

Readers' Guide

Sacred Shelter: Thirteen Journeys of Homelessness and Healing

Part One: Questions for Personal Reflection

George B. Horton

The first part of this guide consists of six questions for personal reflection. The questions were written by George Horton, who runs the Education Outreach Program, the original and longest-running life skills empowerment program, sponsored by New York Catholic Charities. The questions encourage readers to think about how the life stories in *Sacred Shelter* have changed or enriched their perspectives about homelessness and related traumas, and they encourage readers to think about how the stories have changed or enriched their perspectives of themselves and people they know.

1. Having read the life stories in *Sacred Shelter*, have you been changed in any way?
2. Did you see any parallels in your own life and/or the lives of your family and friends to the trauma, suffering, or loss that you encountered in these stories?
3. Has your view of people who are poor, homeless, in prison, drug addicted, or who live on the margins of society changed in any way? The next time you see a homeless or poor person on the street, will you regard her or him any differently?
4. Do you have a better sense of the kinds of help that people need on their journeys to recovery?
5. Do these stories inspire you to seek ways to be of help? Do they inspire you to work for a more just and caring society?
6. Do you know someone who may be like the people in this book with whom you could begin a conversation today?

Part Two: Historical References and Central Themes

Susan Celia Greenfield

This part of the Readers' Guide was written by the editor of *Sacred Shelter*, who is a college professor and literary scholar. It outlines some of the book's historical references and recurrent themes, which are the kinds of categories around which a teacher or professor might organize a class discussion.

This part has ten topics. Each topic begins with an overview, followed by questions for discussion, and then suggested stories and details to consider.

Survival on the Street

Overview

Most people who experience homelessness never live on the streets, but of course some do. Six of the contributors—Nelson Prime, James Addison, Dennis Barton, Lisa Sperber, Rodney Allen, and Akira—all describe their lives on the streets.

Questions

How do the contributors describe street homelessness? How did they work to meet their daily needs? What role did other homeless people, or the homeless community, or the larger neighborhood play in their lives?

Suggestions for Discussion

Initially, both Akira and Rodney were intensely isolated on the streets. Akira even says, “I felt like I was dead. Some days I thought maybe that would be better.” Both men’s lives improved dramatically when they connected with other homeless or formerly homeless people and when they joined the community at All Angels’ Church. When Lisa Sperber left her shelter for the streets, she experienced true friendship for the first time; she too ultimately became a member of All Angels’ Church. The lives of non-homeless people could be brutal, as when Dennis Barton describes being beaten by teenagers in his sleep. But for the most part, the Bronx neighborhood where Dennis stayed was exceptionally supportive; people gave him shelter, clothes, and work. They were “very kind to me,” Dennis says. “They knew me. They knew my heart.” In their actions, “I saw the love of God.”

Life in Shelters

Overview

Except for Rodney, Black, and Akira, every life story contributor spent at least some time living in a homeless shelter. Many describe the experience, especially in the large intake shelters, as dangerous and dehumanizing, although this varies depending on the shelter or on whom the contributors met there.

Questions

What kind of hardships existed in the shelters? How do the contributors describe the authorities who worked there? How do they describe the other residents? When shelters or the authorities associated with them were supportive, what characteristics distinguished them?

Suggestions for Discussion

Several contributors describe the awfulness of shelter life; James Addison, Deborah Canty, Sophia Worrell, and Heidi Nissen do so in vivid detail. Residents could be violent, authority figures corrupt, and the whole system often depressing and dehumanizing. The shelter where James stayed was dubbed the “House of Pain”; Heidi’s caseworker in her first shelter was fired for selling and smoking crack. Sophia had a positive experience in a domestic violence shelter (see below). But later she was sent to a big intake shelter, where “[t]hey would search your bag, your clothes, and your person” upon entering. “The beat-downs were constant, and it was like being in prison.”

