

messages

I am at the Washington State Coalition on Homelessness annual conference in Spokane WA. There are as many as 500 of us here from throughout Washington state. We are here with the mutual goal to end homelessness.

When I left the Seattle area, I had with me a news column by Nicole Brodeur of the *Seattle Times*. She reported on the deaths of two homeless persons. One was very well known. His name is Robert Hansen. He was 58 when he was found dead in the pickup in which he lived in early May. The other is a 36 year old woman named Brandi Lambert, who was found wrapped in a blanket in a Seattle parking lot. Word has it that Brandi was due to move in to her own apartment the day she was found dead.

With this weight on my heart and likely on the hearts of others who came here knowing one or both of these folks, I listened in one workshop to the advice as to how we advocates ought to “message” in order to end homelessness. I was not new to this track. During the recent legislative session we had been introduced by those who-believe-they-know to what was said to be a kind of messaging that would gain what we want.

Now, I have little respect for folks who tell others exactly what to say, especially when what is included is a litany of things that ought not be said. In this workshop I heard it repeated that when legislators keep hearing the exact same messages, there’s a “ping-ping-ping” and they act for us. I might as well have heard that if I give the legislator a chocolate altoid they will vote our way.

In the workshop I raised the reality that not all communities who advocate have the same authentic voice. By this I speak deliberately about the faith community voice. We were told to drop, among other lines, saying that “housing is a basic human right.” These who know better than us have told us that does not poll well in terms of legislative response.

I agree that not anyone can say that housing is a basic human right. Those of us in the faith community do indeed stand apart, however, when it comes to the altitude of the moral high ground. I don’t defend all faith community actions. But we do stand in mostly sacred places and at times we do get it right. At times we do tell the right truth at the right time.

That is why the message I brought to the conference was encouraged by a news clipping. Oh sure, I had a workshop to lead on “The Unsheltered: What about tonight?” I had great colleagues to make me look as smart as they are. But the news clipping emboldened me to ask conference leadership if I might have two minutes at the microphone in the general session.

I was given 2 minutes before the main speaker. I was the warm up act, it seems. I think there was an uncanny wisdom in a warm up that included what I said. Here’s what I said:

“We are here to end homelessness. But for some others — those who die while homeless — their end comes in homelessness. This week in Seattle the vigils for those who died while homeless continue. Many there knew Robert Hansen, age 58, found dead May 6th in the truck in which he

lived. Many also knew Brandi Lambert, age 36, well known at Mary's Place, who was found dead wrapped in a blanket in a Seattle parking lot. In King County alone, 8 have died in 2010 while homeless, 39 in 2009, 360 in ten years. All this while even one was and is one too many. Let's hold them, and I mean all of those throughout this state, who died in homelessness, in silence for a minute."

It was a very quiet minute. Sometimes the message isn't one from the professionals. Sometimes it is as simple as life and death. Sometimes it is saying, "enough!" Sometimes it is saying "housing is a basic right." All the studies pale before a life extinguished too soon. That is a truth that stares into every one of our faces, legislative, advocate, provider, citizen.

You want a message regarding our need to end homelessness? Say, "it is about life and death."

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