In Defense of Homelessness

Andrew F. Smith

"Homelessness simply is not an acceptable lifestyle to us."
—Major William G. Nottle, Salvation Army[1]

"Avoiding officially sanctioned shelters at all costs, the homeless take refuge almost anywhere else—in alleys, parks, tunnels, and abandoned buildings, under bridges, and so on. The police have to roust them from these areas regularly, because if the homeless become comfortable *anywhere*, what motive have they to *stop* being homeless? The trouble is, for some strange reason, it doesn't work worth a damn."
—Daniel Quinn[2]

1 Introduction

David Wagner asserts that Americans tend to view the homeless in one of three ways. The most common is a hostile and judgmental view whereby the homeless are regarded as "disruptive of the public order."[3] Those who hold this view demand that the homeless pull themselves together and return to work and a

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[1] This quote originally appears in "New Regime to Operate Baloney Joe's," *The Oregonian*, 1 October 1990: B1, B5. It is also referenced by Anthony J. Steinbock, "Homelessness and the Homeless Movement: A Clue to the Problem of Intersubjectivity," *Human Studies* 17 (1994): 203–223; quote from 206.

[2] Daniel Quinn, *Beyond Civilization* (New York: Three Rivers, 1999), p. 122.

[3] David Wagner, *Checkerboard Square: Culture and Resistance in a Homeless Community* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), p. 176.

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proper family life—or, barring this, to simply disappear from sight. Less widespread is a charitable view whereby the homeless must be shown compassion and provided with assistance in order to become housed and employed. Particularly prevalent among those who provide social services is a therapeutic view according to which the homeless are considered to be potential clients who can regain their self-esteem and social standing through proper treatment.

"Despite the important differences among these views," Wagner remarks, "they have strong similarities. Each tradition […] sees the down-and-out person as an individual (or a family); that is, as a disaggregated unit cut off from the social order."[4] And each view communicates to the homeless that their social status is inferior, undesirable, and even pathological. This is the position that I challenge in this paper. Indeed, I contend that advocates for the homeless should accept it as a viable lifestyle. They should seek to help the homeless to thrive while homeless. The best way to accomplish this is to facilitate certain specifiable socio-economic forms of organization that are common among the homeless, operate at least partially independently of state and philanthropic institutions, and embody valuable and worthwhile ways to live and to make a living.

This approach has two potential advantages in comparison to focusing solely on reforming state and philanthropic institutions that aim at securing shelter for the homeless. First, it allows us to envision how to mitigate the suffering experienced by the homeless—their constant state of vulnerability to arbitrary interference and stigmatization—by developing a clearer sense of what measures they have employed *of their own accord* beyond the reach of established institutions to enjoy greater security, autonomy, and dignity. Second, it helps us to see how the norms underlying the current institutional response to homelessness facilitate psychological distress and social fragmentation not just among the homeless but also among the housed. To the extent that this is so, the ways in which the homeless seek to live and to make a living likewise may be conducive to the wellbeing of the housed. It is for these reasons that I defend homelessness.

I proceed as follows. First, I offer a clearer sense of how the current institutional response to homelessness perpetuates and exacerbates suffering by the homeless. Next, I rely on the research of social scientists to highlight forms of socio-economic organization among the very poor in general and the homeless in particular that represent at least a partial rejection of the institutional response. Lastly, I draw on such disparate sources as Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry David Thoreau, novelist Daniel Quinn, historian Marshall Sahlins, and environmental activist Bill McKibben to develop a clearer sense of how these forms of socio-economic organization can benefit the housed—in particular, how they can mitigate societal dysfunction, acute and chronic job-related stress, and even

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[4] Ibid.

environmental destruction in a state that is largely unresponsive to the needs of all citizens.[5]

2 "Out of Place"

The homeless are regularly assumed to be mentally ill, of poor character, dangerous, offensive by their very presence, ex-convicts, substance abusers, irresponsible, a public nuisance, lazy, shiftless, unproductive, free riders, moochers, dependent, opportunistic, and so forth. As Talmadge Wright remarks, "The homeless body in the public imagination represents the body of decay, the degenerate body, a body that is constantly rejected by the public as 'sick,' 'scary,' 'dirty and smelly,' and a host of other pejoratives used to create social distance between housed and unhoused persons."[6] They are, Uma Narayan states, "people whose destitute presence makes public spaces less enjoyable, comfortable, or aesthetically pleasing for those who are better off."[7] They exhibit deviant and dysfunctional behavior unfit for public display, hence are "a representation of fundamental and threatening outsiderness," Teresa Gowan remarks.[8]

Given these observations, it is widely assumed that the homeless must be kept off the streets and safely shunted away from those who use public spaces for work and leisure. Stuart Bykofsky argues that the rights of taxpayers demand that authorities deal harshly with the homeless. Since tax dollars are spent to pave and clean the streets, taxpayers have a right to evict the homeless from them.[9] As

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[5] Of course, I claim neither that the housed necessarily would fare better in American society were they homeless nor that steps should not be taken to house the homeless on terms that they accept. My central point, instead, is that we do a genuine disservice both to the homeless and the housed by ignoring the viability and value of certain modes of living and of making a living that have proven to work for the homeless. I also am well aware that my argument may be viewed as romanticizing the plight of the homeless. Linda Alcoff ("The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991–1992): 5–32) warns of the discursive dangers associated with members of more privileged classes speaking on behalf of the less privileged. She advocates engaging in dialogue, both listening to and speaking with the subjects of our investigation as dialogical equals while acknowledging that we are not equally socially and politically situated. With this in mind, I have intentionally sought out the work of researcher who have engaged with the homeless in their preferred environs and who have attempted to develop an honest assessment of their needs, interests, and concerns by entering into dialogue with them. I cannot deny that my interpretation of the statements by those interviewed is filtered through what, invariably, is my socially mediated lens: in particular my own relationships with the less privileged. But this is a matter we all face, which makes it all the more important that we expand the debate about how to address homelessness to as wide an audience as possible. This essay represents just one voice in this debate.