Sometimes shelters offered rare benefits. The sheer number of lonely and isolated women Deborah Canty saw in her shelters “changed my way of thinking. Everybody should have somebody. Empathy filled my heart.” As with James, it was in a shelter that Deborah began attending a group called the Life Experience and Faith Sharing Association, where residents often developed a sense of community. Both Sophia and Cindy describe the staff at their domestic violence shelters as wonderful and life changing.

The Loss of a Parent

Overview

In his reflection, George Horton (who has directed the original and longest-running life skills empowerment program) writes, “the grief of losing a parent, child, friend, or other family member is invariably central to our participants’ stories.” All the contributors describe this kind of grief, especially when it comes to the loss of a parent, and often there is a clear link between that loss and their homelessness.

Questions

How do the contributors describe their loss of a parent? What was their relationship with their parents like before they died? How was parental loss connected to their homelessness? How have the contributors processed their grief?

Suggestions for Discussion

Both Michelle Riddle and Rodney Allen describe their great love for a parent (Michelle for her father, Rodney for his mother) and their depression when that parent became ill or died. Michelle’s story begins with her father, who retired from the army when she was born, just to come home and “make sure I had a daddy.” Decades later, when she herself was a parent, her father had a stroke. He lived for several more years, but he was never the same. Michelle’s “world unraveled.” Already struggling with substance use, she became inconsolably depressed. “I didn’t feel like I had anything to live for. . . . That’s when my addiction really took off.” Rodney describes his mother as “my universe. She was my rock. She was the person I could always turn to with everything.” When she died, Rodney, like Michelle, says, “I didn’t want to live anymore.”

Deborah Canty and Heidi Nissen also adored a parent, in this case their mothers, but had painful relationships with them. When she was raped by her mother’s boyfriend, Deborah says, “I thought [my mother] was sacrificing me.” When Heidi was raped by her stepfather and she told her mother, her mother didn’t believe her. At the same time, both women understood that their mothers had enormously difficult lives and they sympathized with them. Deborah, who had long struggled with alcoholism, began “drinking even more” and blacking out after her mother died. Heidi became an opioid addict and was evicted from the public housing apartment in which her mother had lived for nearly forty years.

For these and other contributors, coming to terms with a beloved parent’s loss was a long—and in many cases still is an ongoing—process.

Loving Children

Overview

This section title has a double meaning. It refers to how much the contributors love their children and how often—and movingly—their children return that love. Loving children is arguably one of the most beautiful and consistent themes in *Sacred Shelter*.

Questions

How do the contributors describe their love for their children? Which contributors maintained contact with their children when they were experiencing homelessness? Which contributors did not maintain contact with their children? Why? In what ways have their children and/or grandchildren helped the contributors?

Suggestions for Discussion

The vast majority of this book's contributors convey their tremendous and often painful love for their children. James Addison, Michelle Riddle, Akira, and Cindy connect that love with their experience of—or recovery from—homelessness. When falling into a crack addiction that she knew would make her homeless, Michelle carefully selected guardians for her children and signed her welfare checks over to them. “I knew I couldn’t help or nurture or protect my kids . . . but I tried the best I could by putting my kids in places where I thought they would get the love and attention they needed.” Akira loved picking his daughter up from school and walking home holding hands. One day they returned to find an eviction notice on their door; his daughter immediately started crying. That, Akira says, “was the worst moment in my life.” Cindy, who was in an abusive marriage, tortuously weighed her options. If she tried to escape back home to Trinidad, her children could be removed; if she stayed with her abuser, they would be psychologically damaged by what they saw; if she went into a domestic violence shelter, they would be homeless. It was only when the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) threatened to take the children if Cindy did *not* leave her abuser that she made up her mind. When they reached their first domestic violence shelter, she told her children, “I left and I’m not going back. . . . I’m gonna be here for you guys as long as I’m alive. I’m never gonna leave you.” James Addison vowed to change his life on the day he learned his daughter was pregnant. Later, he dedicated himself to finding his missing son.

For discussions about their love and pride as grandparents, see the stories by James Addison, Dennis Barton, Michelle Riddle, and Deborah Canty.

