

A Crossing from Psalm 118: What Makes Those Rejects Sing?

Today's posting is a reprint from a Festschrift presented to Ed Schroeder when he retired as Crossings' executive director ten years ago. We hope to post a half dozen more of these essays in the weeks ahead. The bibliographic specs are: A CROSSINGS CELEBRATION. Edited by Irmgard Koch, Robin Morgan, Sherman Lee. St Louis: Greenhorn Publications & HomeLee Press, 1993. 129 pp. \$5.00. (Copies available at <robinjmorgan@hotmail.com>) Preface to ThTh 264. From 1983 until Ed's retirement at the end of '93 Crossings offered semester-long courses in St. Louis. Each course in the curriculum had a Biblical text (taken from the church lectionary) for its "Grounding." We then "Tracked" that Biblical text, first through a slice of church history and then in samples of contemporary theology. Each course concluded with students writing an essay "Crossing" some slice-of-life today with the law/promise theology of the earlier "Grounding" and "Tracking." Vivian Hauser was a student in "Crossings from the Psalms," a course "grounded" in Psalm 118, the ancient Psalm for Easter.

Central to that text is the Resurrection hype that "the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" leading to "glad songs" on the part of other rejects. "What makes those rejects sing?" was the course's constant question. Here is Vivian's answer—case-specific for rejects she lived and worked with in Washington, D.C. Ten years have passed since she wrote this. We have her permission to post it to you now. Vivian now is semi-retired, working with Guardianship Services, Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota. If you wish to contact her, here's the e-address: <vivian.hauser@att.net>

Peace & Joy!
The ThTh desk.

WHAT MAKES THE REJECTS SING?

"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone" (Psalm 118:22).

Course Description: What makes the rejects sing? Psalm 118 says: Though patently rejected by the builders among whom they live—sometimes wrongfully rejected, sometimes rightfully, but always necessarily in view of the building program(s) of the builders—the stones have an ally in Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Father of Jesus, the Christ. This God rehabilitates rejects into his new building, a project whose future is so bright that these rejects already now sing and do their TODAH (Psalm 118's Hebrew term of praise, tough to translate, most often rendered "thanksgiving"] in response to God's CHESED (Psalm 118 term also tough to translate, variously rendered "mercy, steadfast love, lovingkindness").

This is my experience, in Crossings sequence, among rejected stones, the homeless at N Street Village, the shelters of Luther Place Memorial Church in Washington, D.C. I had the privilege of spending a year there in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps working at Sarah House, a residential shelter for women.

Diagnosis, step 1: Rejected, future interrupted: The Stones

No Whispering Way or Country Estates—Road's End, perhaps, faraway country certainly. This is 14th and N, a point on a grid. These once-elegant rowhouses are only a few blocks from

the White House, embassies, and posh hotels, but this is the wrong side of the street, the subcity. This is home to those with no other, home in its most basic form—shelter.

The seasons are exaggerated here. Winter is dreaded, survival the only issue. In spring and fall the ubiquitous trash bags become raingear and bushes clo theselines. But summer is the worst. While living may be easy somewhere, here it's just hot. Fans push the air, but it is hot, humid air, filled with smells—food, exhaust, garbage, cigarettes, booze, and the sweaty perfume of people living too closely together.

In the mornings a sister from the night shelter, crowned with greens, lustily welcomes "Day-o, day-ee-o" (not to the delight of neighbors). Another calls "Taxi, taxi." None stops, except when a manic Marilyn-Monroe type involuntarily waves. In the evenings people fill the streets, waiting for the shelters to open, waiting for the clinic to attend their pain—just waiting.

The volume is loud. Radios boom. Sirens scream. Buses hiss to their stops, and cars never seem to.

About the only choice here is to stay alive. That's what Cora does. Cora is 42, looks 62, and weighs 82. She makes mid-night trips to the hospital—diabetes, arthritis, strokes, heart attacks. On a waste-of-time trip to get an ID card, Cora told me she had been married, had a decent job and money in the bank, but she got sick. When she came home from the hospital, her husband was gone—and her furniture, money, and savings. She couldn't keep a job because of her health; she couldn't keep an apartment because she didn't have a job; etc. etc. "Hard luck," she says. A social security check came for Cora Sandberg; her name is Sanders. She couldn't cash it anyway—no ID.

