

(Moment of silence...)

We come together on this first day of winter, the longest night of the year. We gather as friends, family members, companions, neighbors, care providers and kindred spirits to remember loved ones who have died.

Each of the individuals we commemorate today was “one of a kind” – with unique gifts, attributes, hopes and dreams. Each was known by name, and each will be called by name again today.

These are persons who were mostly unknown to each other. They came from differing places and situations. They represented varying ages and ethnicities. They suffered from various afflictions and wounds of the body, mind and spirit.

What they all had in common were lives deeply impacted by the scourge of homelessness, and its attendant harms. Each also struggled mightily against whatever odds they faced, as best as they knew how.

How can we properly commemorate these members of our human family who have passed on? What tribute shall we give them?

I would like to suggest that one way to honor the dead is to bring life and hope to the living. Or, as Mother Jones put it, we must "pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living!"

First, we must gather, as we are doing today, to grieve the loss of these loved ones and to reaffirm our shared humanity with all its wonder and weakness.

Second, we must continue our charitable efforts to provide direct support and care for people experiencing extreme poverty and homelessness in our midst. We do this by offering food, clothing, shelter, health care, treatment opportunities, and housing as best as we can with the resources we have. And we must do so with a spirit of hospitality, kindness and grace.

And third, we honor the dead by working for justice – the kind of justice that enacts fairness and basic rights.

Those of us who care deeply about the issue of homelessness and the people it impacts are faced with an uneasy tension between doing “charity” work and working for “justice.” David Hilfiker, a physician who has worked in poverty medicine most of his life, describes this tension as such: “*Justice* has to do with fairness, with what people deserve. It results from social structures that guarantee moral rights. *Charity* has to do with benevolence or generosity. It results from people’s good will and can be withdrawn whenever they choose.”

He goes on to say that charity must be viewed as a limited response. It may be a necessary response in our current situation, but it is not enough. Charitable organizations, including government-sponsored programs, provide important services and care, but are rightly seen as a “safety net” – not the *solution* to the concerns of poverty and homelessness.

Hilfiker asserts that “charity does little to change the wider social and political systems that sustain injustice.” Instead, charity “acts out” inequality. It maintains the system of “we who are

the givers and *they* who are the receivers.” It does not address the fundamental conditions of injustice – the inevitable result of the structures of our society – that are at the root of poverty and homelessness.

In other words, when we look at the hard, cold facts of homelessness we must ask ourselves: “Why is it that...”

- Over 46 million Americans have no health insurance in order to access health care, putting many at risk for homelessness.
- Over 70% of homeless people, the poorest of the poor, have no health insurance to ensure access to health care.
- Homeless people suffer the same illnesses experienced by people with homes, but at rates 3 to 6 times higher.
- Many homeless people die from illnesses that could have been treated or prevented.
- The death rates of homeless persons are three times the rates of other Americans.
- People with housing in the U.S. can expect to live to age 78 on average. Homeless people can expect to live to around age 50 – the average age at which Americans died 100 years ago.

Essentially, justice, or fairness, takes the point of view that "we're all in this together" – as opposed to "you're on your own!"

I believe that a fairness-focused response to these facts would lead us to conclude that all people should have a guaranteed right to health care in this country – as is the case in every other industrialized country in the world. *It's not a matter of affordability; it's a matter of whether we truly believe we're all in this together.*

A fairness-focused response would restore a federal commitment to creating affordable housing for all. In 1978 the HUD budget stood at \$83 billion; by 1983 it had been cut to \$18 billion, a 78% decrease. Not surprisingly, this massive cut of the HUD budget corresponds to the dramatic increase of homelessness that occurred during the early 1980's. And since then, a lack of serious commitment to developing affordable housing has contributed to the ongoing problem of homelessness. *It's not a matter of affordability; it's a matter of whether we truly believe we're all in this together.*

Unfortunately, working for justice – for policies that are fair for all – is demanding and often unpopular. “Charity offends almost no one; at one point or another, justice offends practically everyone,” says Hilfiker. Or as Dom Helder Camara, the Brazilian archbishop, once famously said: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."

Nonetheless, the challenge is set before us individually and collectively – to grieve, to provide charity, and to work for justice. We're all in this together. May we honor all people, the dead and the living, by acting as if it were so!

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Homeless Person's Memorial Day
December 21, 2006
Olympia, WA*