



Setting the Table

A Writing Workshop Taps Into Life in a Homeless Shelter

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THE CHURCH UPSTAIRS IS IN SHADOW, the only lights far up in the balcony where a parishioner is at work restoring the ancient organ. The same man has been at work on the same organ for at least six years now.

I set about turning on the rest of the lights, then unfold two plastic-topped tables and move them to the center of the room. I feel optimistic tonight, so I slide eight chairs over to meet the tables. We used to sit in pews, but they were taken out and sold a couple of years ago during the renovation. Now we have dozens of upholstered red chairs stacked in the corner. The minister must be optimistic, too. I've never seen enough people in his congregation to justify that many chairs.

I take pads of paper and a coffee can full of pens and pencils from the closet and place them in the middle of the tables, along with the typed writing from last week's workshop.

During the nine years I have been leading this creative writing workshop at a homeless shelter in Hoboken, New Jersey, the building has come to feel

like home. I even have my own set of keys.

Because I am early tonight, I have time to savor the empty church, when the shining wood floors make it look like a deserted ballroom. I sit there, admiring the floors and waiting, alone except for the organ man upstairs. I wait to hear the heavy thud of the door swinging shut at the bottom of the narrow stairway leading from the shelter into the church. Each thud and I know another person is coming to sit at the table with me. If I'm lucky, four or five people may come upstairs. If I'm very lucky, maybe eight or nine.

I have come to think of the people who attend the writing workshop as my community. It's true, I "lead" the workshop and some of the participants refer to me as the "teacher," but I like to think we're all the same. We all write. We all read. We all share.

But we don't all live at the shelter. We don't even live in the same world. This has been brought home to me time and again by different people's writing. As I wait for participants to arrive, I remember some of the snapshots of homeless life they have given me over the years. So many of the topics and responses have been related to space, place, and transience, all so much a part of homeless lives. In response to hearing the poem "Keeping Things Whole," which Mark Strand ends with, "I move to keep things whole," Patryck, a self-described "ex-hippie" in his 50s, wrote:

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One of the advantages of the shelter's writing workshop is that you can plop your butt down without anyone interfering for a whole hour and, tonight, five people have come upstairs, four men and a woman. I never fail to be amazed at the courage it takes to open that door, climb the stairs, and risk being heard and seen.

I move because not to move is to loiter, and that is a misdemeanor.

Elizabeth wrote this succinct poem:

Finding a place to sit
Too tired
Don't want to look
I quit

Bobby, who lived at the shelter for two years and faithfully attended the workshop, invariably wearing a three-piece suit, wrote this in response to the topic "finding a place to sit":

It seems like the whole life of being a homeless person is trying to find a place to sit. A place where you can rest your tired feet, and shut your eyes for a few minutes. It's not that easy. Don't think you can just plop your butt down anywhere. And the places you can sit for a few minutes, people start looking at you so funny, you get up and start looking for another spot. And if you sit in the alley, the neighbors say you're trying to break in some place. Every restaurant and train station: Sorry, customers only. Bus stop: Sorry, after five minutes you're loitering. Library: Okay, but eyes must stay open.

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Before we write tonight, I make an offhand remark about walking home after the class and am surprised when one of the participants, a man who calls himself "T," says vehemently, "We're already here." He points to the ballroom floor. "Here," he repeats for emphasis. "*You* have to leave here to go home."

It is one of the few times anyone has pointed out the differences in our situations so directly. Yes, I realize guiltily, I leave this place and walk home to a queen-size bed in a bedroom I don't share with thirty or forty other people. I don't have to set up a narrow cot every night and disassemble it every morning. I don't sleep on donated sheets. I'm not forced awake at 5:30.

I ask the participants what it is like sleeping at the shelter, if they get to choose their spot or if they have a favorite place. Oliver says he stakes out a place near the door. If someone else takes the space, he appeals to one of the night staff. For "T," it's not so much *where* he sleeps, but *who* he sleeps next to. Not surprisingly, most want to sleep elsewhere, as Oliver once wrote in response to the prompt: "Write about where you sleep, or where you would like to sleep":

I would like to sleep on the moon, where I would be safe. Sleep can be so sweet if I am all by myself. I don't need to sleep with no one. All I need is myself. I would like for all people to leave the planet so I can go to sleep all I want to.

All this talk about sleeping at the shelter has given "T" a brainstorm. "Hey! Why don't you spend seven nights at the shelter," he says to me. "Then you could see what it's really like." He starts readying everyone in the room to take a vote.