[6] Talmadge Wright, *Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities, and Contested Landscapes* (Albany: SUNY, 1997), p. 69.

[7] Uma Narayan, "No Shelter Even in the Constitution? Free Speech, Equal Protection, and the Homeless," in *The Ethics of Homelessness: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. John M. Abbarno (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 153–169; quote from p. 160.

[8] Teresa Gowan, "American Untouchables: Homeless Scavengers in San Francisco's Underground Economy," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 17(3–4) (1997): 159–190; quote from p. 170.

[9] See Stuart Bykofsky, "No Heart for the Homeless," *Newsweek* 108 (1 December 1986): 12–13. For a compelling criticism of Bykofsky's argument, see Anita M. Superson, "The Homeless and the Right to 'Public Dwelling,'" in *The Ethics of Homelessness: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. John M. Abbarno (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 141–151; cf. p. 144.

George Will asserts, "If it is illegal […] to litter the streets, frankly it ought to be illegal for people […] to sleep in the streets. Therefore, there is a simple matter of public order and hygiene in getting these people somewhere else. Not arrest them, but move them off somewhere where they are simply out of sight."[10] Even the far less callous commentator Nel Noddings maintains that the right of the homeless to public dwelling must be curtailed both for their own good and for the good of the housed.[11]

For the homeless to be publicly visible thus is for them to be "out of place," as Wright puts it. They defy the sense of order that authorities seek to convey, which can only be restored if they are made "invisible"—made to disappear from public view. Indeed, we may assume that the homeless want to disappear: to get a job, find a home, and resume a normal life. As a result, Quinn asserts, "The role of officialdom is therefore to assist, prompt, and encourage the homeless to get about the business of resuming that normal life. Above all, nothing must be done that would encourage the homeless to *remain* homeless."[12]

Several institutional responses to homelessness are commonly implemented. Authorities take steps to *exclude* the homeless in particular from popular work and leisure destinations.[13] Another common response is outright *harassment*, whether or not it is institutionally sanctioned.[14] Attempts at *displacement* of the homeless from their accommodations are also common. Danielle Steel (yes, *that* Danielle Steel) describes witnessing the San Francisco Department of Public Works (DPW) removing one person's dwelling from the street. "They arrive with a dump truck, and if the homeless person is momentarily away at a public bathroom, trying to scrounge up something to eat, trying to find work, or maybe just asleep, the DPW truck scoops up all their belonging, and tidies up the mess for them."[15] Steel notes that DPW carried out the same action in numerous tent cities. Finally, the homeless shelter system promotes *containment*, which represents the most prominent response to homelessness. Shelters are regarded within the U.S. as perhaps the one proper place for the homeless to dwell until they are able to get back on their feet. The homeless are thus placed into shelters where—like prisoners, the clinically insane, and other "deviants"—they can safely be ignored by the housed and monitored by authorities.[16]

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[10] This quote appears in Narayan, op cit., p. 163.

[11] See Nel Noddings, "Caring, Social Policy, and Homelessness," *Theoretical Medicine* 23 (2002): 441–454.

[12] Quinn, op cit., p. 122.

[13] See David A. Snow and Michael Mulcahy, "Space, Politics, and the Survival Strategies of the Homeless," *American Behavioral Scientist* 45(1) (2001): 149–169.

[14] See Superson, op cit., p. 141.

[15] Danielle Steel, *A Gift of Hope: Helping the Homeless* (New York: Delacorte, 2012), p. 64.

[16] See Noah S. Berger, "The Guardian of the Birds," in *The Ethics of Homelessness: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. John M. Abbarno (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 15–20; and Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa and trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (New York: Routledge, 2006). I do not intend to connote that homeless service providers relish such harsh treatment of the homeless. Rather, they are enmeshed in an institutional framework that heavily constrains their actions. See Jason A. Wasserman and Jeffrey M. Clair, *At Homes on the Street* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010), pp. 172ff.

The stated goal of these various institutional responses to homelessness, taken individually or collectively, is to facilitate reintegration of the homeless into the workforce and into homes with stable families. This goal thus supports two complementary ethics: the work ethic and the family ethic.[17] Liberal and conservative public officials and community leaders alike remain deeply committed to the work ethic: to the idea that personal responsibility and fulfillment can be maintained only through gainful and legitimate employment aimed at individual or familial material success.[18] The family ethic likewise has broad-based political support. From the perspective of those who endorse it, family membership provides the primary means to enjoy economic stability and security. It most readily facilitates the proper maturation and moral education of children. Under the best of conditions, it constitutes a lifelong social support system with ties that bind more strongly than just about any extrafamilial relationship can. For these reasons, states Wagner, "the family is the unit upon which a variety of social welfare allocations are based in our society."[19]

It is impossible to deny that many homeless people experience genuine hardships on the streets. Substance abuse is rampant (although this is hardly unique to this particular demographic). It is estimated that one-third suffer from mental illness (although this is only slightly higher than within the wider American populace).[20] Many homeless youths engage in sex work. Many homeless veterans battle with post-traumatic stress disorder. Violence is commonplace, which sows distrust and fear both of the housed and of other homeless individuals.[21] The unpredictability of street life can cause great anxiety and exhaustion, leading people, remarks Steele, to "quietly disintegrate on the streets."[22]

Unfortunately, the institutional response does more to exacerbate than to alleviate these hardships.[23] Consider, for example, what life is like in many shelters. Many

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[17] Arguably, in consonance with the psychological distress associated with the institutional response, its unstated goal is to create a sense of terror at the proposition of becoming homeless, which facilitates adherence to the work and family ethics by the housed. I thank Ian Werkheiser for highlighting this point.

[18] See Francis Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 34.

[19] Wagner, op cit., p. 46.