Some are young. Petite Maria is still in high school, running from abuse. She won't stay long; too many rules. Maria has

gonorrhea. Maria breaks my heart. Freckled Nancy, 19, has her own special brand of jive. Her parents were addicts, and she had her father's baby when she was 13. She trained to be a nurse's aid, but she took off just before graduation. She came to the emergency shelter once or twice more, and later we heard she had had an abortion. She is HIV positive. What future?

The old come too. Iola, barely able to climb the stairs, came when her abusive son took over her house to sell drugs. She waited while the courts did their work. The stories she could tell! Senior-citizen Pat, widowed, recovering from a stroke, frantically applies for jobs. Her bookkeeping skills are obsolete, and she is terrified that this will be her last stop.

Many are mothers, but there are no facilities for children here. Veronica cries for her baby, who knows only his foster mother. How will she support him and two others on wages from McDonald's? Once in a while she finds comfort. Soon she'll have another baby to cry over.

Pregnant women need special shelters—like Mother Teresa's. (I was there one day AFTER Mother Teresa!) Cute, sweet Bonnie, a rounded, 19-year-old, black woman who had already had 3 abortions, didn't go to high school, can't hold a job, and doesn't much care what happens, was pregnant—for the 5th time!! When she had to leave our shelter (for stealing) we went to Mother Theresa's. Sister Suma Rani, in the white and blue habit of the Sisters of Mercy, met us at the door. (It's disconcerting to have Mother Teresa's order caring for our poor.) The shelter is convent-like, very clean and very strict—compulsory prayers, meditation. I watched girls-just-want-to-have-fun Bonnie listening to the rules and despaired, but Bonnie's little-girl voice said, "Well, I guess I can try." Regrettably, she only tried one night.

The sisters of Mary Magdalene walk a few blocks south, against a backdrop of X-rated movies. Traffic is bumper-to-bumper, and the women walk between cars. Drugs are free to women, but eventually they have to pay. A few get out; Tammy didn't. Black, blonde, and sexy at 18, Tammy was full of life. She stayed a few nights, but cooking, cleaning, and curfews were not her idea of fun. She was seen again later, walking the street—stoned.

Becky almost made it. Rebecca Margaret Carpenter, former prostitute and recovering addict, lived at Sarah House for three months. She was loud, emotional, erratic; she laughed and cried and complained, correctly accusing that I did n't know anything about her life. She had friends, went to GED classes, looked for work, attended Bible Class. She had plans. At night, she sobbed out her pain to Michael, who assured her that Jesus cared. Becky loved Jesus, the one she knew by an actor's soft eyes in an old movie. One Friday Becky was found in a dumpster, face-down, half-dressed—Jane Doe #8-88. It's hard to know when the homeless are missing. She had been gone two days when the morgue called. The family of homeless mourned. Connie played the organ (not too well), a volunteer and Eliza sang Amazing Grace (barely heard), and we read Psalm 23 and the Resurrection texts. Then we buried Becky's ashes in the churchyard. The women were quiet and withdrawn. They felt vulnerable and disposable—no families, or homes, or graves, either.

*Care-less Becky walked the streets,
Bleached blonde hair; clothes too tight.
But her sisters in the shelter
Heard her crying late at night.
Victimless they say her crimes;
I don't see it quite that way.
Men and drugs abused her body,
And when done, threw it away*

*in the dumpster
where we found her—
Just the city's poor white trash.*

*In the emergency shelter, life is routinely bizarre, and some,
like Ellie, cannot cope with the voices within, much less the
voices outside.*

*Safe within the church's shadow
Ellie wrapped herself in white
Clapped and danced and sang her praises,
None but birds within her sight.
In the city, strange and homeless
Can't escape the birds of prey.
Now her feathered congregation
Marks her final resting place.*

*Ellie was found one morning, an umbrella stuffed down her
throat. Becky and Ellie had met the final rejecter—death.*

