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It's Not About Me: Public Writing and the Place of Principled Dissent

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: In a 2002 article, Patricia Roberts-Miller asked if rhetorical theory
: has a place for what she then called "principled dissent and sincere
: outrage." This article addresses that challenge, as the author follows
: a year of living in and writing for a community in Atlanta that works
: with the homeless in that city. In it, she argues that, if there is a place
✱: for dissenting rhetoric, it is taking place in marginalized movements
: and publications like the one published by Atlanta's Open Door
: Community. Hers is a follow-up of two previous discussions (both
: written with Paula Mathieu of Boston College) on what these authors
: are calling "a rhetoric of dissent."

"If rhetorical theory promotes decorum, what is the place of principled dissent and sincere outrage?"

Patricia Roberts-Miller

At times like this—times when I'm trying to figure out why I've done a thing the way I've done it—my Mother pops up out of nowhere. Well, not really (she's been in her grave since 1988), but real enough. She showed up again just last week when I was worrying over how I might frame the piece you are reading right now. It was something she used to say about women whose families were struggling to get by but who always wore the newest and best dresses, shoes, coats, hats. "She's wearing her children's food on her back," is what she'd say. When I first heard that, I was too young and too literal-minded to understand it. I could never quite shake the thought of lunch



meat sitting on the lady's shoulders, maybe sandwich bread hanging from her sleeves. Let's just say I came to metaphor later than some of my peers.

When I finally did get it, I thought she was being too rough. I knew where Mom was coming from—she rarely had anything new herself and her kids were always hungry—but the comment seemed sexist, tight-fisted, and even mean-spirited, especially for someone who was none of those. Eventually, I called her out on it, saying that I thought everybody deserved a little bit of luxury now and then. She didn't budge: "When you have mouths to feed, it isn't about you, is it?"

Exactly.

Never argue with your mother.

Writing the Life: A Year at The Open Door Community

In July, 2003, my husband (Chuck Harris) and I began a year-long stay in Atlanta's Open Door Community. I was on sabbatical from Michigan Tech. Chuck was simply continuing the work he had begun five years before when he began traveling regularly from Michigan's Upper Peninsula to Atlanta and spending stretches of time living and working in the Community. Founded over 30 years ago by Murphy Davis, Ed Loring and Rob and Carol Johnson, the Open Door Community calls itself a "Protestant Catholic Worker." The founders drew both their inspiration and direction from Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin who began the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933 in New York, setting up the first Catholic Worker House and publishing the first issue of The Catholic Worker newspaper that same year. As Catholic Worker historian Jim Forest writes,

"Beyond hospitality, Catholic Worker communities are known for activity in support of labor unions, human rights, cooperatives, and the development of a nonviolent culture. Those active in the Catholic Worker are often pacifists people seeking to live an



unarmed, nonviolent life. During periods of military conscription, Catholic Workers have been conscientious objectors to military service. Many of those active in the Catholic Worker movement have been jailed for acts of protest against racism, unfair labor practices, social injustice and war” (Forest).

Like many intentional communities inspired by the Catholic Worker, the Open Door Community carries that tradition of serving the homeless and agitating for social justice to the streets of Atlanta. During my year there, I cooked and scrubbed and served and marched. Most of the time, though, I wrote for Hospitality, the community paper. In the past, when I have written about living at Open Door and writing for the paper, I’ve tried to keep my story — at least my private moments of failure, frustration, shame, success, joy — out of those accounts. I’ve backed away with the excuse that, while the personal might indeed be political, sometimes it’s just personal. I can’t say precisely what has changed my mind now, but one thing is certain: If it’s worth telling at all, this story, as my mother would say, isn’t really about me — though I could be wrong on that one.

The way I choose to tell the story now is through some of my writing that made it into Hospitality’s pages, and though it could well seem like I am telling the story starting in the middle, I open with this piece written nearly six months into our stay:

On Being Told that the Economy is Improving: A Note on NPR and Jack London

from Hospitality, February 2004

From the slimy, spittle-drenched sidewalk, they were picking up bits of orange peel, apple skin, and grape stems, and, they were eating them. The pits of greengage plums they cracked between their teeth for the kernels inside. They picked up stray bits of bread the size of peas, apple cores so black and dirty one would not take them to be apple cores, and these things these two men took into their mouths, and chewed them,



and swallowed them; and this, between six and seven o'clock in the evening of August 20, year of our Lord 1902, in the heart of the greatest, wealthiest, and most powerful empire the world has ever seen.