[20] See Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 67. Superson argues that characteristics of mental illness—depression, listlessness, anxiousness, and the like—should be considered "natural responses" to the conditions the homeless face. See op cit., p. 42. See also Paul Koegel and M. Audrey Burnam, "Problems in the Assessment of Mental Illness Among the Homeless: An Empirical Approach," in *Homelessness: A National Perspective*, ed. Marjorie J. Robertson and Milton Greenblatt (New York: Plenum, 1992), pp. 77–100; Lisa Goodman, Leonard Saxe, and Mary Harvey, "Homelessness as Psychological Trauma," *American Psychologist* (1991): 1219–1225; and Patricia Anne Murphy, "The Rights of the Homeless: An Examination of the Phenomenology of Place," in *The Ethics of Homelessness: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. John M. Abbarno (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), 55–61.

[21] See Katherine Coleman Lundy, *Sidewalks Talk: A Naturalistic Study of Street Kids* (New York: Garland, 1995), p. 80.

[22] See Steel, op cit., p. 3. See also Jennifer Toth, *The Mole People: Life in the Tunnels Beneath New York City* (Chicago: Chicago Review, 1993), p. 5.

[23] There are exceptions, including the now defunct Baloney Joe's in Portland, OR, and Fountain House in New York City.

inhabitants are thankful for having an option other than begging and foraging for food in dumpsters.[24] But, first, that inhabitants feel compelled to express thankfulness suggests that shelters tend to operate within the context of what Harold Garfinkel refers to as the "degradation ceremony" to which the homeless must submit.[25] Second, they serve to separate out the deserving from the undeserving: "Those who obey are deserving. Those who do not are undeserving," states Wright.[26] Obeying often means undergoing screening for substance abuse, abiding by a strict curfew, enduring long waits for food and services, consenting to constant surveillance and regimentation (lining up for meals, submitting to sermons or prayer services before receiving assistance), performing unpleasant chores, engaging in an active search for work and permanent housing, potentially submitting to abuse and robbery at the hands of fellow inhabitants, and putting up with arbitrary interference by shelter staff. It is no wonder, then, that shelters are often used only as a last resort when street life becomes especially precarious or weather conditions too difficult to bear.[27]

3 Socio-Economic Forms of Homeless Organization

Those who have had sustained contact with the homeless report that three specifiable norms tend to govern their interactions—not because they are somehow more virtuous than the housed but because adhering to these norms fosters the enjoyment of a degree of security, dignity, and autonomy under conditions of great duress.[28] These norms include *security through community*, *free sharing of provisions*, and *equitable exchange.* And they facilitate the creation of a support network on which members can rely as they seek to escape the shelters, family abuse, predatory landlords, and harassment by police and the public.[29]

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[24] See Mike Yankoski, *Under the Overpass: A Journey of Faith on the Streets of America* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2012), p. 32.

[25] See Harold Garfinkel, "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies," *American Journal of Sociology* 61 (1956): 240–244. Offering a similar perspective, hip-hop artist Jay-Z suggests that "to some degree charity is a racket in a capitalist system, a way of making our obligations to one another optional and of keeping poor people feeling a sense of indebtedness to the rich" (*Decoded* (New York: Spiegel & Gray, 2010), p. 220).

[26] Wright, op cit., p. 215.

[27] See Dennis P. Culhane and Randall Kuhn, "Patterns and Determinants of Public Shelter Utilization among Homeless Adults in New York City and Philadelphia," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 17(1) (1998): 23–43.

[28] See James C. Scott, "The Infrapolitics of Subordinate Groups," in *The Global Resistance Reader*, ed. Louise Amoore (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 71f.

[29] Rachel Solnit highlights numerous instances in which natural disasters and comparable events have led those most adversely affected to band together for mutual support. For example, while it was widely reported that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which hit New Orleans in 2005, residents were routinely accosting one another, comparably few such incidents actually occurred. Far more commonly city residents and boat owners from outlying areas offered whatever assistance they could provide in the absence of state support. Solidarity, not engagement in a Hobbesian war of all against all, was the most common reflexive response to their travails. See *A Paradise Built in Hell* (New York: Viking, 2009).

Solitary panhandlers are the most publicly visible of the homeless. Because of this, it is easy to get the impression that the homeless tend to prefer isolation and disaffiliation. But this is not so. Most prefer to maintain contact with other people who are familiar with their experiences. Mike Yankoski spent time on the streets in various cities in the American West. He notes that time and again, fellow homeless whom he encountered for the first time were welcoming and happy to provide information about where to obtain food and where best to panhandle. By his account, moreover, the perceived isolation of panhandlers is itself a sign of territorial respect for fellow panhandlers.[30]

Wagner, who studied the homeless community in Portland, Maine, in the 1980s, notes that food, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, and information about social services were readily shared.[31] When perceived violations of what were intended to be reciprocal exchanges occurred, they were quickly resolved by the intervention of others in the community. These practices maintained and even strengthened the cohesion of the community. Such cohesion even made it difficult for some members of the community to remain in housing units that became available, as they were geographically separated them from peers and left to their own devices.[32]

Public officials and the media generally focus on ways in which the homeless consume resources while overlooking or willfully ignoring their productive activities. Perhaps they assume that one cannot be genuinely productive—one cannot care for oneself and contribute to social wellbeing—outside of traditional employment channels, which is incorrect. Or perhaps they take affront to the decision of many homeless to refuse traditional employment, which ignores the fact that the employment options open to the homeless (and the very poor) are generally grueling, oppressive, and fail to guarantee an income that can permit them to escape poverty. Deindustrialization, deunionization, and the rise of the service sector have generated a sharp decrease in well-paying jobs for low-skilled and unskilled workers with no coinciding increase in state support in the United States.[33]

Yet the popular assumption that the homeless are indolent freeloaders does not hold up in the face of the resourcefulness and self-discipline that many exhibit. As Wagner remarks, "The popular ascription […] of 'laziness' among the poor can only be upheld by ignoring the dominant underground economy of nonwage labor" as well as other productive activities such as parenting and caring for others on the street.[34] Along with panhandling, the homeless spend considerable time scavenging, busking, and selling junk and recyclables. This permits them at least partially to avoid the degradation ceremonies performed by social service institutions and also to maintain dignity through productivity.