*Oh, Christ, can you still pray
As we crucify anew,
Father won't you please forgive them?
They just don't know what they do.*

*Wendy knew about death, too—living death—imprisonment. Wendy,
very young and not very intelligent, lived with two children in
an unheated apartment. When her mother died, Wendy could no
longer cope, and when the baby wouldn't stop crying, she hit
him. Now she was serving 5-15 years for involuntary
manslaughter. After two years, public defenders asked us to
take her. I went twice to prison and once to court on her
behalf. Now she is one of us.*

Diagnosis, step 2: These are the stones. What could anyone build with these? Builders reject these stones, ex officio, and so do I.

Why must there be shelters? Where are the families? Where are the government programs? Why don't they work? (The public wants to know why the people don't work.) The problem is so large and so complex there seems no solution. It's understandable. Landlords can't keep tenants who can't pay rent. And moving-in costs include 1 month advance rent, 1 month security deposit, a deposit on the utilities. Then there's furniture, and food, and . . .

Employers can't depend on employees without reliable child-care and transportation, and few use the unskilled and uneducated. (When you have a baby at 14, you probably don't finish high school.) Those that can—fast food, hotel service, janitorial—offer minimum wages and erratic hours. They don't offer sick leave, vacation days, insurance, benefits, or security.

And the ill? Since de-institutionalization a few decades ago, mental health providers work to move people out, but not many hospitals could be worse than the streets! So patients are stabilized and sent where? To shelters? Out on their own? Then medication isn't taken, and soon it begins again. Some estimate that 1/3-1/2 of the homeless are mentally ill. And they are difficult to care for. Prescriptions are hard to get, and even harder to administer. Psychotic behavior cannot be tolerated in a room of women sleeping bed-to-bed. The police will come—when they get around to it—and remove the patient, but the next day she is back.

Improperly clothed, inadequately fed, without haircuts, barely able to keep clean, wrong sex, wrong race. We would rather not

see them. And they know it. Lily Tomlin's Trudy says, "I don't mind. No matter how much contempt I have for society, it's nothing compared to the contempt society has for me." For one year, I shared their neighborhood—a stone of sorts too. But I can leave. I am white, educated, and respectable.

And I am the establishment. To build, maintain, and protect this community, I must reject the people I came to help—ex officio. Stoned, drunk, abusive, violent—they can't stay. Women who can't keep the rules or care for themselves don't belong here. Sarah House takes the cream of the crop, those able to work or go to school—those most likely to get out. My job is to select them, and reject them, and remove them when they don't fit—those like Bonnie and my namesake, Vivian.

Vivian was my favorite, an oversized woman with a mouth to match. She could never be ignored, and she never ignored anything. I let her push at the rules, but she pushed once too often and was sent one notch down the continuum of shelters. The next night she was in the kitchen, screaming at me. I warned I would call the police if she didn't leave. She didn't, and I did.

Yvette had to leave. As quiet and gentle as Vivian was loud, she was streetwise and tough, living in an abandoned building without electricity and heat—with rats and drug dealers. I took her in because she was afraid and I was afraid for her. She had to be up at 3 A.M. for her hotel job—more rule bending. Denise, however, wouldn't bend, and one evening pulled a knife. In a flash, Yvette had her pinned to the floor. We restrained them until police removed them—both. I never saw Yvette again. Denise showed up from time to time, but was not admitted to the shelters—even under another name.

Another decision, made without much thought, caused 2nd, 3rd,

and 4th thoughts. Dawn, white, in her late 20's, was pleasant and bright, a school teacher running from a fundamentalistic sect. I liked her and waived the waiting period. The first day she worked to get her teaching credentials. She was calm, but the shelter was tense. The second day she antagonized several residents, all black. On the third day she had to be restrained from attacking a black woman, and on the fourth I asked her to leave. She stood outside ranting that the place was "run by niggers."