Jack London, The People of the Abyss (78)

Over a century ago, one of Dorothy Day's favorite writers — Jack London — traveled to London, England, traded his regular clothes for rags he found in a second-hand shop, and walked the streets of that city posing as one of the homeless. He lived in shelters (work houses) to learn what it meant to be out of work, living in the streets, and ignored by “the greatest, wealthiest, and most powerful empire the world has ever seen.”

One hundred and two years later, it is time to reread *The People of the Abyss*, Jack London's account of what Stephen Crane had earlier called an “experiment in misery” — an attempt to become one of the poor, to know poverty within poverty. It is especially important to read of London's life in the streets when, today, so many of our brothers, sisters, and children walk our own streets, enduring conditions not far removed from those London experienced so long ago.

The U.S. has, quite surely, taken over from Britain the dubious honor of being called “the greatest, wealthiest, and most powerful empire the world has ever seen,” and in the midst of all that wealth and power it is increasingly difficult to see the level of demeaning poverty that is growing everyday in our streets, under our bridges, in the gullies, in abandoned warehouses, in churchyards, and against doorways.

Despite the current communications boom, most Americans cannot see this poverty and never hear of it. At the Open Door we do see it, but that is most likely because we want to.

On the first day of December, in the first week of Advent, I sat in



my room listening to a National Public Radio report on what they were calling an “improved economy.” It was cold and rainy in Atlanta that morning and guys from the street were lined up and huddled under our eaves waiting for a bag breakfast. Normally, we can bring people in, but that day we couldn’t, so the tension and frustration in the yard were high. Amazingly, people’s patience goes up with the tension. For every shouting match there is somebody who wants to make peace. For every curse there is a word of thanksgiving.

The NPR report was focused solely on what this “economic upswing” might mean for the next presidential election. There were no nuances in this story and little to suggest that the reporters had any sense of what is going on in the real economy of making it day-to-day on low income, below-minimum-wage income, temporary income, or (given free trade agreements) no income at all. I wished they could sit with me and just take a look out the window.

Daily, I watch old men and women (our elders) pick through dumpsters.

Daily, I am reminded of how little I know about living in the streets in this city.

Twice this winter, I have been stopped short by my own ignorance / my own habits of mind.

The first time was with a man I’ve known since I got here. He usually looks pretty spaced-out, so I assumed he was doing some drug or wasted on alcohol. Listerine is a preferred beverage for a number of alcoholics in the streets, and since he never really smelled of liquor, I thought maybe it was just a lot of Listerine dulling his eyes and slowing his responses. Now that I know him better, I realize the spaced-out look isn’t alcohol or illegal drugs



at all but prescribed medications for everything from a bi-polar condition to high blood pressure, anxiety, headaches, sleeplessness, and allergies. I knew that he slept in the streets somewhere, but I didn't know where. He is at The Open Door most days and gets food and a change of clothes and a shower on shower days. He worries when our routine changes, so that morning in Advent he was probably anxious.

The week before, I had heard that he had finally been approved for a place, and he looked happy about that. I was happy about it because I could see him going downhill as the days got wetter and colder, and I didn't like thinking about him sleeping outside. So, when I saw him, I said, "Hey! I heard you got a place! Congratulations!" He nodded and just said it was good. He was relieved.

I mentioned his place to Barbara here in the house. She tried to set me straight: "It isn't inside. It's a doorway." I told her that he said he was approved for a place. "I'm pretty sure he's inside."

When he came through the sorting room that morning, I asked about it. "It's a church doorway," he told me, "but they gave me a letter to show the police. It says I'm allowed to sleep there."

A church doorway. That's what he meant by being approved for a place.

Later the same week, I was talking to a couple I've come to know in our yard. I don't recall what it was they were noticing, but I overheard one say to the other, "We'll have to do that at home."