Consider the activities of recyclers, whose attitudes reflect the demand to be seen as hard working, competent, and self-sufficient. Recycling has become a primary

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[30] See also Gwendolyn A. Dodrick, *Something Left to Lose* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1997), p. 27.

[31] See also Wasserman and Clair, op cit.

[32] See Wagner, op cit, p. 148; Toth, op cit., p. 16; and Steel, op cit., pp. 28f.

[33] See Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

[34] Wagner, op cit., p. 77.

source of income for people who are excluded from the shrinking formal labor market. Gowan notes that recyclers are confronted by long-standing discourses that treat them and their activities "as powerful symbols of deviance and decay."[35] In response, recyclers work extremely hard: some earning just a few dollars for working more than twelve hours per day and "sometimes taking in two or even three loads of 100-200 pounds each."[36]

Understandably, this has struck commentators who focus on informal economies as an example of how firms prey on the weak to maximize profits, often with state complicity. Manuel Castells and Alejandro Portes regard the activities of recyclers as a byproduct of the success the state has had at scaling back the social safety net in combination with outsourcing recycling by the firms that process recyclables to parties that receive little income, no benefits, and no leverage with management.[37] This is undoubtedly so; I do not deny that recyclers, and the homeless in general, are deserving of sustained state support, a salient voice with respect to the conditions of their employment, and a living wage.

What is peculiar, though, is that these concerns have little resonance with the lived experience of recyclers, according to Gowan. "Despite the low pay, many of the homeless recyclers really get into their work with enthusiasm. They do not express the sullen resentment of people acting only out of economic compulsion." As one recycler thus declares, "I work hard, I clear up the neighborhood. Don't beg, don't steal, don't deal drugs."[38]

"Why," Gowan asks, "should the homeless recycler be so emotionally involved in a job which is physically exhausting, low paid, and most of all, significantly stigmatized by much of the general population as not only disgusting but akin to stealing?"[39] The answer may be twofold. Recyclers need not fight for resources given the abundance of recyclable material available in urban spaces. This in turn creates a sense of self-sufficiency and solidarity with fellow scavengers since they can enjoy "relationships in which friendship, not cash, are seen as security," notes Mark Boyle.[40]

Grace Yang notes in a recent article that the American media has all but ignored the existence—let alone the expansion—of tent cities, which now populate some fifty-five cities.[41] When attention is paid to them, the focus is on matters of hygiene, safety, and access to electricity and safe drinking water. For this reason, tent cities are regarded as accommodations of last resort.

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[35] Gowan, op cit., p. 170.

[36] Ibid., p. 161.

[37] See Manuel Castells and Alejandro Portes, "World Underneath: The Origins, Dynamics, and Effects of the Informal Economy," in *The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries*, ed. Alejandro Portes, Manuel Castells, and Lauren Benton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1989), pp. 11–37.

[38] Gowan, op cit., p. 169.

[39] Ibid., p. 170.

[40] Mark Boyle, *The Moneyless Man: A Year of Freeconomic Living* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2010), p. 42.

[41] See Grace Yang, "US Media Ignores Sharp Increase in 'Tent Cities' in 2012," Examiner.com, 2 August 2012; http://www.examiner.com/article/us-media-ignores-sharp-increase-of-tent-cities-2012.

But it is important not to overlook that life in tent cities can offer forms of socio-economic support to which residents have access nowhere else. In many encampments (although of course not all; I denote marked tendencies, not certainties), help is not denied to those who seek it, and no one is exposed to regimentation or humiliation in order to receive it. This allows for the freedom and privacy that shelters lack, offers protection and security, and permits residents to make a living collectively. Wright even found encampments in San Jose in which residents self-selected on the basis of alcohol or drug use, which permitted residents to choose locations most suited to their liking.[42]

At The Bridge in San Jose, Wright describes finding numerous huts that were well ventilated and well insulated, many with lofts, windows, storage space, and internal stoves for heat and for cooking.[43] Fresh water was available at a nearby fire hydrant that city workers turned on for residents. Privacy and respect for personal space were strictly enforced, and disputes were settled by residents with seniority. In addition, it was typical for residents to work together to appropriate and use resources. As one resident reported to Wright: "Do what you can for them and they'll do what they can for you. They go out and work and they bring in whatever they could. We go to a dumpster, get steak, wash it off, cook it, and make stew or whatever."[44] Residents faced low barriers to entry, high levels of camaraderie, and control over their labor practices. So long as their basic needs were met, "Sharing with each other whatever resources they could find, 'Bridge' members were fond of talking about their camp as a 'family.'"[45] This provided a basis for them to make a place for themselves and to enjoy the benefits of collective action.

Wright also visited Tranquility City in Chicago. Residents established an extensive social network with area churches, art galleries, and community activists first to resist being uprooted and then to secure public housing. Several former residents lamented the loss of security Tranquility City afforded them in comparison to life in the projects, in which drug dealing and gang violence were a constant concern.[46] As one former resident recalled:

> 'As a group we stuck together because we had nobody else.' […] Decisions were made collectively, although some newcomers would often exclude

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[42] Wasserman and Clair do note that a good number of encampments replicate wider cultural dynamics when it comes to self-selection. Racial segregation is commonplace. Moreover, authorities are more likely to raid and shut down predominantly African-American encampments than predominantly white encampments. This permits the latter to become more established and comfortable, thus replicating wider trends of differential and asymmetrical treatment by the state on the basis of race. See op cit., p. 103.

[43] At the Shanty in New York City, Gwendolyn Dodrick also found huts that had heat, electricity, and locks. There was just one entrance into the encampment, which made it easy to monitor. And the sanitation department collected garbage on a regular basis. Residents, who also embraced an ethic of sharing, were better off in the "flexible market" that they created for themselves "than in the more expensive and less yielding market of the outside world," op cit., p. 200.

[44] See Wright, op cit. p. 270.

[45] Ibid., p. 269. See also Megan Ravenhill, *The Culture of Homelessness* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008). For more on basic needs, see Wasserman and Clair, op cit., p. 109.

