

Spiritual Care In Deep Poverty
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on Resilience by Jeff Coleman-Payne

One of the podcasts that I have on my playlist, but don't listen to very often is a podcast called Criminal. One of the best episodes of the podcasts is called Sister Helen, who is the guest of the podcast. She describes her life as a Catholic nun and her work supporting inmates within the prison system. After listening, I took away the compassion that she held for those people she worked with and how she continued to see, recognize and honor the humanity of each person that she supported as they went through some of the most difficult times of their lives.

When I thought of what to say today, I thought back to the experience I had volunteering many years ago when I first moved to Vancouver and Portland.

With extra time on my hands as a student and visitor in the US, I volunteered with two organizations, Join PDX and Share. I really loved both of these volunteer positions because it gave me the opportunity to step outside of my own needs and be useful to others. While I was volunteering, I got to meet and speak with many of the people who used these services and heard so many stories of people's past, present and hopes for the future. I remember one volunteer who had previously been homeless but had just found an apartment. He, among others, would share how much having a permanent address could change the potential for someone's life. It became clear to me how easy it would be to be in a similar position, all it could take is the potential of one illness or job loss. I'm no Sister Helen, I'm no nun, but I do try to remember and keep what I learned from these years to do my best to see each person that I meet with the same dignity and respect, no matter what their present circumstance may be, because if I were in a similar situation, I would want to be treated with respect as well.

Spiritual Care in Deep Poverty © by Rev. Charlotte Cramer

My name is **Rev. Charlotte Cramer**. I am an Interfaith Minister, Community Chaplain, and founder of the nonprofit *Temple of the Forgotten*, an organization dedicated to bringing non-religious spiritual care to folks living in deep poverty.

I was raised Unitarian Universalist and have wanted to be a minister since I was a child — but decidedly went on a long and winding path to get there, as one does.

Right when COVID hit, I decided I wanted to be a chaplain. I was inspired by the hospital chaplains working on the frontlines. Three years into seminary, nearing the end of my schooling, I could not, for the life of me, find a hospital or hospice internship — which is actually a rare occurrence — something quite magical and strange happened.

I found myself with only one internship opportunity: a street chaplaincy organization in Marin County, California. (I moved to Portland 11 months ago)

At the time, I held a lot of fear and discomfort around homelessness — for no reason other than my own poverty bias. And I decided that this was a sign from the universe to move through that fear, because I felt like I couldn't be a real minister until I felt comfortable working with the unhoused.

So, at the very young age of 25, I stepped foot into my first encampment and began my work with the unhoused community.

Like so many who have worked with this community, my life — and my sense of self — were changed by the remarkable people, the deep connections, the radical kindness, the deep suffering, the injustice, the pain, the anger.

All of the poverty bias and fear I held in my heart dissipated rather quickly when it became apparent that my biggest fear wasn't homelessness at all — it was getting over my own social anxiety enough to go talk to someone.

And that changed everything.

This began my work as a street chaplain. I walked the streets by myself. I hosted free dinners at a local church. I started going into Marin County Jail to do programming and one-on-one counseling.

My instant love and natural inclination toward this work was eye-opening to me. And the fierce protectiveness, care, and hope I felt for the people I worked with taught me so much about who I was and what I wanted to do with my life.

Fast forward to now, I feel as if I have been on a journey of what I would call “private research.” I've dedicated a lot of time and energy trying to understand the landscape of spiritual care in the system of deep poverty, as well as the presence of spirituality in the lives of folks experiencing it.

I realized pretty quickly that spiritual care for marginalized populations and people experiencing deep poverty — which I will define more clearly in a moment — is incredibly rare, undervalued, and undersupported.

There is a lot to say about the lack of resources for spiritual care providers in the United States, and the near complete absence of them across our social service systems, as well as a lack of cohesion.

Street chaplains — people who walk the streets and actively provide spiritual care to unhoused folks — are often underpaid and ignored, even when they are deeply entrenched in their communities for decades and considered highly valuable and important by the unhoused community they serve.

Religious care is often prevalent. But unfortunately, it can sometimes carry a lens that is exclusive and manipulative. And that can cause harm. Serious harm. It is also disrespectful to people's beliefs and their spiritual and religious rights.