Okay. Home. That sounds to me like a place to live, so I asked where their place is.

"We found an abandoned car that's all covered in kudzu. So far,



nobody's found us."

The week before Christmas, I heard that they had lost their place. Maybe the hard frost killed back the kudzu. Whatever it was, they were on the streets looking for a spot to sleep.

We see them here at The Open Door most evenings. They drink coffee and eat sandwiches in the yard. After that, I'm not sure where they go. Maybe they sleep in whatever doorway, yard, ditch, or underpass they can find. Or, maybe they "carry the banner." That's what Jack London called walking the streets all night. Just walking. Rarely stopping.

Over a century ago, The People of the Abyss described a life of harassment and exhaustion, a life in which street people kept moving to avoid arrest, and London painted a picture that could easily be Atlanta today. "And now," he wrote, "I wish to criticize the powers that be":

All night long they make the homeless ones walk up and down. They drive them out of doors and passages, and lock them out of the parks. The evident intention of all this is to deprive them of sleep. Well and good, the powers have the power to deprive them of sleep, or of anything else for that matter; but why under the sun do they open the gates of the parks at five o'clock in the morning and let the homeless ones go inside and sleep? If it is their intention to deprive them of sleep, why do they let them sleep after five in the morning? And, if it is not their intention to deprive them of sleep, why don't they let them sleep earlier in the night? (118-119)

London makes a plea, in *People of the Abyss*, for sanity and caring. After a night spent out with others "carrying the banner," London tells his readers that he did not stop and rest in the park:



I was wet to the skin, it is true, and I had had no sleep for twenty-four hours; but, still . . . I had to look about me, first for a breakfast, and next for work. (121)

It is, indeed, a good time to reread Jack London. The people he wrote of in 1902 in England are still with us today in 2004 in Atlanta, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, Memphis, Miami, Orlando, St. Louis, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Duluth, Tucson, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and in Washington, D.C. They are with us in small towns and major cities; in the heat of the South and in the bitter cold of the North. They are with us whether we see them or not, whether the “powers that be,” as London calls them, keep them out of our sight or not. They are with us.

“And, so, dear soft people,” London writes, “should you ever visit London Town [or Atlanta, Georgia] and see these men [and women] asleep on the benches and in the grass, please do not think they are lazy creatures, preferring sleep to work. Know that the powers that be have kept them walking all the night long, and that in the day they have no where else to sleep” (119-120).

For a writer, community newspapers can be an amazing mixture of report, commentary, instruction, satire, appeal, outrage, and—for lack of a better term—personal journey. A publication modeled on Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin’s *Catholic Worker*, as is *Hospitality*, is also an instrument for what Maurin called, “clarification of thought.” After all, when Maurin proposed a paper to Dorothy Day, what he was hoping for was a place where he could publish his own ideas, a paper that would be unapologetic in its politics. I have been fond of quoting Maurin’s reaction to the first issue of *The Catholic Worker* which he found to have no strong politics in its effort to reach readers across political lines: “Everyone’s paper is no one’s paper.” That stark dismissal remains foundational for community newspapers, the radical press, street papers, even today’s political blogs. It is an



assessment, moreover, that stands in contradiction to many of the most basic lessons of traditional rhetoric. To put it simply, among its many functions, a community paper provides a soapbox — a place for the “principled dissent and sincere outrage” Patricia Roberts-Miller identifies as missing in the lessons of classical rhetoric (23). In her 2002 examination of John Quincy Adams’s defense of those charged in the Amistad incident, she identifies a significant contradiction in the rhetorical tradition and the supposed usefulness of decorum for challenging the status quo:

In the rhetorical tradition, this means that there is some confusion fundamental to the notion that good rhetoric is ‘the good man speaking well’—such that decorum and virtue are implicitly causally connected. But, if decorum and virtue are connected, how does one disagree with convention without thereby identifying oneself and ill-mannered and immoral. What is the place of dissent? (16)

Papers like *The Catholic Worker* (or, *Hospitality*) rarely pull back from dissent and, indeed, “sincere outrage.” I do believe that, in the first few months at Open Door, I felt that outrage more than I felt anything.