[46] See ibid., pp. 280f.

themselves, living on the farther edges of the camp. Those who chose to exclude themselves were still checked upon by the other hut dwellers periodically, and were left alone if they desired. Problems would be worked out collectively.[47]

Residents gained a sense of hope, optimism, and place through community involvement: "what I've gained is having people know who I am, which I really like. I am no longer invisible."[48]

Jason Motlagh visited Slab City, a squatter's camp in the California desert. Slab City—which one resident referred to as a "postapocalyptic vacation zone"—is home not just to eccentrics but also to victims of the 2008 economic downturn.[49] It affords residents rent-free accommodations; a community in which both resources and skills are readily shared; and a slower, simpler life free from the watchful eyes of authorities. Jennifer Toth ventured into the tunnels beneath Manhattan and found The Condos, a "quiet and peaceful" place where people could set up accommodations within easy distance of electric wires to which lighting could be attached and a sprinkler pipe for fresh water. "Once inside the community, I was safe from random violence of tunnel life," Toth states. "Even without aboveground law, there was a network of protection."[50]

It should go without saying that tent cities are not suitable for everybody. But they are chosen by so many homeless instead of the shelters precisely because they provide a degree of security, autonomy, and dignity in terms of living and making a living that shelters generally do not. Indeed, the forms of socio-economic organization adopted by the homeless, particularly in tent cities, can work quite well for the housed as well. They can act as a powerful counterweight to social and political policies that exacerbate social dysfunction, employment-related hardships, environmental collapse, and state institutions that serve the few at the expense of the many. As such, the homeless highlight possible avenues by which the housed too can at least partially opt out of forms of socio-economic organization that may not work for them. This can assist the housed as well to envision how to challenge the work and family ethics without having to engage in the prohibitively difficult task of directly resisting the powerful forces that defend them. Instead, they can walk away.

4 Unlocking the Food and Other Ways to Opt Out

If I am right that the activities of the homeless provide a means to challenge prevailing socio-economic norms, to offer an alternative vision of critique and the facilitation of social change, then the homeless are indeed dangerous—although not

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[47] Ibid., p. 282.

[48] Ibid., p. 291.

[49] See Jason Motlagh, "Slab City, Here We Come: Living Life Off the Grid in California's Badlands," *Time*, 3 February 2012.

[50] Toth, op cit., p. 252.

in the typically ascribed ways. They are fellow citizens who nevertheless are others, outsiders, threats to the current contours of American society. They represent one of American society's most salient limiting conditions, for the institutional response has failed—"repeatedly and consistently"—to neutralize them.[51]

Consider, for example, Nietzsche's discussion of "ennoblement through degeneration." In *Human, All too Human*, Nietzsche suggests that social custom is a preserving strength of any community. However, strong communities tend over time to produce "firm-charactered individuals" who, because they face no concerted challenges to their shared customs, end up exhibiting "the gradually increasing inherited stupidity such as haunts all stability like its shadow." Under such conditions, strong communities greatly benefit from their "more unfettered, uncertain, and morally weaker individuals"—individuals who are either unwilling or unable to live in accordance with social custom—who are particularly well situated to discover new pathways to "*spiritual progress*." In this respect, Nietzsche declares, "Degenerate natures are of the highest significance wherever progress is to be effected. Every progress of the whole has to be preceded by a partial weakening. The strongest natures *preserve* the type, the weaker help it to *evolve*."[52]

If Nietzsche provides a viable lens through which to discuss the problem at hand, from within the purview of prevailing social custom in the United States the homeless must be perceived as degenerate. But it is their very degeneracy that makes possible healthy forms of social transformation. As a result, Lawrence Hatab remarks, from the purview of a society so transformed, the homeless turn out on due reflection to embody a "life-advancing strength."[53] By contrast, the demands imposed by the work and family ethics can force "life denying" values on those who are commanded to submit to demeaning jobs that provide no pathway out of poverty, abusive family relationships, a foster care system that is indifferent to the needs of its clients, and exploitative landlords against whom tenants have no viable recourse. At best, Nietzsche concludes, such submission would entail the embrace of "asceticism," the reduction of one's life to the "*mechanical activity*" of maintaining a form of domicility that "brings considerable relief to a life of suffering" but only by engaging in a "hypnotic dampening of the capacity for pain."[54]

While life-advancing strength may not be conceptualized by Nietzsche explicitly in terms of what would be socially and economically beneficial to those living on the margins of society, it is quite interesting to note that more than once Wright was told by encampment resident about their newfound "will to live."[55] They encountered

[51] Quinn, op cit., p. 126. See also Peter Marcuse, "Neutralizing Homelessness," *Socialist Review* 18 (1988): 69–96; and David Lovekin, "Technology and Culture and the Problem of the Homeless," *The Philosophical Forum* 24(4) (1993): 363–374.

[52] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University, 1986), p. 224.

[53] Lawrence J. Hatab, *Nietzsche's* On the Genealogy of Morality: *An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University, 2008), p. 47.

[54] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University, 1996), p. 112.

[55] Wright, op cit., p. 295.

residents who treated them with respect precisely for having the wherewithal to opt out of the shelter system, to walk away, to choose the "least worst alternative available to them" and, in the process, to reject domicility for the sake of life.[56]

Why should this be of value to those among the housed who are not subject to the acute hardships experienced by the homeless? Quinn asserts that the homeless are best viewed as "reluctant pioneers" blazing a path "beyond civilization": beyond a culture in which the idea is perpetuated that there is exactly one right way to live despite the fact that this way of living is profoundly destructive individually, socially, and environmentally. Here, then, is but a glimpse of what a culture beyond the American iteration of civilization might look like, if, indeed, the practices exhibited by the homeless point the way.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett note that American society is currently at the pinnacle of material and technological achievement yet, at the same time, so many people find themselves anxiety-ridden, prone to depression, and deeply worried about their social status. What Americans have gained in material wealth has come at the expense of meaningful social contact and emotional satisfaction. As a result, Americans all too frequently seek comfort in overeating, obsessive consumption, alcohol and drug abuse, and psychoactive medications. Roughly 25 percent of adults have been diagnosed as mentally ill within the last year.[57] Over their lifetimes, almost half of Americans experience mental illness. That this is comparable to the rates of mental illness among the homeless suggests that members of the wider population likewise suffer in their work and family lives from a lack of security, autonomy, and dignity—if not to the degree experienced by the homeless.