Many contributors also describe the loving nature of their children. When James Addison told his daughter, “I know I wasn’t there for you,” she said, “But you can be there for your grandkids. . . . [M]y daughter taught me forgiveness.” One of Michelle Riddle’s daughters, who was adopted by another woman at birth, simply told her classmates, “God gave me two mommies.” When Dennis Barton’s adult daughter heard from him for the first time in many years, she packed her whole family into the car and drove from South Carolina to his homeless shelter in Manhattan. Rodney Allen’s adult daughter searched the streets for him, urged him to move in with her, and when he refused insisted that he stay with her at least one night a week. A few years later Rodney had his own apartment and gave a toast at his daughter’s wedding. “[W]hen I was going through my own personal trials and tribulations . . . [my daughter] always said, ‘Dad, no matter what, I will always be there for you. . . . I will stand by your side.’ . . . She is like an angel, an angel that has really brought me back.”

New York City’s Fiscal Crisis and Housing Insecurity in the 1970s

(Some of the following text quotes from the Introduction to *Sacred Shelter*.)

Overview

The vast majority of this book’s contributors lived in New York City in the 1970s, when the city’s fiscal crisis almost led to a default. The poorest neighborhoods were devastated by a variety of factors, including crime, the drug epidemic, and white flight. Cheaply produced and poorly maintained public housing buildings began deteriorating. Privately owned buildings were being neglected and abandoned by their landlords. Arsonists set fire to them, as did the landlords themselves with the goal of collecting insurance money.

Questions

What kind of poor housing and housing insecurity do the contributors describe? How did poor housing generally affect their lives? How did it affect their experience of homelessness?

Suggestions for Discussion

Dennis Barton offers a broad perspective of the cataclysm in the South Bronx. “Lots of people talk about white flight and the fall of the South Bronx. Well, I *lived* through that as a teenager. I watched the South Bronx disintegrate from a vibrant community where you could walk down the streets and hear different languages to where it looked just like those pictures of bombed-out Germany.” Both Heidi Nissen and Nelson Prime lived in condemned housing, Heidi as a child in a Lower East Side tenement and Nelson as an adult. Heidi recalls there being no heat or electricity on Christmas morning. “[Mom] was in bed and we all cuddled up with her under the blankets. There were no presents. There was nothing.” Nelson’s superintendent “ran to Puerto Rico with all the rent money,” and “turned off everything—the lights, the hot water. . . . [One day] I came back [and] my apartment had been ransacked, all my stuff was gone, I had nothing.” In Brooklyn, Michelle Riddle and her siblings played in the burned-out store next to their tenement until “our own building caught on fire, and the Red Cross put us in the Brooklyn Arms Shelter.”

The Crack Epidemic

(Some of the following text quotes from the Introduction to *Sacred Shelter*.)

Overview: In the mid-1980s, after Ronald Reagan declared a “War on Drugs,” and at a time when urban poverty and unemployment were at an all-time high, crack arrived in New York City. The drug, which was cheap, widely available, and short-lasting but intensely addictive, had an especially catastrophic effect among poor African Americans. Instead of prioritizing prevention, treatment, and education programs that might have limited the drug’s harm, Congress passed the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act. As Michelle Alexander notes in *The New Jim Crow*, the law established “far more severe punishment for distribution of crack—associated with blacks—than powder cocaine, associated with whites.” Though African Americans and other people of color do not use or sell drugs at higher rates than whites, drug laws and crime policies have targeted substances that disproportionately affect their communities. It is telling that today’s opioid epidemic, which disproportionately affects white people, is being met with calls for compassion and rehabilitation instead of crime and punishment. “Had this compassion existed for African Americans caught up in addiction,” UCLA and Columbia University Professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw notes, “the devastating impact of mass incarceration upon entire communities would never have happened.”