Sticks and Stones—Language that Kills

from Hospitality, October 2003

Crack-heads. Dealers. Beggars. Aggressive Panhandlers. Nut Cases. Con Artists. Bums. Drunks. Thieves. Perverts. Lazy Asses. Vagrants. The Un-housed.

The Homeless.

When we were kids, our parents taught us not to call each other names, and when others called us names, we were supposed to shake it off: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” That’s what my mother taught, anyway. And,



though I continue to think that she was one of the wisest people I will ever know, I am quite sure Mom was wrong on that one.

... For some time now, Central Atlanta Progress, Atlanta Journal-Constitution columnist Colin Campbell, The Atlanta Neighborhood Association, Mayor Shirley Franklin, and others hoping to make downtown Atlanta a pleasant place to be have been calling names. They have been talking about “cleaning up” downtown and “making sweeps” through the city parks. They have warned “righteous do-gooders” to keep quiet and let the authorities “Do Downtown.” And, for some time now, Atlantans have read and listened to that language just barely aware of its power to shape our responses to the people who live in our streets.

Last Wednesday, as some of us from The Open Door walked through Woodruff Park passing out leaflets and talking to people in the park, one of our group crossed over to Sun Trust Plaza and approached a neatly dressed, attractive young woman who told him not to bother to talk to her about homeless people. “I don’t care what they do with them,” she said. “Get rid of them all. I don’t care if they kill them all. I want them out.”

“I don’t care if they kill them all.”

Could she really have said that? Yes. She did say that.

So, who is it she wants out of her sight—even if it means killing “them all”? What language shapes her thinking when she looks across from her concrete bench in Sun Trust Plaza to the people sitting on Woodruff Park benches waiting for a sandwich from the “righteous do-gooders” who Mayor Franklin also wants to keep out of the parks?

The language we hear from the Journal-Constitution, from Central Atlanta Progress, from the Mayor’s office is language that depicts



all homeless men and women as waste. And, quite naturally, it is the city's business to "clean up" waste.

When police entered the Pine Street Shelter a few weeks ago and offered anybody who'd agree to stay away for five years a free one-way ticket out of town, that was an action prompted by the metaphors we live by. Sweep this town clean of the waste of vagrants and crack-heads and lazy bums. Get them out of our sight. Send them somewhere else and let someone else deal with it.

When Colin Campbell supports the proposal of a new multi-million dollar park to connect mid-town Atlanta to downtown Atlanta, he describes the "two acres of graffiti-covered parking lots, and the troubled shelter for the homeless at Peachtree and Pine" as "reminders that the city's core still needs help." It is here that this new stretch of green would be developed.

And, where would the shelter go? I suppose it would just be greened over.

And, where would the people in it go? Well, if they didn't take their one-way ticket out of town, I suppose they'll be walking the streets looking for help.

Where the homeless go doesn't seem to matter in all of this language because, after all, they are the vagrants, the dealers, the thieves, the drunks, the waste. Surely, no one with a job is homeless. Surely, no one free of an addiction is homeless.

"This is America," a Georgia State student said to me last Wednesday. "You can work and be successful in America. These people are just lazy-asses." I remind him that a lot of homeless people do have jobs that don't even pay them enough to keep a room. His response: "Then get another job."



Several weeks ago, I listened to a homeless woman talk to a group gathered along the steps of City Hall. She said, "I'm homeless. Do you know anything about me? You just call me HOMELESS. What is homeless? I had a job. It got cut. I work when I can and where I can and I can't afford a place. What do you know about me?"

That woman spoke more profoundly and truthfully about "the homeless" than anyone in any position of power in this city I have heard thus far. So, who are the homeless?

Mothers. Fathers. Sisters. Brothers. Aunts. Uncles. Short order cooks. Maids. Housekeepers. Loft builders. Dishwashers. Waiters. Day labor. Temps. Keyboardists. Workers.

People who need homes.