According to Wilkinson and Pickett, "individual psychology and societal inequality relate to each other like lock and key."[58] Rooted in human evolutionary development is extreme sensitivity to differences in social status. In the modern world, "The scale of income difference has a powerful effect on how we relate to each other."[59] As a result, health and social problems are decidedly worse in more unequal societies. Stark societal inequality strongly correlates—across all social classes—with lower life expectancy; increased mental illness (including drug and alcohol addiction); lower rates of literacy and competence with math; higher rates of infant mortality, teenage births, homicide, and imprisonment; eroded social trust; and reduced social mobility. Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson note in turn that the precipitous increase in income inequality in the United States over the past thirty years has come at the expense of job security, affordable health insurance and higher education, and a robust social safety net.[60] David Callahan provides an illuminating account of how the increasing emphasis by firms on the bottom line, which has gone hand in hand with increasing income inequality, has led to a sharp

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[56] Quinn, op cit., p. 125. See also Wagner, op cit., pp. 34 and 68; and Survival Guide to Homelessness, "How to Solve Homelessness," 23 April 2011; http://guide2homelessness.blogspot.com/2011/04/how-to-solve-homelessness.html.

[57] See Wilkinson and Pickett, op cit., p. 67.

[58] Ibid., p. 33.

[59] Ibid., pp. 4–5.

[60] See Hacker and Pierson, op cit.

increase in job-related stress, particularly for low- and middle-income earners but also for upper-income earners in middle management.[61]

If what matters in terms of individual and societal health is how people stand in relation to one another, it stands to reason that poverty should not be viewed as an absolute condition. As Marshall Sahlins contends:

> The world's most primitive people have few possessions, but *they are not poor*. Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; above all it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is the invention of civilization. It has grown with civilization, at once as an invidious distinction between classes and more importantly as a tributary relation.[62]

Note the measures that the homeless take to shield themselves from the institutional response to their plight, which reinforces that they maintain an inferior social status that only the state and philanthropic organizations can rectify. Many tent cities are intentionally modeled to have no formal hierarchy. Much as in tribal cultures, note Wasserman and Clair, seniority confers symbolic power, especially in terms of settling disputes.[63] Because this power remains symbolic, the status anxiety to which the homeless are exposed on the streets is alleviated by social conditions in the encampments that foster equality, including mutual systems of support, care of and concern for all, and equitable treatment when disagreements arise.[64]

What would opting out of hierarchical conditions involve for the housed? Wilkinson and Pickett call for the eclipse of corporatism: the embrace of forms of employment that reduce income inequality and undercut the rank ordering of bosses and subordinates. This can involve democratizing the workplace and encouraging the development of employee owned and operated businesses. This provides a basis for working conditions that are conducive to the alleviation of status anxiety while also reducing the societal dysfunction that is a direct result of stark social and economic inequality.

The rejection of hierarchy in the workplace need not require taking the formal administrative steps that Wilkinson and Pickett identify, however. Quinn advocates opting out of corporate life by seeking to "live tribally." This involves the establishment of forms of social organization that facilitate "people working together as equals to make a living" not for the sake of a paycheck but for the sake of perpetuating the tribe.[65] The circus is one clear example of tribal living. As Terrell Jacobs of the Culpepper and Merriweather Circus remarks of he and his cohorts, "We all work together, perform together, eat together, and, yes, bitch and

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[61] See David Callahan, *The Cheating Culture* (New York: Harcourt, 2004).

[62] Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine-Atherton, 1972), p. 38.

[63] Wasserman and Clair, op cit., p. 105.

[64] See Lisa Gray-Garcia, *Criminal of Poverty: Growing Up Homeless in America* (San Francisco: City Lights Foundation, 2006), pp. 213ff. Wasserman and Clair comment on the vociferous rejection by encampment residents of "regulating," or a single person or group seeking to control the distribution of resources. This displays that encampment residents remain highly sensitive to any attempt to subvert their equality and autonomy.

[65] Quinn, op cit., p. 65.

moan at each other. There's not enough of us to play chiefs and Indians. It's got to be a democracy." As David Leblanc of the Big Apple Circus declares, "Here you not only live in the neighborhood, you're also working together for a common goal. You're part of something."[66] The Neo-Futurists, an ensemble of artists in Chicago, together run a theater and art gallery in Chicago. Responsibility for all activities, including writing, directing, and performing plays, as well as working the box office, cleaning up, producing programs, and buying and operating props is shared equally.

Tribal life—much like life in tent cities—is not without its difficulties, and it does not make people into saints, notes Quinn. Rather, "it enables ordinary people to make a living together with a minimum of stress": "wherever it is found intact, it's found to be working well […] with the result that the members of the tribe are not generally enraged, rebellious, desperate, stressed-out borderline psychotics being torn apart by crime, hatred, and violence."[67]

The institutional response to homelessness focuses concerted attention on instilling a sense of individual responsibility while encouraging said responsibility to be directed toward material wellbeing for individuals or the family unit. "The American social welfare discourse is profoundly individualistic," Gowan states. "Inability to prosper is an individual failure, stemming from personal deficiencies."[68] Such measures discourage the collective control exhibited in tent cities in favor of "individual control over a limited social space," Wright remarks— namely, a single family home or apartment. Both the charitable and therapeutic views "discourage collective empowerment in favor of individual self-oriented success."[69]

Residents of tent cities are quite aware of this, which is one reason why they make keeping people sheltered, fed, and protected a common concern and a common enterprise. In an effort to maintain this cohesion while also considering how to provide the homeless with housing, Wagner offers the following provocation. I quote him at length:

> What if homeless people […] were offered the opportunity of *collective mobility* and *collective resources* rather than individual scrutiny, surveillance, and treatment? What if the dense social networks and cohesive subcultures that constitute the homeless community were utilized by advocates, social workers, and others? What if housing could be provided near the geographic areas in which street people congregate, decent housing that does not require leaving the group but that could be shared by street friends? There is no structural reason why obtaining shelter should entail separation from friends and community, except for the scarcity of adequate housing in U.S. cities

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[66] Ibid, p. 69.

