Will there be Room at the (Coastside) Inn?

As a child, the holidays were always charged with tremendous anticipation of gifts, the joy of school vacation, visits from relatives, and lots of seasonal foods. It was “the most wonderful time of the year.” Then, I grew up and realized I wasn’t so special, some relatives were alcoholics, it took a lot of planning and work to make those foods, and I had to buy everyone else gifts too! Life lessons.

Similarly, in my work with the homeless community over the past 30 years and now at Abundant Grace, I realize it has taken me my lifetime to grow into a more realistic vision. As a young man in my 20’s I was so green, astonishingly inexperienced, and rightfully so. I had no training working with the homeless community, and nothing to temper my idealism and youthful grandiosity. As I’ve grown older, I take the longer vision about smaller things. People I work with do change, and we are called to keep “setting the table” for those transformations.

The idea of a transitional shelter at the Coastside Inn has drawn many reasonable criticisms. Most Coastsiders, myself included, are concerned about the proximity to the elementary and middle schools, the neighborhood right behind the building, the potential of bringing more homeless from around the county to our small town, and concerns about concentrating in one place a group of people, many of whom struggle a lot with substance abuse and mental health.

The big question is how will the space be managed. First, the county will not be “running it.” They will contract with LifeMoves, Samaritan House, or a similar non-profit. An organization with professionally trained social workers and staff will be working 24/7; safety and security, as well as solid, high-quality programming will be in place. People experiencing homelessness will sign onto rules and guidelines, and expectations and consequences will be clear. Case workers will assist people with achieving their goals; eligibility for services will be assessed; housing, health care and employment will be pursued.

These organizations bring decades of experience, and all the most current theories about how to effectively work with people experiencing homelessness. We will see positive changes in people’s lives and in our communities.

I’ve already had conversations with about 20 people who will likely be considered for this housing and I was struck by the fact that their concerns mirror the concerns of the larger community...They wanted to know if it would be safe and secure for them, will they have opportunities for permanent housing, employment, health care and so on. No one wanted to see a free for all, a noisy shelter, or a place that looked like the creekside encampments with all its trash and disorder.

Again, the real question is management. I think the creation of a local oversight committee is essential so the city, locals and service providers can work together to make this a success. Some of our supporters have already contacted me about helping making the Coastside Inn look more attractive and feel more welcoming for those who will live there. Community support and
engagement is key, not just to monitor the space, but because the people there are our neighbors, and our whole community is better, safer and more caring if we get involved and help. Many of them currently live a mere 100 feet away from the Coastside Inn right under the bridge. We are not “bringing in” problems...We are finally engaging our homeless neighbors with an intensification of services and resources and I’m sure we will see great strides in people’s lives.

It’s going to take community involvement, and this community is amazing. I have been so overwhelmed by the generosity of local folks and organizations...from Coastside Lutheran Church, the Rotary Club, the Community United Methodist Church, Coastside Families Taking Action, the Girl Scouts, Mariner’s Church, Rebuilding Together, the Catholic Church, Coastside Mother’s Club, the Table of Plenty, and so many others.

This work is about “setting the table” for people: inviting them in, offering hospitality, programs and services, and perhaps recovering a bit of the meaning of this time of year and the values of our cultural, religious and spiritual traditions. So I will close with this: as disillusioned as I have become with Christmas; the decorations going up in October, the all-consuming sales on Black Friday and Cyber Monday, and the near total loss of focus on the meaning of it all, I feel a slight stirring within...it’s the memory of a homeless couple seeking shelter at an inn. And it’s happening again in our own town. Happy Holidays to all.

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