Rules of the Road

"Students report that their fears and prejudices diminish or disappear, that they are moved by the experience of helping others, and that they feel a commitment to help more. This is a remarkable accomplishment, to be sure. But it is important to note that these responses tend, quite naturally, to be personal, to report perceptions and emotions."

Bruce Herzberg

If you ask any class of first-year comp students to tell you what they know about writing, eventually one (and, often, several) will tell you never to use first person, in fact, to avoid the word "I" entirely. Nobody wants to read what you think. That isn't quite what Bruce Herzberg was warning against over a decade ago in his critique of service-learning, but that distrust of the personal (though guarded in Herzberg's argument) is a strong element of the lesson our students carry with them about writing that counts

It is a lesson that works for a lot of things, but it doesn't work well for



the kinds of newspapers and newsletters my good friend and ever-more-frequent collaborator Paula Mathieu and I have been reading, writing about, and occasionally writing for over the past several years (George; George and Mathieu; Mathieu and George). We have begun calling the work we encounter in those publications a “rhetoric of dissent,” a rhetoric that can be, and often is, nakedly angry; this is a rhetoric that demands the presence of a real voice, an outraged individual writing to expose injustice, laugh at the absurd, or put into stark relief actions and language so common they nearly go unnoticed—that is, unless you are on the receiving end.

A Lenten Reflection

from Hospitality, April 2004

In my life outside The Open Door, I [was at the time this was written] a Professor of Humanities at Michigan Technological University in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. It is a place with long winters, deep snowfall, and close friendships. So, while I [was] in Atlanta, I [had] been sending reports back to my home parish, St. Anne’s Catholic Church in Chassell, Michigan. The people at St. Anne’s responded with warmth and generosity. Even people I didn’t know or barely knew have written to me about the work at The Open Door. When Obie Anglen, a friend from the yard, died in February, I sent this Lenten Report. I share it now with Hospitality readers . . .

Dear Father Larry and St. Anne’s Parishioners,

On the Monday before Ash Wednesday, we began the morning reflection with a reading from Matthew that most of us have heard every year at the beginning of Lent:

But take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them . . . when you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do . . . to win the praise of others. . . . When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. . . . When you fast, do



not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. . . . When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to God who sees what is hidden and will repay you.

That reading struck me as especially powerful this morning because I believe it helps me explain why I've been so silent since before Christmas. I haven't written much since then because there are times when I'm not sure what the letters are really all about. Doesn't [that passage] tell us to pray privately, fast privately, give privately?

I've sometimes wondered if my letters back home are just my way of being like the hypocrites in Matthew's Gospel—doing good works so that others will notice.

But this morning, as I listened to that reading, I remembered all the years after I had left a small Catholic elementary school and had started high school in the public system. On Ash Wednesday, I would go to school wearing ashes, and, inevitably, my friends would gently whisper that I had something on my forehead, that I'd gotten into the ink or smudged myself on my homework. And, I would feel a shock of embarrassment rush up my neck as I explained that the smudge was from ashes; I'd been to church that morning.

On those days, I resented that reading from Matthew. I'd sit and stand and kneel in the Church early in the morning before school and listen to that reading all the while thinking, "Well, if we aren't supposed to walk around wearing our fasting on our faces, why are we getting this stuff smeared across our foreheads for everybody to look at?

I didn't want to be embarrassed.



What I should have remembered, though, is what the Sisters had taught me about ashes. When we would complain about being embarrassed, they would say, “The ashes are a reminder. Look in the mirror. Don’t think about the way you look. Remember why we fast on these days. Remember why we pray. The ashes will fade very quickly, but you should still remember.” . . .

Two weeks ago, one of our friends from the streets died. His name was Obie, and he has been on my mind for a long time now.

Back in October, I called the ambulance for him. He was having a heart attack in our front yard, but I didn’t know that. In fact, the first time I saw him that day, I thought he was probably on a binge. He was struggling down the sidewalk and could barely walk a straight line. I was going in the opposite direction and stopped to say, “Obie! What’s going on? You look a little fuzzy this morning.” He didn’t make eye contact, just said, “I need to get to The Open Door.”

Three hours later, I was on house duty and one of the residents here came in to tell me that Obie was in bad shape. He needed an ambulance.