Questions

Why was crack so destructive? How did the contributors’ family, friends, and/or society at large react to their addiction? Did anyone show compassion and try to help them, and, if so, who and in what circumstances? How did the contributors finally recover from their addictions?

Suggestions for Discussion

James Addison, Dennis Barton, and Michelle Riddle all used drugs before crack, but crack, they discovered, was incomparably destructive. The problem, Dennis explains, was that “crack cocaine was a real quick high. . . . The instant you lit the lighter and put the pipe to your lips . . . you were thinking, ‘Where’s the next high coming from?’” As a result, Michelle suggests, “you became a slave to” the drug. The “first high was such a rush. You never got it back again, but you kept chasing it.” Nothing else in life mattered, James says. “The pull of crack made men and women do things that degraded them. Crack took away what little self-respect and dignity I had left. I would walk around for days with the same clothes on.” Though both James and Michelle had been homeless before, their experience of homelessness became worse. James, who had been

couch surfing, started living on the street and in the worst shelters. Michelle, who had gone from a shelter to an apartment, was evicted. She sought rehabilitation in Phoenix House, but her drug counselor was punitive and she left. Neither Dennis nor Michelle was able to find the rehabilitation help they needed, and both were eventually incarcerated.

Incarceration

Overview

People who are incarcerated are by definition homeless. And people who are homeless—especially if they are people of color and suffer from substance use—are at constant risk of incarceration. Several people in this book had substance problems and engaged in low-level crime. But the only ones who were ever incarcerated were African American. The demography speaks to the long-entrenched racial bias in our criminal justice system, what Michelle Alexander has called the New Jim Crow.

Questions

What circumstances led to the arrests of the contributors? Were they sentenced for a crime before spending time in jail? What was incarceration like? Where did they go when they were released?

Suggestions for Discussion

Black, Dennis Barton, and Deborah Riddle all engaged in low-level crime to support their drug addictions. Dennis was first arrested in his high school building for possessing the roach-sized remains of a marijuana cigarette. When he reached Central Booking, the white cops laughed at him and said, “‘You got a record, now you can’t drive a cab, you can’t even get a barber’s license.’ . . . I felt doomed.” Later in life, Dennis received a felony sentence for a botched mugging. Black was arrested and charged with selling drugs for simply pointing out van undercover agent to a drug dealer (what is called “steering”); the agent was pretending to be in withdrawal, and Black helped him only because “I couldn’t stand to see that. I knew how bad it felt.” For this, Black was offered a plea bargain of four-and-a-half to nine years. He rejected these terms and spent the next thirteen months in Rikers Island. He was finally acquitted when his case went to trial.

Black, Dennis, and Michelle Riddle all describe their experience in jail and prison in vivid detail. There, it is worth noting, they each had some positive experiences. But the details of their dehumanization are especially pronounced. Black recounts being denied methadone and forced into sudden and excruciating withdrawal. Dennis describes being handcuffed, shackled, and given the number by which he was identified for the rest of his imprisonment. In Michelle’s prison, the doctor tried to force all the women to have hysterectomies. When she refused, her release date was postponed.

Stephanie Reid, one of the reflection writers, describes the long history of imprisonment among the male members of her family. From her perspective, “unexpected things can happen that can land anyone in prison—a person’s lifestyle, or a case of mistaken identity, or a simple fight. . . . None of us can stick our noses up and say, ‘Never, not me.’”

Faith and God

Overview

The vast majority of the contributors speak movingly about God’s central role in their lives, especially when they recount the details of their recovery from homelessness. The title *Sacred Shelter* is in part an acknowledgment of their deep faith. George Horton, who has listened to

more than 500 personal stories as director of the life skills program at New York Catholic Charities, says, “The presence of God or a higher power in their lives, although not always explicit, is almost universally acknowledged.” He writes about how program participants share their deep belief that they have been saved.

Questions

What do the contributors say about their faith and their relationship with God? How do they describe God’s help when they were homeless? How do they describe God’s presence in their current lives? Was their faith in God ever shaken?