The idea is an interesting one and I mentally go through my schedule, wondering when it might actually be convenient for me to spend a week at a homeless shelter.

“When would I have to do this?” I ask.

“Within thirty days,” “T” replies.

I protest, saying it would have to be within the next six months or so.

The rest of the room shouts in unison, “We won’t be here!”

I am struck again by the truth of the words: They probably won’t be here in six months. There are limits on how long people can stay at the shelter unless they are adhering to a litany of burdensome conditions. And no one, as far as I can tell, ever actually *plans* to be at the shelter in the distant future. The object is to get out as quickly as possible. For me, however, the object is to come back as often as possible.

In the end, I avoid taking a vote by turning everyone’s attention to a writing exercise. This time I decide on walking. After all, the whole conversation had started with me mentioning my walk home.

Victoria writes a piece describing the varieties of walking that punctuate her days on the street:

Walking—I do a lot of that. I get impatient waiting for buses so I start walking. There’s the classic “thinking” walk. I suffer from anxiety so I could walk from the East Coast to the West Coast with my mind racing with overwhelming thoughts about my problems until I thought it all out and/or my legs gave out. Sometimes I have to stop just because I’m so far away, and even at times lost. Lost in a strange place because I tend to cut down side streets to avoid crowds. Lost sometimes because I just went from point A in a circle, though Z and only after all that back to point A.

And then there’s the “quiet time” walk. My son and younger daughter share this expression. They use their quiet time to walk to school sometimes. It’s when you need time alone before something important. Like to search for your confidence, compose and memorize a speech to express yourself fully. To be “alone” with what you have in your mind not wanting to share it yet, and hopefully when you reach your destination, you’re ready to share it.

Jericho, a young man from Georgia, writes a poem expressing the loneliness that often accompanies homelessness:

Walking with a peace of mind
I walk I wonder
How better life can be for us all
I walk I wonder
How nice a bird flies, so peaceful in the sky
I walk I wonder
How beautiful the flowers grow in spring
I walk I wonder
How lovely the night can be with its bright star and
moon
I walk I wonder
Will I have a walking partner one day?

And Chad provides what I think is a pretty apt description of me:

She walks fast but she moves slowly
Thinking
Thinking
She tries to find her place in a world where she
doesn’t quite fit.
Trying to hang on to that branch on the side of the
mountain with one hand
while lending another to the person behind her.

At nine o’clock, everyone, including me, has read their piece out loud and I feel the differences between us are hanging less heavily in the room. I put away the coffee can and the paper and pick up my coat and the new writing to take home and type. We take down the tables and move the chairs over to the wall. The church will now become a bedroom for the female guests. We always leave the same way we came in—down the stairs to the dining room, which, while we are writing, has been transformed into a men’s dormitory. I open the door right onto a man’s half-made bed, apologize, then thread my way through a maze of cots with their assortment of mismatched sheets and blankets, men sleeping, men coming back from the shower, men reading, men chatting.

I move past them, past the men getting ready for

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bed, past the people watching television in the front room, past the man ironing his clothes for work the next day and past the cigarette smokers, all lined up on the ramp outside the front door.

I head up to Washington Street for the seven-block walk home. Now I am thinking about another piece, this one written by Richard, a part-time street sweeper for the city, in response to the topic, "Write about laziness or about disrespect." We had happened on this prompt after some participants described their difficulties just getting through the day without attracting undue attention:

I was passing through the Lackawanna waterfront park last year when I noticed a Hoboken cop harassing some people who were just sitting, not drinking or sleeping. Something told me to keep on walking. Don't stop and stare, don't draw attention to myself. Later, I got to talking with one of those people and he said the cop must be a rookie and rousting people is part of his training. So, always walk quickly and purposefully, like you're actually going someplace.

We do indeed inhabit different worlds, I think to myself.

But the next week, when I go back to the shelter, nothing seems to have changed. This time, I am not as early so I have to thread my way through eighty men and women eating dinner at about a dozen makeshift tables. Intruding on

people's meals is a good way to announce myself and the workshop that is about to start upstairs. I climb the stairs, turn on the lights, and set up the tables and chairs (eight, again, because I am feeling optimistic). I lay out the typed writing from the week before, then I sit, waiting for the heavy thud of a closing door and footsteps on the stairs. I wait, for people—one or two or four or even ten—to come together in a space where we can sit without loitering or drawing the stares of others, to join me in a world that we share, however briefly. ☺