I went out to talk to him. No odor of liquor. In fact, the people around him told me that Obie didn’t really drink, so I called the ambulance and then went out into the yard to sit with him until they came.

The next day we heard that Obie was having a heart attack; he would have died if I hadn’t called the ambulance.

I was feeling pretty good about myself—having mostly forgotten my earlier judgment that he was on a bender and heading down the street to sleep it off in our front yard. After all, I’d saved his life. The doctor said he needed open heart surgery. Just in time, I



thought. If we hadn't gotten him in, that would have been the end.

Three days later, Obie was in our yard again, and I was shocked. "Obie!" I called, "I thought you needed open heart surgery. Why are you here?"

"I have to wait to get an appointment. They don't tell me nothin' there."

For the next several weeks, the nights got colder and wetter. In the evenings when I passed out sandwiches, Obie would be there, still waiting to hear about surgery. He was sleeping in the streets most of that time, in the coldest, wettest, hardest part of the winter. And, he needed open heart surgery.

One night when I had to clear the yard, Obie was there bedded down with some others. He needed open heart surgery, and I had to wait while he slowly and with difficulty put his shoes back on and packed up to move on down the street.

I was ashamed of myself.

The doctors told Obie that he needed open heart surgery and sent him out to sleep in the streets.

I knew he needed open heart surgery, and I sent him out to sleep in the streets.

It is good — if you pray — to pray in private, but I believe now that the ashes remind us to act in public.

We live in a country that has some of the best health care in the world, and yet, we ask an old man with a life-threatening heart condition to go live in the streets until there's a place in line for him to get the care he needs.



We live in the wealthiest nation in the world, and yet men and women live in the gutters and under highway overpasses. The CEOs of some of our largest, most prosperous companies make salaries large enough to pay dozens of workers a fair wage, and yet we fight legislation to guarantee everyone a living wage.

I am ashamed of myself that I have to send sick and dying men and women back into the streets after I have handed them a sandwich, and I am ashamed of a system that makes that necessary.

When you are living and working at a place like Open Door, there are a lot of things to get mad about. You can start just by getting mad at the system. In the end, though, a paper like Hospitality forces writers as well as readers to admit their own part in making that system possible.

As I reread that reflection (confession, more like), I am both chagrined and struck by how much more apt it is today than it was in 2004. Since at least 1996, the number of public hospitals across the country has continued to decline steadily (Andrulus and Duchon) which means that today it is harder than ever for homeless men and women to find a spot at a place like Grady. That is primarily because there aren't many Gradys left, and yet the fight to stave off universal health care continues as bitterly as ever. The scene I wrote about in 2004 has likely played itself out, with variations, dozens of times since then in cities all across this country. In my mind, that means that this is the kind of story that needs to be told over and over again.

The community paper does, indeed, have the tendency "to be personal, to report perceptions and experiences," to echo Herzberg, but the personal in this context does not inevitably mean the writer will "not search beyond the person for a systemic explanation" (Herzberg 309). One does not cancel out the other.



What Was I Writing?

Just about the last piece I wrote for Hospitality that year was the one that worried me more than anything I had written the entire year:

Hearing Voices

from Hospitality, July 2004

One morning in May, I was sitting in my room trying to finish up a paper I had promised for a conference at the end of the month. Below me, the yard was filled with the sounds of people lining up for showers and waiting for soup kitchen. A lot of the time, these sounds worry me.

Earlier that very morning, about 5:00, it was the sound of Spanish—urgent and angry—in an argument with someone bedded down against the wall of our side yard. I didn't know if it was a fight about to erupt or just the singular and hard frustration of spending the night on the ground and having to wake up early enough to get a number in the shower line. But it was over nearly as soon as it woke me, so I let it melt into what was left of a restless dream and forgot it for the time.

At my desk later that morning, I sat trying hard to concentrate, trying hard to block out the noise of conversations and soup kitchen pots and sirens and truck traffic and singing.

Yes. Singing.