The isms operate among the homeless too. The women have their own pecking order—shades of color, degrees of illness, levels of coolness. Phyllis, black as night, hates black men most, then black women, then white men. As a white woman, I am her closest friend. When she first became ill, her husband locked her in the house—for 1-1/2 years. When the authorities were alerted, they found her emaciated and catatonic. After a year in a hospital, she came to us. She did well for awhile, but in spite of lithium, deteriorated before our eyes. The women, fearful, isolated her further. She ate cups of sugar; piled mountains of food on her plate, eating none of it; sat on napkins; hid in the bathroom. Her anger was tangible. We begged mental health workers to help. She wanted to stay, but we couldn't let her. She couldn't make it on her own, and she couldn't live with others.

Diagnosis, step 3: I am a builder—and a rejecter. God says yes to rejected, no to rejecters—and that's me

Now the problem is God-sized. I am part of the action and inaction of society, and on a one-to-one basis, I do no better. I don't have the power or skill to fix lives. Most often I don't even want to. And I have an "attitude." I have more; I know more; I know what's best; I could not be where they are. But these are God's people, of his creation and his love,

people for whom Christ died. Phyllis and Yvette and Dawn are his, and he hears their pain. My role now separates me from him. Now I must face my inability to build and look at the rough edges, the distortion, the ugliness that make me an unsuitable stone for God's building.

St. Vincent de Paul, the 17th-century saint known for his work among the poor, is reported to have said on his deathbed, "We must be very humble and ask forgiveness of the poor, because we have given them charity." God, forgive my charity.

The rejected can be rejecters too, rejecting God's offer and finding their own gods in alcohol, drugs, and easy money. Or finding nothing, they sink into despair and hopelessness. God forgive their refusal.

And he does. Forgives us all.

A New Prognosis, step 4: God uses rejected stones to build when Christ is the cornerstone

Bad news becomes good news. Throughout history, God identified with the oppressed and rejected, from the Hebrews in Egypt to the Samaritans of Christ's time. Who else but Christ would have associated with prostitutes and tax collectors and started a church with fishermen? And he knew homelessness—no room in the inn, nowhere to lay his head. His words and ministry identified him with the poor—in money and in spirit.

Christ's message to the women of N Street is this: His story is their story, and his story has a future guaranteed by his final rejection, on the cross. When God sees the rejected, when God sees me, he sees stones worthy of his building plans on earth and his home in heaven—because he sees us all through Christ, the cornerstone that can bear the burden of all these strange stones.

That good news is told on N Street in countless acts of caring—when it is not always clear who is helping and who is being helped.

It is told, too, when the women gather one Sunday each month for Word and Sacrament—and food. The church serves breakfast, not coffee and doughnuts, but sausage, bacon and eggs, french toast, hash browns, fruit, homemade breads, coffeecakes, juices, milk, and coffee. The tables have tablecloths and flowers. After the meal, chairs are rearranged, and worship begins with this strange congregation. Vicki, in strapless, sequined top and beret (donations!!), who can't say two intelligible sentences, reads the first lesson flawlessly, and Florence, who barely raises her eyes to speak, reads the second and returns to her chair, grinning. The "choir" sings "Jesus Loves Me" with the heartfelt sincerity of 3-year-olds. Iola belts out "Amazing Grace" in the richest alto imaginable. The pastor tells that God loves them (and me) and sent Jesus as their Savior. Their attention is riveted. The Lord's Supper is offered, and only I am reluctant. I share their daily bread. Do I share this meal too? Common cup? My body and blood given for you Florence and Connie and Jewell—and Vivian. Go in peace. Serve the Lord.

A New Prognosis, step 5: There is courage and hope, appropriated from a loving God

There are victories. Sometimes we are a community; sometimes this is a home and family—the first to many. The women learn skills, gain self-respect, and assume responsibilities. They help each other. June patiently helps Connie with her homework every night, Pam washes dishes for Pat, and Mary fixes Theresa's hair.

Some are empowered. Pam, stranded in D.C. and depressed, finds

health, a job, a place of her own, and plans her return to Hawaii. Michael holds a job and is content in her own tiny space. Debbie draws and writes and sends resumes. Iola has her house back and shares it with her grandson. Connie graduates from secretarial school, finds a good job and a safe place to live. Sometimes we give more than band-aids to these wounded. Sometimes this sisterhood of the oppressed is home.