My work is centered around studying the value and importance of spirituality and non-religious spiritual care in the lives of people experiencing homelessness, incarceration, poverty, mental illness, addiction, high-grade trauma, housing insecurity, domestic violence, and low-income senior living.

All of these people — and more — are living under what I call “deep poverty.” Deep poverty is cyclical, dynamic, and pervasive. It is not accidental. It is a system. And it is used as a tool of oppression and marginalization.

I now consider myself a community chaplain because I work in a variety of settings involved in the system of deep poverty — not just with actively unhoused folks.

I was once solely a street chaplain. But I realized that homelessness is not a static, isolated experience. It is part of this ecosystem of deep poverty. And the people living within that ecosystem are either at constant risk of homelessness, have experienced it significantly in their lives, or are actively homeless.

I believe the missing link in our system's fight against deep poverty is our inability — or unwillingness — to bring spirituality and spiritual care into the forefront of the work social service systems are already doing.

Despite what many believe, spiritual care is an absolutely crucial aspect of care for the human spirit.

If we are truly interested in approaching homelessness and deep poverty from a holistic perspective — with the intention of eliminating these inhumane systems from this earth — then every city, town, treatment center, shelter, jail, transitional housing site, domestic violence center, senior living facility, skilled nursing facility, juvenile justice center, and social service nonprofit should have trained non-religious spiritual care professionals present.

So a very important question I am asked often is:

What does spiritual care for folks in deep poverty actually look like?

What is a street chaplain?

First and foremost, you cannot find this job on LinkedIn. You can't search it on Indeed. Trust me, I've tried. You can't just move to another city and decide to get hired as a street chaplain. It's rare. It's often unpaid.

And yet — this work has existed for a long time. San Francisco has had street ministers since the 1960s. That's pretty incredible.

My work is profoundly dynamic.

On any given day in the field, I don't know who I'm going to meet.

I don't know what state they're going to be in.

I don't know what kind of day it's going to be for them.

Some days I'm just saying hi. Keeping things simple, easy, surface-level — yet still operating from a place of deep compassion and care — is a crucial skill for a community chaplain.

Other days I'm sitting with someone for hours and we are going through it. We are talking about their childhood. Their trauma. Their addiction. Their heartbreak. Their relationship with God. Or the universe. Or nothing.

I have met people having psychotic breaks. People actively high on meth. People drunk and deeply depressed.

I have called 911 many times — and that was my spiritual care for the day.

Sometimes I am fully inside someone else's reality, no matter how distant it is from my own. Just listening. Not correcting. Not fixing. Just being there.

Sometimes I'm throwing a football for twenty minutes—that remains, to this day, my favorite spiritual care encounter. I'm really bad at football.

Sometimes we're telling jokes. Sometimes we're praying. Sometimes we're talking about the weirdest things that make absolutely no sense — and we're just in it together.

It's dynamic. It's complex. It's unpredictable.

But the core of it — the heart of it — is this:

I meet people where they are.

I am not going in to fix them.

I am not going in to change them.

I am not going in to control them.

I am there to bear witness.

And bearing witness is a spiritual practice.

It is the willingness to step toward suffering and not run away. It's the willingness to connect, human to human.

And let me tell you — everything in your nervous system wants to run away sometimes. It's scary. It's heavy. It's overwhelming. But that choice to stay — that is where the sacred lives.

The greatest harm that those who are unhoused experience is not just lack of housing. It is dehumanization.

It is being looked at with fear. Or disgust. Or avoidance.

A lot of folks forget they are human because the world has stopped treating them that way.

There are very few people who walk toward them and say:

“Hi, human. How are you doing?”

That sounds simple. But it's radical.

Spiritual care is about building trust. It is about using the tools of spirituality to empower people in themselves, to remind them who they are, and to offer a trusted companion in their suffering.

I'm sure you can begin to see how powerful that could be for people entrenched in some of the deepest suffering our country has to offer.

There are five things I have learned from doing this work, from researching spirituality in the lives of marginalized folks, and from speaking with street chaplains across the country.

One: Street chaplains are crucial and underrepresented. They build trust where trust has eroded. They are often the hidden systems of support that get people to hospitals, show up to court dates and help provide hope and faith in people's worst moments— and no one talks about them.

