

Seattle City Hall

Eighty More Matts for the Homeless

A response to Kate Walters recent KUOW article entitled
"80 shelter beds for the homeless open in lobby of Seattle City Hall"

Obviously there is nothing wrong with a major news outlet having a political agenda. And, surely journalists, like in any other profession, are under pressure to perform within a limited time frame. Even investigative journalism has its limits in this regard. Unfortunately, journalists often write about things about which they have little direct experience and depend therefore on others to provide them with the information they need to create a story that satisfies the political, social, or economic perspective of their readership, listeners, and/or viewers. Unfortunately, those that they interview can have their own political agenda as well. As a result, an objective result is almost never obtained.

I would like to provide a different perspective from that of an article by Kate Walters that I recently discovered in the *There Is No Them* Twitter forum. In her article she praises the Seattle City Council for opening the City Hall lobby to 80 more homeless people and providing a place for a frightened, anonymous, homeless woman to lay her head at night. It is a touching article that I am sure was well received by her KUOW audience. The reason given for the woman's eviction is at best vague; I suppose she thought that it did not matter.

I have now been homeless for 21 months, and the reason for my eviction mattered very much. Since then, I have slept in four different shelters including one located in the Seattle Municipal Tower, not all that distant from the City Hall, and would like to report a somewhat different take on the 80 new matts, their owners, and those who occupy them with much and not so much dedication from night to night.



First, the homeless population is a mixed lot. There are those who believe that they have been unjustly treated and blame all of society for the alleged injustice. Indeed, they are of the mind-set that society owes them a living and take every hand-out they can obtain without a bit of gratitude that is not feigned. There are also those who see the free handouts that they receive as an economic trade-off between work and play. When one can get by without having to work and still enjoy many of the "luxuries"

enjoyed by those who do work, then not working becomes preferable, and the joke is on those who work.

Not all homeless, of course, are do-nothings, however. There are those who work, and who are truly thankful for the transfer of savings from someone else's account into their own. These latter are dedicated to finding a way out of their homeless situation and appear to be well-deserving of the voluntary charity that they receive. The involuntary charity provided by the city is, of course, another matter.¹



As a group these latter are no larger than either of the two aforementioned cohorts. Still others among the homeless are those who are simply unable to fend for themselves in the moment that they find themselves homeless. Unfortunately, this moment can last anywhere in duration from right now to an entire lifetime depending on the amount and kind of care that these people receive. If I have left anyone out, then understand that they are fewer in number than any of the four cohorts just described.

Second, none of the four shelters that I have occupied since I became homeless in the fall of 2016 has ever provided me, but on rare occasions, with more than five hours of sound sleep in a night. The veteran homeless call it the “grind”. This is a very apt term I discovered, for the regular absence of a full night’s rest weighs heavily on one’s physical and mental well-being over time. Indeed, no matter when a shelter opens its doors, one rarely falls asleep until well after 12:00 midnight and one is inexorably awakened somewhere between 5:30 and 6:30 AM depending on the shelter. This is one of the reasons that you find the homeless sleeping on the side-walk, in the library, or some other public place during the middle of the day. For, those who put in a full days work, the grind is especially debilitating.

Third, it is unlikely that Kate Walter bothered to count the number of toilets and sinks available to the City Hall’s fleeting tenants every morning during the half hour that they are given to gather their belongings, turn in their blankets, and exit the building before the cleaning crew enters. Broken toilets and clogged drains are one of the hall marks of having made a building into a shelter.