A New Prognosis, step 6: And there are songs from the rebuilt-todahs for God's chesed.

The women need to give. I don't know why, but I take it as evidence of God, the first and best giver, within them. Eva, the stereotypical bag lady, gave me a lipstick for my birthday. The thought of her, lugging her trash bags, into a store to spend her panhandled quarters on lipstick makes me cry. Cora insisted I take earrings from her box of treasures, and twice Vivian gave me pins she was wearing. When the year ended the women gave me a surprise party. I was so pleased—and so proud of them.

Michael taped Gospel music to remind me that I am never alone, and added her own encouraging message (and I had come to help her). Debbie sat on the steps one long hot day and drew the rowhouses. "Love Street" she wrote on the street sign. Her story is a miracle, and she wrote affectionately to say thanks. Jewell lives in her own room, paid for by work in a motel where the rates are by the hour and the rooms littered with needles and condoms. She struggles to stay dry. Still, Jewell claims all the women as her family. She calls occasionally, long-distance, from a pay phone, to see if I'm OK.

Two women defy categories, their spirit transcending their circumstances. Eva epitomizes the rejected and the rejecting. Of indeterminate age, Eva is the senior resident. No-one knows

where she came from or why. She was coaxed in when the shelter first opened. She panhandles during the day, cigarette in hand. She has a tic, vaguely twirling her fingers in front of her nose. She hallucinates and talks nonsense much of the time, often abusively, but she can be incredibly gracious, noticing and appreciating every kindness. She washes, shampoos, and changes clothes only when required. She arranges pictures of farm animals and flowers beneath her covers, and sleeps on top. Eva is conscientious and a good cook, but others are skeptical. They are less nervous when the food is cooked, but Eva likes tuna salad and potato salad. Once when we had neckbones and beans over rice, a favorite of the women, laughing and gagging sounds came from down the table. Finally, someone explained. Eva had gone to the stove behind me, dumped her chewed-on bones back into the pot, and refilled her bowl. No-one would eat more. Poor Eva didn't know what was wrong (and neither did those who ate later). Somehow though, Eva is everyone's favorite. The first revulsion turns to love. The determination to make her conform resolves to let her be.

Because I'm thankful that Michael listened to Becky, I want to tell about her too. Although named for a wished-for son, I think Michael is more than nominally linked to the archangel. Michael, almost 50, is an attractive black woman (caramel, she says). When children ask about her birthmarks, she tells them God gave her special coloring—like a leopard. Although Michael dresses like a Muslim—caftans and draped head (covered in the presence of men), she is Coptic Christian and calls Jesus "Master." She is spiritual advisor and resident guru of Sarah House, but not pious. Earthy laughter comes from her toes. She's unique—a genius, I think. When I reached for a pan on the cabinets, Michael helped and told about playing basketball. When the talk was self-defense, Michael demonstrated karate. I thought it grandiose thinking, until one day when I was trying

to read in French to Eliza (who had the grace to laugh only occasionally), Michael took the book and read fluently, apologizing that time had dulled her French. When someone pointed out that Siddhartha (a local restaurant) was named for Buddha, Michael elaborated on its Sanskrit roots. She cooks like Julia Child (vegetarian, of course) and sings like an angel. She works in a group home for terminal AIDS patients and gives them nursing care and emotional support. I treat Michael with sincere respect, and she responds in kind. Why is she there? I don't know exactly, but there's something vaguely paranoid . . .

I will always be grateful for the privilege of being on N Street. I don't pretend to have shared the lives of those women; I was a visitor. I have no solutions to the problem of homelessness. I have little understanding of the causes. I have no illusion that my year diminished the problem.

But I have stories, and they are my way of giving thanks. Someone said the best part of Scripture was the genealogies. If God thought it important to write down those names, he must remember mine, too—and theirs. Their names are my todahs.

Oh give thanks to the Lord for He is good
And his lovingkindness endures forever.

Vivian E. Hauser