[67] Ibid, p. 61.

[68] Gowan, op cit., pp. 171–172. See also Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

[69] Wright, op cit., pp. 190 and 216, respectively.

and the refusal of the service system to acknowledge ties other than traditional families in making housing placements.[70]

If such steps were to be taken, Wagner asserts that the homeless could free themselves both from the dangers associated with street life and from the hardships associated with isolation and dispersal. They could carry on quite effectively with the practices that provide them with collective control and empowerment. Being housed in and of itself would not inhibit this.

What can the housed learn from this? McKibben states that "Access to endless amounts of cheap energy made us rich, and wrecked our climates, and it *also made us the first people on earth who had no practical need for our neighbors.*" Due mainly to cheap oil, our food arrives to us sometimes from thousands of miles away. We walk the streets with iPods pumping music into our earphones and commute to and from work alone. We've moved from the front porch of our homes to the rear deck. And we can purchase anything with a credit card and an Internet connection without having to leave home. As a result, McKibben notes that the average American eats roughly half as many meals with family and friends as they did fifty years ago. Moreover, "we have half as many close friends."[71]

This hyperindividualism not only facilitates our toleration of stark inequality, it also has adverse psychological effects.[72] We are less happy than we used to be, McKibben asserts, "and no wonder—we are, after all, highly evolved social animals."[73] For this reason, he highlights a number of promising forms of socio-economic organization that have emerged over the past couple of decades in response to hyperindividualism. In consonance with the Transition Town (or permaculture) movement, people build local barter networks, expand community gardens and local food production, and seek out sources of local energy generation.[74] The Slow Money movement promotes investment in local businesses, while the Slow Food movement focuses on social interaction in the production, purchase, and cooking of locally grown organic foods. Each of these forms of association helps to enhance the social and ecological resilience of communities. Each creates bases for collective empowerment for the housed in a manner similar to what the homeless find in tent cities. And each at least partially circumvents forms of socio-economic organization that rely on individuation and isolation. Hence, they enhance the security, autonomy, and dignity of participants expressly by making them matters of common concern.

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[70] Wagner, op cit., p 180. By contrast, the anonymous author of the "Survival Guide to Homelessness" calls for providing the homeless with access to affordable capsule hotels like those developed in Japan, clean public toilets, and safe single occupancy showers. Additionally, squatters in Chicago have set about restoring abandoned houses, or so-called "abandonominiums," that perpetuate blight. See Ben Austen, "The Death and Life of Chicago," *The New York Times*, 29 May 2013; http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/magazine/how-chicagos-housing-crisis-ignited-a-new-form-of-activism.html?ref=magazine&pagewanted=all&_r=4&.

[71] Bill McKibben, *Eaarth* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2010), p. 133.

[72] See Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2007), p. 103.

[73] McKibben, *Eaarth*, p. 133.

[74] See David Holmgren, *Permaculture: Principles & Pathways Beyond Sustainability* (Hepburn, AU: Holmgren Designs, 2002).

Steps also can be taken to encourage the collective control and empowerment of workers who do not walk away. While their ranks have been decimated over the past several decades, unions continue to serve as an organizational counterweight to corporations. They also continue to be under siege by both political parties, which is tolerated in part due to the all-too-common perception that as their membership numbers decline unions increasingly operate as just another special interest: looking out primarily for the interests of the rank and file even if doing so comes at the expense of the broader population.[75]

But this need not be a permanent condition. What if unions were to invest as heavily as possible in outlets that permit them to reconnect with the broader population? What if they were to seek out avenues by which to revivify a sense of solidarity with a broad majority of citizens, in particular by showing the clear connection between a vital labor movement and the protection of robust living standards society-wide? This would better position them to convey that increased economic and social equality is tightly linked with improved physical and mental health, enhanced community life and social relations, reductions in violence, superior educational performance, greater social mobility, and the array of other social factors identified by Wilkinson and Pickett.

This requires sustained popular action, including door knocking, phone calls, teach-ins, and community outreach. Community outreach in particular can build more robust institutional linkages if unions can reach across class and racial lines to muster the widespread support of religious communities (most notably those that currently provide material and moral support to the impoverished), voluntary associations, veterans groups, student and faculty organizations, unemployment support groups, and other comparable organizations that have both municipal clout and state- and national-level linkages. Members of these various associations in turn can reach out to unaffiliated members of their communities by means of both formal and informal consciousness raising campaigns.

Any such attempt to develop a broad-based organizational counterweight to corporations is bound to be difficult to scale up.[76] Moreover, it is sure to be met with ceaseless misinformation and demagoguery, both of which can spur the perpetuation of what David Harvey calls a "politics of denial"—specifically, a political orientation that denies the salience of stark social and economic inequality—among the disempowered and dispossessed. But if their means of operation can be reconstructed, unions and other groups with multilevel linkages have one clear advantage over the corporate community: their memberships are far more deeply rooted in local affairs, which gives them on-the-ground connections with those who are adversely affected by inequality.[77]

Along with rejecting hierarchy and hyperindividualism, the forms of socio-economic organization here surveyed facilitate the rejection of wastefulness. Wastefulness comes in two primary forms: the failure to reuse and repurpose

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[75] See Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans Most Confident in Military, Least in Congress," 23 June 2011; http://www.gallup.com/poll/148163/Americans-Confident-Military-Leact-Congress.aspx. See also Jeffrey M. Jones, "Approval of Labor Unions Holds Near Its Low, at 52 %," 31 August 2011; http://www.gallup.com/poll/149279/Approval-Labor-Unions-Holds-Near-Low.aspx.

[76] See Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1965).