Fourth, under the assumption that the stock of bleached water has been timely replenished, it is simply ineffective in warding off the creatures that it is intended to dissuade. This, of course, is not fault of the bleach; rather it is the blankets that are

¹ Roddy A. Stegemann. “The Modern Anglo-American Robin Hood: A Time Past or Still an Uncharted Future”. *Viewpoint*. <https://www.hashimori.com/moogoonghwa/viewpoint/kuow/modern_liberal_robinhood.pdf>

distributed when you check in, and that you lay over your body while you lie on the matts. Although you are thankful that you are provided with a blanket to cover yourself, you soon discover what a mixed blessing warmth can be. For, the blankets are not washed but once or twice a week, and the bugs that infest them do not discriminate among shelter dwellers with good hygiene and bad. Scabies is a microscopic arthropod



that buries itself beneath the skin and lays eggs. They can live for up to three days in the open air, cause intense itching, and once having reached a critical mass spread like brush fire. Ridding yourself of these creatures is not only expensive, but depending on whether you accept cream (less expensive) or a pill (more expensive) can be at best awkward. With the former you must cover your entire body and finding someone and a place to cover your back can be awkward. That so many people use the blankets distributed by shelter management can only be explained by ignorance or an unwillingness to carry one's blanket around with him throughout the day.

Fifth, I will not repeat what I have already written about the nature of the homeless population, but just imagine yourself trying to fall asleep next to any of those from one of the less desirable cohorts described above. The matts are available on a first-come-first-serve basis, and although you are able to choose the matt of your choice, so is everyone else. And, the matt that was empty and next to you when you came in could be taken by anyone from any of the groups just described. Those who believe that sleeping together on matts under a shared roof is akin to a teenage retreat is simply out-of-touch with the social reality with which the homeless person is confronted each and every night and morning. This is an important reason why so many homeless prefer to sleep outside under a viaduct, on a commercial doorstep, or in a tent positioned anywhere that is not a source of immediate complaint. It also explains why there are always more matts then occupants, this despite the fact that one is forever being told that the shelter of your choice is full.

Sixth, when you occupy the bottom rung of society self-respect is hard to come by and taking offense is both easy and widespread. As a result, arguments are quite common and escalate quickly. Physical altercation is less frequent than I originally imagined, but the threat of it is relentless, and the homeless are a bored lot looking for excitement.

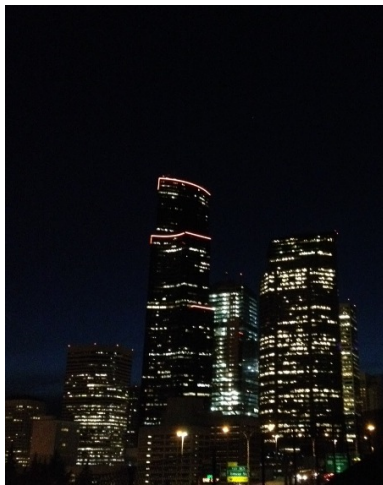
Seventh, the homeless population varies widely in age from young adults to retirees. As a result, there is no dearth of sexual drive, and one cannot help, but think that the chief

source of entertainment of shelter monitors is watching us masturbate during the course of the night. This brings me to my eighth and final point.

It has been shown that those who sleep in a lit room generally do not sleep well, and I have yet to sleep in a shelter where there is not enough light for the monitors to see every occupant at a distance. As a result, not only is the length of time available for sleep inadequate, but the sleep itself is generally of poor quality. Shakespeare once wrote on the topic of sleep in a conversation between Macbeth and Her Lady:

Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep', the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast,--²

No, Ms. Waters, for many, an urban tent that you can call your own in a temporary community with neighbors that you know is far better than the hallowed halls of our city fathers, be they in the basement or the lobby. If there is something that makes the City Hall attractive, then it is its proximity to early morning Starbucks, the YMCA, and the public library. I will not bother to ask what it cost to build the downtown branch of the Seattle Public Library system, one of Seattle's principle day time amusement centers for the homeless.



How about we spend a day watching *Gone with the Wind* together and talk about racial relations among Seattle's homeless population. You can choose the computer.

If you are looking for solutions, I have a good many, but they are not immediate fixes for the symptoms of a long term social disease.

Roddy A. Stegemann
University of Washington

² William Shakespeare. 1623. *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene 2. <<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.2.2.html>>