

# “What If God Was One of Us?”

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## Meditation

The words of Oriah Mountain Dreamer, from her book, *The Dance*.

We are all lost without [a] sense of home. Home is, of course, not simply a physical place. It is a sense of belonging, of remembering and being remembered, of being put back together again when our journeys into the world have fractured and fragmented our sense of self. It is the place that holds some essential piece of you in trust, waiting for you to return when you go out into other places. This is what home is: not only the place you remember, but the place that remembers you, even if you have never been there before.

## Sermon: “What If God Was One of Us?”

It always happens in much the same way at this time of year.

Bob asks me what I want for Christmas,  
and, with a straight face, I say, “world peace.”

We’ve been doing this around our house for more than twenty years.

Obviously enough, my Christmas wish has yet to be fulfilled.

But, of course, it’s not Bob’s fault.  
It’s a pretty tall order, after all.  
A ridiculously bold request.

I think that’s why the story of Abraham Olagbegi recently captured my attention.

Abraham is 13 years old.  
He lives in Jackson, Mississippi.  
He has a rare and troubling blood condition.

And he became eligible, given his health challenges,  
to have a wish granted through the Make-a-Wish Foundation,  
which endeavours to provide children who are dying or severely ill  
with something that will bring them great joy.

It's typical that children ask to meet their celebrity superheroes.  
Or want a new PlayStation or a shopping spree.  
Many ask to take a trip to Disneyland with their families.

But Abraham chose something of an entirely different order.

He asked for help feeding the homeless in his city for a year.

He asked for help doing what he and his family  
had already been doing for four years—  
but which had become harder to do  
as his health took a turn for the worse.

And so the Make-a-Wish Foundation gladly granted his wish.

And they have now provided hot meals to 80 people—  
in Abraham's name—every month for the past year.

I am moved by Abraham's story.

Moved by his example of moral clarity.

And moved to ask just what prompts  
such deep empathy at such a young age.

What would move him to be so selfless?

And how on earth can we get more of that in our world,  
given that it seems to be in such short supply?

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For those of us who live in urban settings,  
there is an arguably necessary outer layer  
that we put on to navigate everyday life in the city.

It's an ability most any city person develops over time.

An ability to sit on the subway and gaze intently into the middle distance,  
avoiding eye contact with our nearby neighbours—  
which, in all honesty, can be an act of generosity,  
as we give others their space, their privacy.

And, for better and for worse,  
this is an ability that also often extends to the sidewalk,  
when we're strolling along,  
mastering the strange ability to see without seeing,  
as we witness human suffering on some very real level  
and not knowing what to do or what else to say,  
we, when asked for spare change,  
perhaps, simply smile and say that we're "sorry."

Or we pull a loonie or toonie from our pocket or our purse,  
and we drop it into a waiting hand or cup.

I suspect I am not alone in having done each of these things.

Nor am I likely the only one who has never quite felt  
that what I've done is a good and helpful thing,  
or in any way adequate to the deep human need I see before me.

And so it's no wonder that we insulate ourselves as best we can.

It is an act of self-care. Of self-preservation.

There is, after all, only so much we can take in.  
The human heart does have, at times,  
a limit to how much it can hold.

Travelling down most any sidewalk in the heart of Toronto,  
or in so many cities around the world,  
we are bombarded by more human need than we can sometimes bear.

And we are asked for change—  
certainly in terms of coins and cash.

But we are also asked for change on a systemic level  
that brings an end to people sleeping on the streets,  
people being desperate for their next meal,  
and people, as Denise so eloquently reminded us,  
who need and deserve support for their physical and mental well-being.

In the face of this, it is hard to resist the hardening of our hearts.  
To close inwards because we are overwhelmed.

I'm struck at times how I have to fight this response,  
even though I experienced homelessness myself

after my disastrous coming out to my parents when I was 19.

My theory is that we struggle to respond to homelessness,  
both as individuals and as a society,  
because it delivers us to the doorstep of some of our deepest fears.

But that sense of primal vulnerability we may feel  
also begs fundamental questions  
that go to the very heart of what it means to be human.

They may well have been the first questions ever uttered  
by some of our earliest ancestors,  
who, finding themselves in the wilderness of the world,  
grappled with the choice of going it alone  
or banding together for some hope of shared survival.

*Will you take me in?  
Will I do the same for you?*

These are questions as old as our humanity—  
and as relevant today as they've been  
for every generation that's gone before us.

Though questions rarely spoken, at least out loud,  
I believe these questions are,  
for many of us, never that far from our thoughts.

In a piece I recently read by Unitarian Chuck Collins—  
the heir to the Oscar Mayer fortune, who, at the age of 26,  
and like an increasing number of young people born to great wealth,  
gave away his entire inheritance to help others—he wrote:

I recently had coffee with a single friend  
who rents an apartment in my neighbourhood.

[With the downturn in the economy,  
She was worried her job would [soon] be cut.

I said, offhandedly, “You can come live with us.”

“I can?” she said, and [then] started to cry.

“Of course. You will always have a place to live.”

[At that point,] she began to sob.

Then a thought crossed my mind,  
“[well,] as long as we have our house.”

How quickly we go to our most vulnerable place.<sup>1</sup>

It is no wonder  
that so many of the world’s oldest civilizations,  
that so many of the world’s great religions,  
have addressed this deep sense of vulnerability,  
this fear for life’s awesome fragility,  
by demanding hospitality be accorded the stranger,  
by requiring aide be given to the weak and to the poor.

“Serve God [the Koran says] . . . and do good to orphans, those in need,  
neighbours who are near, neighbours who are strangers,  
the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet,  
and those who have nothing.”<sup>2</sup>

The author of Leviticus writes  
that the Hebrews are to love the stranger as themselves,  
reminding them that they, too, were once “strangers in a strange land.”<sup>3</sup>

It would be easy to discount such ancient wisdom,  
seeing it simply as the product of a very different time and place,  
the scripture of peoples living in a world nothing like our own.

It would be easy to dismiss, that is,  
were it not for the persistence of those most human questions:  
of whom will help us in our time of deepest need—  
and who we will help in theirs.

Our Social Contract calls us to action.  
And it is heartening to see the many things being done  
to address homelessness on a policy level,  
as well as through practical supports.

And, yet, the problem remains a stubborn one.

I take heart in the unanimous vote by Toronto City Council the week before last

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<sup>1</sup> Chuck Collins, “Working together to create common security.” *UU World Magazine*, Spring 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Koran 4:36.

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:33.

to study the impact of simply providing housing, rent-free, for a year to the roughly 10,000 homeless people in our city.

The report is due to Mayor Tory in January.

The compelling argument is that the costs involved will be significantly less than those involved in running the shelter system.

But the decision must not be made on the basis of the budget alone.

There is a terrible human cost to homelessness—for those directly affected, and for our society as a whole.

The proposed intervention is bold, and could go a very long way to stabilizing the lives of thousands of people who need help out of this city's housing crisis.

With the numbers of those experiencing homelessness steadily rising, we simply cannot miss this moment to make a meaningful difference.

Which means we must summon the moral courage to do what we can.

That may mean giving generously to organizations who work in this area.

It may mean seeking out opportunities to volunteer.

It may mean lobbying the mayor and City Council to adopt the proposed motion at the beginning of the year.

And it may mean that you overcome your own urban insulation to look deeply into the eyes of those in need that you might bear witness to their humanity—and be reminded of your own.

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May we heed the call to compassion.

May we draw on the wells of empathy that help us to understand what it means to journey in another's shoes.

May we be moved by our shared humanity,  
glimpsing in the face of another  
the divine spark that gives light to us all.

So may it be.

Amen.