[77] See David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (New York: Oxford University, 2010), p. 252.

recyclable goods and the production of goods whose main purpose is to perpetuate conspicuous consumption. We have already seen how homeless scavengers counter the first form of wastefulness, saving countless tons of refuse from landfills that would otherwise degenerate into toxic waste. Avoiding conspicuous consumption provides perhaps a clearer path to opting out of wasteful practices for the housed.

Sahlins identifies two possible means by which to achieve affluence—either by having much in comparison to others or by desiring little. Inasmuch as they adopt the second strategy, he identifies tribal peoples as "the original affluent society." This defies the typical view of them, according to which we assume that they, like us, are driven by the desire to consume but lack the technological advantages that make mass consumption a possibility for them. But if they maintain no such drive to consume, then it is incorrect to regard them as impoverished; "perhaps better to think of them for that reason as *free*" inasmuch as goods can become an acute encumbrance, as anyone who has experienced relocating can attest.[78]

Thoreau makes a similar claim in *Walden*, his testimonial to the advantages of living more simply. He identifies four specifiable advantages that it can provide. First, in line with Sahlins, those who always desire more are perpetually impoverished, regardless of how much they earn or how many goods they already possess. To be able to find contentment with what one has—to be free of the social pressure to have whatever is trending—is to enjoy *wellbeing.* Second, simplifying our lives is a necessary condition for *self-cultivation.* It puts oneself in a proper state of mind for an "elevation of purpose."[79] This makes it possible to mitigate the "spiritual poverty" endemic in consumer cultures.[80] Third, it puts us in a better position to *live deliberately* in the sense that we are able more easily to track our habits of acquisition: paying closer attention to our consumption practices and better understanding their social and environmental effects. Fourth, in line with Wilkinson and Pickett, it can markedly improve social relations. Thoreau goes so far as to suggest that thievery—which takes place "only in communities where some have got more than is sufficient while others have not enough"—would decline precipitously were more and more people willing to live simply.[81]

Let us turn now to the matter of unlocking our food, the final means of opting out that I catalog. It is striking that almost half of the produce grown in rich nations is discarded while some 900 million people around the globe face malnutrition.[82] In the United States alone, over 50 million people face food insecurity. This includes one out of every six Americans and one out of every five

[78] See Sahlins, op cit., p. 14.

[79] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Lexington, KY: Empire Books, 2013), p. 67.

[80] Boyle, op cit., p. 25.

[81] Thoreau, op cit., pp. 130–131.

[82] See Rebecca Smithers, "Almost Half of the World's Food Thrown Away, Report Finds," *The Guardian* 10 January 2013; http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2013/jan/10/half-world-food-waste. See also World Hunger Education Service, "2012 World Hunger and Poverty Facts and Statistics," 2012; http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm#Number_of_hungry_people_in_the_world.

children.[83] Many homeless surely are food insecure. Yet many others have little problem acquiring what they need.

"One thing about being homeless in New York, you can't starve. There is just too much food around," states one man interviewed by Toth.[84] Grocery stores and restaurants throw away vast quantities of food, and a good deal of it reaches the homeless. Numerous restaurants willingly give away unused and expired food at the end of each night. Both restaurants and supermarkets discard considerably more, making dumpster diving a popular enterprise.[85]

While this practice is unlikely to be taken up by most housed people, it should at least cease to be a source of derision or even regarded as theft. Letting edible food rot leads to the release of methane. Add to this the environmental cost associated with transporting food waste to landfills and "you'd think that those who use waste food would be heroes in a world verging on climactic catastrophe and ecological collapse," states Boyle.[86] This matter aside, it cannot be ignored that the homeless have found a means to opt out of engaging in legitimate forms of employment even for such basic a need as acquiring food. "The food may be under lock and key," Quinn remarks, "but they've found all the cracks in the strongroom wall."[87] They have found a viable means, without even enjoying a living wage, to *unlock this food.* This represents a powerful stance against both food waste and forms of socio-economic organization that permit millions to go hungry. The housed need not themselves take up dumpster diving and the related means of unlocking the food to acknowledge this. Perhaps, then, more steps should be taken to assist the homeless in its acquisition and distribution.

5 Conclusion

The defense of homelessness that I have offered lays out an alternative vision for socio-economic organization that homeless practices and modes of interaction inspire. So too have I considered how to instigate social changes—by means of at least partially opting out of the work and family ethics rather than by directly challenging them—that call for moving beyond the norms associated with reintegration, hierarchy, hyperindividualism, wastefulness, and locking up food.

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[83] See Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Mark Nord, Margaret Andres, and Steven Carlson, "Household Food Security in the United States in 2010," *Economic Research Report* (ERR-125), 2011; http://www.ers. usda.gov/media/121076/err125_2_.pdf.

[84] Toth, op cit., p. 26.

[85] David Giles, a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Washington studies dumpster diving culture. He got his monthly grocery bill down to $100 per month and knows many people who spend no money on food whatsoever. See Gillian Tett, "There's No Time to Waste," *FT Magazine*, 2 December 2011; http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/3c78c6ac-1bca-11e1-8647-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2b0mqJbF4.

[86] Boyle, op cit., p. 139.

[87] Daniel Quinn, *My Ishmael* (New York: Bantam, 1997). p. 201.

Homelessness is not for everyone, of course.[88] But this is exactly the point. No one way of living is right for everyone—including the sort of life regarded as normal in American culture. If the homeless desire assistance, provide it for them on their terms. If they wish to be left to their own devices, leave them alone. If they seek to build communities partially or fully beyond the reach of state institutions and philanthropic organizations, permit them to do so and ask what can be learned from them in the process. Both the homeless and the housed stand to benefit from doing so.

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[88] I remain skeptical, for example, about children experiencing homelessness. Trevor Smith (no relation) also has suggested to me that my thesis speaks more to the plight of homeless men than to homeless women. Given that Wright notes that some men acting as protective figures in encampments exhibited what he perceived to be hypermasculine behavior, I do not take Smith's suggestion lightly. Whether a defense specifically of female homelessness is viable is a matter for future investigation.