

“Poverty and Proximity”

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Terry Currier and the Rev. Heather Janules

There is someone you may have noticed here, visiting from time to time. I will call him “Joe.” He is a lanky, middle-aged man, often dressed in clothes that suggests he performs some kind of manual labor.

Joe doesn’t attend worship but he comes early to sit outside the sanctuary and listen to the choir rehearse. Whenever I see him sitting there, I am delighted that our music ministry reaches beyond the hour of worship and beyond those who gather here every Sunday.

Eventually, Joe rises from his chair and seeks me out in hopes that I can give him a gift card to a local grocery store. We provide these cards to people in need, this ministry paid for by the Minister’s Discretionary Fund. As the primary purpose of this fund is to assist members of the congregation in financial distress, I am glad that this ministry also reaches beyond the immediate community.

But we have had to develop some practices for distributing these funds. Being a trusting sort, in the past I have given money to people who eventually become known to all the houses of worship in town with ever-evolving stories of need, stories that, in time, don’t hold up. So we don’t provide cash but grocery cards, putting our faith in relieving food insecurity so resources can be applied elsewhere. And we have had to limit folks to one card a month to ensure we have enough for everyone who asks.

This is one of the most challenging things about being a parish minister, providing for the community-at-large in a way that serves the most people and honors the intention of generous donors. Sometimes I am tempted to throw caution to the wind and empty the account, giving abundantly to anyone and everyone who asks. But then I remember that the need is so great in our world these dollars wouldn’t go very far.

While it is meaningful, putting the opportunity for a hot meal into someone’s hands, I admit I often feel uncomfortable in these moments.

It is not so much the uncertainty of whether we are being swindled. For me, there is discomfort inherent in the transaction. In this moment, I am a gatekeeper to resources, a human ATM if you will. It is hard to escape the feeling that both I and the person I am handing a card to are somehow demeaned by this act. We are both so much more than giver and receiver but, in these exchanges, that is the only relationship between us.

When I place a gift card into someone's hand, I sometimes think of the words of Bryan Stevenson. Many read his book, *Just Mercy*, illustrating his work in defending the disenfranchised in our systems of incarceration. One thing he writes and speaks about is the connection between justice-making and relationship: one must – in his words – “get proximate” to the poor to begin making a difference.

As Stevenson puts it:

Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths...My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice....I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.

While handing a grocery card to someone brings me in close physical proximity, over time I have learned that this gesture inspires a feeling within me, a sense of personal distance. On some level, this distance is arbitrary; if my life unfolded in a myriad of different ways, it would be me on the other side of this exchange. But it did not...and here we are, our connection defined by this momentary, imbalanced interaction. There is so much more I could do to, as Stevenson would say, “get proximate.” There is so much more I could do to have an authentic relationship with poverty and those who struggle with it every day.

But the longer I serve in this area, the more I understand that I am in relationship with people in poverty. The only thing is that so often, the reality of this struggle is invisible, hidden by pressure to keep up appearances.

I remember a conversation I had with Dot Butler, a community leader who, among other roles, participates in the Winchester Got Lunch program. This organization provides groceries in the summertime to households where children receive free and reduced lunch during the school year.

I learned from Dot that – lest we think that everyone in Winchester is comfortable - there are hundreds of children eligible for free and discounted meals in the Winchester school system. I know there are similar needs in surrounding towns like Woburn, Arlington and Reading.

Echoing these statistics, in 2016 Winchester Hospital conducted a needs assessment of the region it serves. They found that 7% of Winchester residents are “low income,” meaning they receive incomes lower than 200% of the federal poverty level. 7 percent is lower than the average for the county and the Commonwealth but 7 percent of 21,621 residents is about 1500 people trying each month to make ends meet.¹

As we talked over coffee, Dot affirmed that in so many situations, one would never know a family was financially challenged. The Winchester area is defined by its wealth but some of this impression is optical illusion. We know people struggling with poverty but may not know the reality of this struggle.

I also remember a conversation I had with the eternally wise Rebecca Kelley Morgan, our Director of Lifespan Religious Education. When I wondered out loud why Winchester doesn't have a local resource, like a food pantry, she observed that such places are often organized in communities with more visible need even though the need is everywhere.

Local residents often turn to the Woburn Council of Social Concern's food pantry, a program the Winchester Unitarian Society has supported for many years

¹ <https://www.winchesterhospital.org/File%20Library/Winchester%20Hospital/Our%20Promise/Winchester-Hospital-2016-Community-Health-Assessment.pdf>

through food contributions, the creation of baskets at Thanksgiving and donations towards gift cards for low-income families during the December holidays.