Suggestions for Discussion

The following are only a few of the contributors’ many inspiring accounts of their faith and relationship with God: Edna Humphrey, who suffered unfathomable trauma, says, “I love going to church. I love to hear the Word of God. I thank God every evening. . . . In the morning, I thank God for waking me up. . . . That’s how I have survived.” Like Edna, Black talks “to my God every day. I pray to him. I tell him, ‘Thank you for another day clean.’ . . . I don’t see how a person can live without God.” Black first began reading the Bible in jail. Dennis Barton “managed to keep” a pocket-sized New Testament with him through fourteen years of homelessness. As soon as he started the life skills empowerment program, Dennis joined a church, where he is now a deacon. When Deborah Canty attended her first AA meeting in rehab, she told her counselor, “AA is a crock. . . . All I ever hear about is ‘God, God, God!’” Furious with her family, Deborah dismissed the possibility of divine forgiveness. A few days later, she found herself on her knees. “I said, ‘God forgive me for holding on to this hatred for so long.’ . . . And I swear, . . . I felt the weight of the world lift off me. I was so light I had to hold on to the bed because I thought I was floating away.” Lisa Sperber and Akira also had conversion experiences during their recoveries. Rodney Allen describes this experience in vivid detail. “Today,” he says, “God is the driving force in my life. I believe Jesus Christ is the reason that everything happens. If you were to take that away from me now, I don’t know, I might be lost again.”

Many of the reflection writers also refer to faith and God. This includes both clerics—Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky, Dawn Ravella, DMin, Reverend Alistair Drummond, and Reverend Michelle Nickens—as well as laypeople, like Ira Ben Wiseman, Terry Michaud, Marc Greenberg, and George Horton. Jeremy associates the moments of human connection in the life skills program with Jacob and Esau’s reunion in Genesis. “To see your face,” Jacob tells Esau, “is like seeing the face of God.” Every human being has “immeasurable value from birth,” Terry says, “as each of us is formed in the image and likeness of God.”

Gender Violence

Overview

In the United States, sexual violence and other forms of physical abuse, especially against women and girls, is terrifyingly common. A 2014 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that, over the course of their lives, an estimated 43.9 percent of women and 23.4 percent of men experience sexual violence, and 19.3 percent of women and 1.7 percent of men are raped. In addition to sexual violence, 22.3 percent of women and 14.0 percent of men are severely abused by an intimate partner. “Many victims,” the report states, “were first victimized at a young age.” The perpetrators are overwhelmingly male.

There is also a strong correlation between gender violence and homelessness. A 2016 New York City study reports that nearly a third of predominantly female-headed families entered the shelter system because of domestic violence. Even when intimate partner violence is not the

immediate cause of homelessness, homeless women are commonly domestic violence survivors. Adverse childhood events, like sexual and physical violence, are also correlated with adult homelessness.

Questions

Which contributors spoke out about the gender violence they experienced at the time it happened? How did people respond? Who remained silent at the time, and why? When did the contributors get help? What kind of help did they get?

Suggestions for Discussion

Six of the seven women who tell their life stories in *Sacred Shelter* experienced some form of gender violence over the course of their lives. Many of them, as well as at least three of the men, came from homes where their mothers or other relatives were battered. In three cases, the victimized family member died as a result of this battery.

Both Sophia Worrell and Cindy became homeless as a direct result of domestic violence. They describe the enormous challenges of seeking proper help, challenges that, for both, were complicated by their precarious immigration status. Now each woman is outspoken about her experience and committed to helping other victims speak their truth. As Cindy says about facilitating a life skills program for survivors, “I [told them], ‘I’m no different from you. . . . I was abused and I know how you feel. But the only way to survive this thing and to get through this is to talk about it.’” Sophia describes coining the phrase “It is difficult but it is necessary,” when she first told her story in the life skills empowerment program. “Now whenever I talk to domestic violence survivors . . . I tell them that phrase.”