Two: Spiritual care strengthens the social service system. It supports social workers, first responders, nonprofit staff. It decreases burnout and addresses secondary trauma. It creates more trauma-informed, welcoming environments for clients in the system.

Three — and this one hurt — social isolation and dehumanization deeply impact those who are unhoused and in deep poverty. They feel our judgment. They feel our fear. They internalize it. Imagine surviving trauma after trauma and also feeling actively hated.

Four: Folks who are unhoused have intricate, remarkable spiritual lives. Wide-ranging beliefs. Deep theology. And no one asks them about it. No one wonders whether it might be a powerful tool for healing.

Five: Our system is designed to fail because spiritual care is not part of it. Yes, we need housing. Yes, we need food security. Yes, we need policy change.

But if we ignore belonging, connection, purpose, joy — spirituality — we are ignoring most of the human being.

Of course it doesn't work.

When I was working at Marin County Jail, one man who had been unhoused for about twenty years asked me:

“Why did this happen to me? Why am I suffering?”

He had asked rabbis and priests and imams.

I took a deep breath and said:

“I don't know. But I know suffering is painful. And I don't believe it is meant to be done alone. And I'm here.”

And he cried.

He said it was the best response he had ever received.

Because he wasn't looking for theology.

He wasn't looking for religious care.

He was looking for connection in the midst of deep suffering.

And that is spiritual care.

It doesn't matter whether that connection got him housing or put him back on track or helped him do what the system wanted him to do. Spiritual care goes beyond fixing the problem — although it can help — and moves into basic human dignity and our rights as human beings on this earth.

Temple of the Forgotten was born from all of these encounters. From every powerful moment with someone who felt desolate, lost, and hopeless — and found kindness and truth in conversation.

Spirituality is a temple. No matter what our religious beliefs are — atheist, evangelical, somewhere in between — spirituality is a temple we can all walk into and feel loved and seen.

Temple of the Forgotten is an organization.

But more than that, I want it to be a movement.

A movement carried by churches and synagogues and temples and community centers. By people who understand the power of spirituality and religion — who have seen how it transforms and heals lives.

Because this next step — bringing spirituality into this stark system — belongs to us. The government can build housing.

We can build belonging.

My hope is that we begin to create communities where we know we are responsible for one another. Where we see the value in spiritual care. Where we create boundless opportunities, both community-based and professional, for those in deep suffering and marginalization to be supported, cared for, and loved on the spiritual and emotional level.

That is my organization's mission. That is what I have dedicated my life to.

So what can you do? How can you participate? Not everyone wants to become a chaplain or spiritual care provider, and that's not the only answer.

First and foremost, your donations matter. As a small nonprofit trying to stay afloat during a pretty rough time for nonprofits everywhere, every penny counts. Your donations go directly to supporting my work with folks in deep poverty across Portland, as well as the many offerings we hold online, and our advocacy work. My organization continues because every month I get little miracles that keep us going. Your support is deeply appreciated.

Other than money, there is plenty you can do. Temple of the Forgotten hosts many workshops that cover subject matters such as homelessness, addiction, and poverty bias. Becoming a more educated community member is a powerful act of revolution. If you want to hold a private workshop at your home, or you want to organize one in this church, let me know and we can talk about the possibilities.

Then, of course, there are ways that you can become more involved. There are a few potential volunteer opportunities that I'm working on right now (still pending), as well as ideas for churches to become more involved in the lives of their unhoused neighbors. If that's something

you feel passionate about, let me know and we can explore what a project like that would look like.

Ultimately — whether or not you choose to participate in this movement, and it's okay if you don't, the world is overwhelming and we cannot do everything — my hope for you today is simple.

The next time you see someone who is unhoused, if it has been hard to look them in the eyes, try.

If it has been hard to smile, try.

Push gently past the fear.

Search for the human connection, in them and yourself.

I promise you — it will be powerful.

And it will be joyful.

Since beginning this work, I have become more grounded. More grateful. More alive.

Walking toward suffering, with boundaries and love, is one of the deepest spiritual practices there is.

And that is why spirituality belongs in these systems.

Because we know the profound sacredness of walking alongside suffering. This work belongs to all of us.

Thank you. Blessed be.