Our primary leaders, connecting Winchester Unitarian Society and the food pantry, are Mary Saudade and Terry Currier. Earlier this fall, Terry encouraged us to organize a service focused on local poverty and the Woburn Council's good work.

As Terry and I met, we realized that when we give to the pantry, there is no direct relationship with the people being served. We, as a community, are not very "proximate." While it is not a direct, personal connection, I am grateful to Woburn Council staff member, Debbi Pisari, for sharing some of the profiles of those who benefit from the food pantry. Terry now gives voice to their stories:

One of our clients is a woman who had a great job at the hospital. A year ago, she had a stroke and...was out of work for quite a while. She is still going to therapy and trying to get back to a more functional life. It took a lot for her to visit the Food Pantry but she said that she was made to feel so welcome that this lessened some of the embarrassment...

Other clients are a husband and wife who were both working. The husband was self-employed but got injured on the job and hurt his back. He lost his income...The wife was working but got laid off and was collecting unemployment which ran out so they lost her income. They started receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – or SNAP - benefits to help financially. The wife finally got another job and when she reported this to SNAP, they reduced her benefits [which] created more financial difficulty. However the wife was so happy to be back to work and getting back on her feet. The Food Pantry has been a terrific source for them to supplement their food budget.

And we had a client who was a father and he recently passed away due to cancer. His children would accompany him to the food pantry to help him shop and carry out the groceries. They called us to let us know that he had passed and to thank us for helping them to bridge the gap from the loss of his income. Shopping here [helps them] put nutritional meals on the table

and they would like to continue shopping here until they can get back on their feet.

These stories remind us that “poverty” is not an abstract concept but a story lived out through human lives. And to see the human face of poverty is, in these times, a strangely counter-cultural act. In the words of the Rev. Dr. William Barber, as he calls for a new Poor People’s Campaign, “As our social fabric is stretched thin by widening income inequality, politicians criminalize the poor, fan the flames of racism and xenophobia to divide the poor, and steal from the poor to give tax breaks to the rich.”²

There is little that we, as individuals or as a community, can do to dismantle the systems and political forces that govern our world. But we can join in the Fight for Fifteen and we can reach out to our neighbors – to the medically impaired, to the unemployed, to the survivors of a loved one, still living on the edge – to offer the support that social safety nets do not.

I am grateful to Terry for her initiative in calling us deeper into our partnership with the Woburn Council for Social Concern. I now invite her to share some more about her motivation to reach out in this way:

When I first heard these stories I was struck by how much I could identify with the Food Pantry clientele. It’s a bit frightening to realize how vulnerable we all are, how we are all one mishap away from hardship and misfortune.

We all face difficulty. It isn’t always financial. We experience sickness, injury, loss of a loved one. And in these times we lean on each other for help and support.

Think about the last time you were in need of assistance, when you turned to another for comfort, connection, a need to feel safe.

We all rely on each other. And if we’re lucky, we have people and organizations we can turn to. In the spirit of compassion, and gratitude for our own good fortune, let’s give as we have received. Let’s practice the kindness and benevolence that informs our religious beliefs.

² <https://poorpeoplescampaign.org/poor-peoples-campaign-kicks-off-national-tour-charlotte/>

Each month the Woburn Council request specific food items for the Food Pantry. You will find a flyer announcing these items, and a basket to receive your donations, at the Social Outreach table in the Symmes Room. If you purchase just one extra item each time you go food shopping and place it in that basket you can make a big difference in the lives of those people who make use of the pantry.

Please open your hearts and give generously.

In 1894, a resident of Winchester, Asa Fletcher, left a bequest to the town to “benefit the poor.” Since then, town leaders have stewarded these resources; these funds have grown, creating the potential to make a positive, dramatic impact on low income residents. Yet even town leaders are unsure how to best distribute these funds, leading to organizing a needs assessment and an eventual revision of the Fletcher fund program.

I hear in this effort a hope to be of better service, a wish to become “more proximate” to those in poverty. For some of us, “getting proximate” is as close as looking in the mirror. For others, the material and emotional distance is far. For all of us, there is the opportunity to shift the shame of poverty to where it belongs – on the society and its leaders that create and condone it – and to work towards ending its hold on so many, just trying to survive in this world.