Deborah Canty, Edna Humphrey, Sophia, and Heidi Nissen were sexually assaulted and raped when they were young by their mothers’ boyfriends or second husbands. Sophia kept the horror to herself, but Edna and Heidi each told their mothers what had happened. Their mothers could not—or would not—listen.

In many cases, the contributors’ mothers themselves had been battered by their fathers or stepfathers. The same man who ultimately raped Deborah, for instance, beat her mother. Nelson Prime and James Addison were beaten by their stepfathers, who also attacked their mothers. Nelson tried to help his parent. “When I was fourteen, I . . . stole his knife, because he had already stabbed my mother.” Later, his stepfather “shot my mother in the chest but didn’t kill her. I took the cartridge out of the gun and threw the clip out the window.” Nothing helped. Right before Nelson’s sixteenth birthday, his stepfather stabbed his mother to death in the street.

Community and Service

Overview

In *Sacred Shelter*, the help and healing a community can offer is a central subject. Such community need not necessarily be religious or faith-based. A sacred shelter can be built by any community that champions individual dignity and equality and helps people find meaning and hope by finding one another.

Questions

What were some of the communities that the life story contributors found most helpful when they were homeless? What kind of inspiration, help, and service did these communities provide, and how did this make a difference in the contributors’ lives? What communities are the life story contributors a part of now? How did their experiences inspire them to take on leadership roles in these communities?

Suggestions for Discussion

The life skills empowerment program grew out of an activist community of homeless people, who, in the summer of 1988, took up residence in City Hall Park in Manhattan for 200 straight days. Their experience and impact on public awareness about homelessness are summarized in the Introduction to *Sacred Shelter* and in Marc Greenberg's entry at the end of the book. Nelson Prime, who was one of the community's leaders, describes the event in vivid detail and emphasizes the incredible solidarity among participants. "How wonderful that homeless brothers and sisters were banding together to make our voices heard." After the group disbanded, Nelson told himself, "I'm going to make a difference now . . . , and the best way I can do that is by helping myself to help others." To this day, Nelson is committed to community activism and service on behalf of homeless people.

Two faith-based community organizations, the Life Experience and Faith Sharing Associates (LEFSA) and All Angels' Church, frequently appear in *Sacred Shelter*. James Addison and Deborah Canty describe how much LEFSA helped them when they were homeless; today Deborah is a LEFSA team leader, and James is the group's operations manager. All Angels' Church has played a vital role in the lives of Lisa Sperber, Rodney Allen, and Akira. When he was homeless, Akira was inspired by the diversity and devotion of the community. "There were all kinds of people—homeless people, young people, old people, bakers, lawyers, architects. . . . [I began to be] influenced by the congregation's strong faith." Today Lisa, Rodney, and Akira are all active in the church community and devoted to helping its homeless constituents.

Of course, the community created in the life skills empowerment program deserves special recognition in *Sacred Shelter*. All of the book's contributors graduated from the program, and all the reflection writers participated in it. Contributors like Heidi Nissen and Cindy describe their sense of identification with other participants. "Being around [them] really, really helped me," Cindy says. "Now I had many friends."

Equally moving descriptions of community support come from the professionals and volunteers in the program. Time and again, the reflection writers in *Sacred Shelter* testify to how being part of this community changed their lives. Hope says that listening to the "pain, wisdom, insight, and bravery" of the participants' stories "liberated me to tell my own story"—in her case, about the trauma of being an adopted child. Michelle Nickens, who facilitated a program for domestic violence survivors, writes, "Hearing the stories of the women, witnessing their profound resiliency and determination, seeing the developing bonds of mutual support . . . —all of these experiences have [had] a profound impact on me. . . . Working with these women has helped me heal." The final words of George Horton's reflection—which are appropriately the final words of *Sacred Shelter* and of this Readers' Guide—summarize the transformative communal power of the life skills empowerment program: "Above all, I am grateful for the participants . . . who have taught me about faith and have helped me cross boundaries to find the gifts of conversion and community, the 'sacred shelter' waiting on the other side."