

'The Lens of Home' – Newtonbrook United Church May 31, 2010

It's probably no surprise to you that having been a Street Nurse for so many years I see everything through the lens of 'home'.

The recent movie 'The Road' haunted me for weeks after I saw it at TIFF. It's an apocalyptic story with haunting images of environmental disaster, made even more realistic by recent world events including Iceland's volcanic episodes and the BP oil spill. The desperate migration of the father and son and the dangerous hurdles the cross to survive reminded me of people I've know over the years who, without a home, live a life of forced migration desperately seeking food and shelter.

The children's stories I read to my grandsons – whether it is 'Nightmare in My Closet', 'Caillou Surprise Sleepover' or 'Mortimer' all have strong images of home and safety. I mean consider Robert Munsch's 'I'll Love You Forever' or the classic 'Three Little Pigs.'

A hospital visit to a friend reminds me there are no home hospice options available for her. A visit to another in the same institution reminds me she will be discharged to a rooming house in her wheelchair.

At a cooking class recently, the teacher tells our group about her book club where a famous author reads from their book and the menu includes food from the book. Imagine hearing Margaret Atwood read from the Year of the Flood after you had a glass of Elderberry Sangria followed by cheese, mushroom medley bruschetta, mini-burgers and God's Gardeners Salad with Ancient Fruits and Honey Vinaigrette. Here is the phrasing with one of the recipes:

"God's Gardeners ate a lot of mushrooms, both dried and fresh and lived in buildings where they did not have to pay rent like an old cheese factory which still smelled faintly of cheese."

If Dying for a Home were ever selected for this book club I fear the choices would have been KFC or chili.

On television news I see ordinary people protesting at an animal shelter. So people can and will fight for justice, even for animals to get a home.

Dri who is one of the Tent City heroes secretly filmed the basement shelter scene in the film 'Street Nurse' for Shelley Saywell, one of Canada's most famous filmmakers. Afterwards he said, 'we wouldn't let animals live like that.'" He's right.

So, I recently asked him: Were the people who created the waterfront squatter camp known as Tent City in Toronto homeless or did they through their actions make a home, in their tent, shack or pre-fab house?

On a good day Tent City sure looked homey. I remember the sunny, cold day when Eldon Comfort and others from this congregation helped to bring, what we called disaster relief, turkey dinner with all the trimmings to celebrate the TDRC delivery of the first pre-fab homes. Over the next three years the Tent City community grew and eventually included 55 houses, most with woodstoves installed, portable toilets, a clothing exchange, streets with names like Billy Lane and a place of worship – which perhaps as a sign of things to come, collapsed in a windstorm.

I remember that many insisted it was their home. They were not going back to the shelters and they fought to stay put working with us and architects to develop, as the City requested, a planned re-location of Tent City to a neighbouring site on Commissioner's St.

Three years passed. When the 140+ people were evicted by Home Depot and Mayor Mel Lastman told the 140+ people to go to an emergency shelter he might as well have said Go to Hell. That day they were homeless and they continued to refuse shelters like Seaton House, not after living free. Their fight won them the historic rent supplement program which meant a real apartment.

It was a similar act of civil disobedience that won us our first national housing program. The World War II vets who returned home to a housing shortage did exactly what the Tent City folks had done, they squatted! They took over empty property, moved in and kicked up a fuss leading to a national movement and ultimately the National Housing Act.

It is often this kind of 'in your face' activities, exposing the real truth that results in social justice wins.

When the Reverend Bruce McLeod booked into the Seaton House men's shelter in the 1980s and then wrote about his experience in the Toronto Star it was an important effort that exposed sub-human conditions.

Two decades later Kingston author Larry Scanlan in his new book 'The Year of Living Generously' recounts the month he spent with TDRC when we asked him to also venture into the shelters. After a graphic description of what he witnessed at Seaton House he writes: "I leave Seaton House feeling what I can only describe as grief, and it's there yet."

Decades of intentional neglect to shelter funding, street outreach, income levels, housing programs and support is the accepted status quo in policy and politics. No matter the research, the visibility of the need, the suffering, the growing death

list at the Homeless Memorial, the hit of the recession – those who purport to know the truth claim there are enough shelter beds, the Streets to Homes program will find you a home, and volunteers in every sector will help.

What's the truth?

The concept of 'Truthiness', popularized by comedian Stephen Colbert refers to a "truth" that a person claims to know intuitively "from the gut" without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts.

Canadian examples of truthiness abound:

The Ontario government's promotion of poverty reduction with a 1% increase to welfare.

Their cancellation of the Special Diet Allowance to be replaced with a 'Nutritional Supplement'.

EatRightOntario: a 1-800 number to get information on how to improve your health and quality of life through healthy, nutritious eating.

City rules that call giving hot food and sleeping bags to homeless people 'enabling'.

The naming of de-housed people as 'Street People'. As Bruce McLeod says: When we mention the shadows at all, we call them "the homeless" – one of those abstract terms like 'collateral damage' which we use to distance ourselves from what we're talking about."

American programs like Housing First that take people from the streets and puts them into questionable 'homes', now implemented nation wide in Canada, in the absence of a national housing program.

When it comes to knowing and talking truth about 'home' kids say it best.

In our documentary film series 'Home Safe' about homeless families with children, film maker Laura Sky and I hosted a Kids Forum with Miloon Kothari, then UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing during his investigation in Canada. The kids, many who had homeless experience, told Miloon they want to make a difference and that it hurt them to be homeless and to see so many people homeless.

What is a home to them?

Well perhaps it is most simply put by the young girl who told him: "Being able to say you have one is important."

Another kid said: "It's one of the most important things in your life, to have a home."

They all told Miloon that it was about privacy, protection, comfort, having a foundation, a sense of belonging, safety, security, food.

They said it's about not feeling caged in, constantly tired, adjusting to new schools, doing homework on buses, feeling discriminated against, scared and constantly worried about whether their parents can make the rent that month.

After listening intently Miloon, with a twinkle in his eyes said, " So how about this - The human right to adequate housing is the right of every woman, man, youth and child to have a secure place to live in peace and dignity."

He added: "That's what you've all been saying!"

Then a very young boy passionately jumped in: "When you have a home, it's exactly like a protection, sort of like a force field from stuff that are dangerous. So, sometimes, when you are homeless...if you know that you're getting a decent home and you're going there soon you kind of get overwhelmed with happiness and that's what a lot of people want now."

Yes, a lot of people want that happiness now, about 4 million people.

Ursula Franklin wrote that Canada is now occupied by alien forces that put profit above all human or earth values. That sounds like the plot line for the film Avatar.

But it's not. It's the truth that we have to change.

There is hope on a number of fronts:

This week a landmark legal charter challenge was filed on the right to housing and you can be sure truth will be filed into the records for posterity.

In 2011 our troops in Afghanistan are scheduled to come home and they will want to fight once again for a peace dividend that includes housing.

In the meantime I thank you for all you do on the issues of hunger, social isolation and advocacy and I know you will continue this fight.