped out of high school; he took out a mortgage he couldn’t afford and lost his home to foreclosure; she argued with family to the point of a fissure and left home; he is a felon and can’t get a job.

Sociologists call this an individual deviancy hypothesis. It is rooted, they argue, in political and economic ideologies that posit an equal and fair playing field, where people who do not make it to first base in the great game of life will be found to have personal flaws and a history of poor choices. Conversely, everyone standing on third base thinks they hit a triple, never questioning whether perhaps this was the base on which they were born.

As an anthropologist, I believe this

concept of bounded, separate agent-selves that have the power to bring on their own destinies is an even more encompassing ideology, extending in our culture not just to economic success and failure but to whether you get cancer or survive an



Henry Freeman mixes up his popular “Atlanta style” cole slaw, a side-dish for 270 “To-go” meals.

PHOTO BY JULIA OCCHIOGROSSO

illness, whether you can win friends and influence people, and even whether or not you invite good luck. There is a reason why self-help books have been the fastest-growing segment of book sales among adults in the United States; it is our abiding American belief in a self-made man/person in which the locus of power, fate, and fortune is largely internal.

Not all cultural traditions view things in this way. If you are having trouble seeing an alternative to the American/Western conception of things (the classic problem of a fish trying to see the water), consider the way Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and activist, looks at a piece of paper. “There is a cloud,” he writes, “floating in this sheet of paper.” He continues:

Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are . . .

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow . . . And so, we

know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also

in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s concept of “interbeing” invites a different way of viewing both a piece of paper and a social problem. Each arises from a plethora of intersecting factors in which we all are ultimately implicated and playing a part.

So is it the overarching structures, policies, and attitudes in American life that produce homelessness? Well, yes, all these factors set up critical conditions, but the answer is not exactly this either. For Thich Nhat Hanh, the sun doesn’t *cause* the tree, although it is a necessary condition. All these factors construct the social and economic landscape that individuals must negotiate, and it is a geography of slippery slopes.

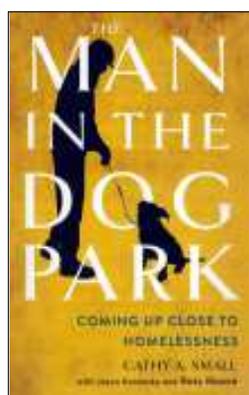
Despite the immense complexity here, it’s simple, really. Every time the slopes are made steeper and more slippery still by *(continued on back page)*

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larger conditions, more individuals slide into homelessness. Those with personal issues and challenges may slide first, but the slope can become too steep for almost anyone, however motivated or talented, to maintain his or her footing. And without a lifeline in the form of a network of family and friends with resources or available and adequate government programs, the chances are that a person will slip to a homeless bottom.

The general population has a one-in-two-hundred chance of ever becoming homeless—not a terribly steep slope. If you are born poor, the slope steepens almost eightfold. Hispanic or black? The odds of being poor are more than double those of non-Hispanic whites. The probability that you will ever move out of poverty has actually decreased since the beginning of this century, and your chances of becoming homeless if you are born into poverty are only one in twenty-five. If you were in foster care, then your chances are one in six. Now add an economic downturn, and there is another precipitous drop. Would you have been the one who lost his job? If you had only a high school diploma, your chances of being laid off were three times greater than a college graduate’s. So what are your chances of being a college graduate? They are tiny if you were “persistently poor” growing up. Add to this any personal or social liability like an abusive husband or an alcohol problem or depression disorder, and a plummet into homelessness becomes practically inevitable.

This is what we saw when we interviewed homeless people: a series of falls from successive slopes, set up by larger conditions, abetted by some personal decision or circumstance; each slip to a lower slope leads the person closer and closer to the edge until one single or small event triggers a seemingly sudden drop into homelessness.



The Man in the Dog Park: Coming Up Close to Homelessness
by Cathy A. Small with Jason Kordosky and Ross Moore
Cornell University Press

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Las Vegas Review-Journal, Aug. 26, 2021

CARDINAL CUPICH:

US must reject ‘false idol’ of money

Edited from the article by Brian Roewe, *National Catholic Reporter*, Aug. 6-19, 2021, page 5, website: *ncronline.org*

A bolder embrace of *Laudato Si’* in the U.S. requires rejecting individualism, indifference and the “false idol of economic growth” that permits reckless exploitation of the environment, Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich said. Cupich challenged Catholics to see sacrifice as “essential to saving our planet” and called on young

on an issue that is quickly worsening [and] an issue that requires bold action.”

A study she conducted with Creighton theologian Daniel DiLeo and sociologist Sabrina Danielsen found that less than 1% of diocesan columns written by bishops from the year before the publication of *Laudato Si’* to four years after have mentioned climate change, and in even fewer have bishops sought to teach substantially on the topic.



John Lalone (left) and Pete Lee pour about 350 cups of tea behind the trailer at our morning outdoor food line. PHOTO BY JULIA OCCHIOGROSSO

people to meet with their bishops and priests to share their concerns about climate change and urge them to speak out on the environmental challenges facing the world.

“I am convinced that it is useless to talk about advancing a culture of life absent a vigorous commitment—both by individuals and communities—to making sacrifices required for improving the socioeconomic, ecological and political crises of our time,” Cupich said.

The cardinal’s remarks came during the opening event July 13 at the second “*Laudato Si’* and the U.S. Catholic Church” conference co-hosted by the Catholic Climate Covenant and Creighton University. The virtual event attracted 2,600 registrants, according to organizers.

Emily Burke, a recent Creighton graduate, said the encyclical’s publication “gave me great hope” as a young Catholic concerned about climate change. And while some parts of the church have increased their focus on climate, she said, “it’s become clear that the U.S. Catholic Church is moving too slowly and tepidly

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