Suddenly, the noise of pots and traffic and people milling about the yard had arranged itself into music—beautiful, rhythmic, a cappella voices—in close Motown harmony, rich in the soul and gospel tradition of Black churches and side streets. Four men had circled in the drive and were making startlingly beautiful music. It went on for over an hour.



I stopped to watch and listen from my window, and as I watched I thought about how much I've written about the suffering and how easy it is to forget the pure joy of living, whether in the streets or in houses and apartments. People find joy even within the outrage of having to stand in our front yard waiting to be served a meal, waiting for a clean shirt, waiting for a shower, waiting for a job, waiting for justice in this country of all countries.

Of course, there is that echo of Jack London there at the end, but I worried then and continue to worry that I had just offered up one of those happy-peasants-dancing-in-the-landscape paintings that I loved to critique when I was studying art history. It is a true story and it was one of those bits of light that surprised me and made me immeasurably happy that year, but there are dangers in it. It is too neat, too much the tableau, too easy.

I do know poverty and not simply from reading and writing about it. I also know that those moments of joy and beauty happen. What worries me in that piece is how muted the outrage has become; how it seems precious—a Hallmark moment. In the end, it could have been written for any mainstream newspaper; it could have been a human interest spot on any half-hour network news show. In my mind, it is a failed piece of writing because it very likely is more about me and my own desire for a resolution to the year than anything else, and as Mom would say, “When you have hungry mouths to feed, it isn’t about you, is it?”

The Place for Principled Dissent and Sincere Outrage

“I should have called it something
you somehow haven’t to deserve.”

Robert Frost

Near mid-year in our stay at Open Door, Chuck and I used a line from Robert Frost’s *The Death of a Hired Man* in an article about homes



and homelessness (Harris and George). Frost writes that home is “something you somehow haven’t to deserve.” A few friends read that piece and asked if maybe we had gotten that one wrong. Didn’t Frost write, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in”?

He did. He wrote both lines. They occur back-to-back when the farmer Warren scoffs at his wife for telling him that the Hired Man had “come home to die”:

“Home,” he mocked gently.

“Yes, what else but home?

It all depends on what you mean by home.

Of course he’s nothing to us, any more

then was the hound that came a stranger to us

Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.”

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

They have to take you in.”

“I should have called it

Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”

And, then the argument turns to the Hired Man’s rich brother, living somewhere close by, who really ought to be taking him in.

I’m an English teacher, and so it seems I’ve known those lines almost since childhood—though I am sure I didn’t read the poem until I was in high school. Still, I have read those lines and studied those lines and taught those lines many times. It is only in living and working at The



Open Door that I have understood those lines and especially that I've understood the difference between the two.

The Death of a Hired Man is a poem still taught in most American high schools, probably in the third year in American literature classes. It is a common enough assignment to ask students to turn the poem into theater (it is nearly a play, already), to act out the parts in reader's theater, even to design a set for a full-blown stage production. It is not a very common assignment to ask students to understand what is going on in that poem beyond the drama between a farmer and his wife arguing over whether or not to take in a hired man who has come back to the farm to die.

To think of home as "the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in" is to admit something of an inevitability. Like it or not, if you drag yourself home in need — even after years of turning your back on the whole lot of them — the family is supposed to take you in. That's just the way things are. It doesn't always work that way, of course, but that's basically where Frost is going with that line.

The farmer's wife (speaking with the same clarity that rang in my mother's words) is talking about a different kind of social contract. She isn't talking about responsibility or the deserving poor or family ties or expectations of friendship or even (thinking about the Hired Man, here) labor relations. She is saying something profoundly revolutionary, at least in Capitalism: Home is basic. Nobody ought to have to earn the right to a home. It is, quite simply "something you haven't to deserve." It is that kind of understanding of human rights that leads a publication like Hospitality away from rhetorical decorum and toward principled dissent and sincere outrage which, as Paula Mathieu and I would argue ("A Place for the Dissident Press"), is the rhetoric of dissent.



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Notes

At the time that I wrote article, I was on sabbatical leave from Michigan Tech. In 2005, I took my current position at Virginia Tech. This was a letter originally addressed to my home parish in Michigan after what had been a long period of silence. Hospitality chose to run the letter as is with the short introduction setting up the context.