

We woke up in Kinsmen Park

A surgeon, the head of the Provincial Realtors association, an inner city physician, one of the wealthiest businessmen in the city, and myself.

We had slept on cardboard, under the awning of the concession stand

We had learned the day before from some people in the lineup at the Food Bank that we needed to find cardboard to help with our sleep.

On the way to Kinsmen Park we found a jackpot of cardboard in a dumpster in front of the Alt Hotel at River Landing.

The businessman and the Realtor CEO jumped right into the dumpster and started digging it out.

While hotel guests walked through the doors and people arrived for a Persephone Play.

It was like we were in our own world. Quite a surreal moment

So back to waking up in Kinsmen Park

The night was stiff, it was restless,

People came and asked for cigarettes, kids did burnouts in the parking lots, sirens sailed by.

We had all walked thousands of steps the day before and were already beginning to feel worn out.

We had to find a washroom. A couple of us had to go particularly bad, especially the realtor. It was about 6:30am.

We went to City Hospital which was right nearby.

The realtor and the businessman approached the security guard, looking tired and dishevelled.

They were turned away.

The surgeon was in a wheelchair as part of his challenge, he wheeled by the security guard when his back was turned, and I followed. So we got to go to the washroom.

We came out and the rest were standing there waiting.

The realtor still really needed to go.

We checked the washrooms by Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan – the weren't open until 10am

We headed downtown.

We heard from two women in front of Prairie Harm the day before that the staff at the Tim Horton's downtown look away when you go in to use the bathroom there

We dragged ourselves to the Tim Horton's and the realtor was getting desperate.

She had picked up a pretty nice sweater in the pile of used clothes that we were given to pick through when the challenge started.

She tried to make herself as presentable as possible and headed through the doors

The business man headed in with her – he was looking quite a bit scruffier with a coat way too big and baggy pants.

The Realtor turned back to him and said – “don't drag me down David!”

And told him to stay back because she really wanted to be let in.

She had fair skin and only carried the wear and tear of being out for one night homeless and she was already trying to maneuver around the discrimination she was encountering.

It struck me how different it would be if she was First Nations or Metis, and carrying months or years of this struggle.

She got past the staff but there was someone in the washroom with the door locked.

We waited for 10 minutes and the person didn't come out.

So she headed for the Sheraton Hotel. Really needing to find a washroom.

The rest of us hung out by the parking lot across from the Catholic School Board Office waiting.

I remembered we needed to find a way to get some money for a meal and a bus ticket.

I decided to check the garbage bins behind the Sheraton for bottles.

There was a hotel maintenance staff person coming out as I approached. He looked at me and said – “Don’t make a mess” and turned away.

I was grateful that he didn’t tell me to leave, it was an accomplishment to at least be barely tolerated.

All of the garbage was bagged. Some of the bags had been opened already. I started digging through and found quite a few pepsi cans, then in another bag some cooler cans and beer cans. It was a pretty good find.

As I dug through the garbage I was struck by how familiar it was – I could imagine the gatherings of families and friends who had produce the garbage – because I had been in those hotel rooms for kids birthday parties or staycations.

Pizza boxes, candy wrappers, chip bags, happy birthday crowns.

What a vast distance between the hotel room experiences that created that garbage

and then momentarily experiencing the reality that there are people who dig through that garbage to survive.

I had never understood just how we may live in the same city – the housed and the unhoused – the cities we experience are entirely different.

How could we have gotten here

On Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Metis

Where some live in such comfort and an increasing number of people, especially those who are descendants of the original people of this land live as outsiders.

Sleeping unsafe every night,

having to humble yourself just to get a public washroom,

Living in a community where every day as you try to meet your basic needs most treat you as someone to ignore, to fear, or to be outright hostile towards.

Where your meagre belongings can be stolen at any moment, and the potential for violence is around every corner.

I knew we had poverty in our city. I knew we had racism. I knew we had homelessness.

But this gave me a closer understanding of how the odds stacked against people are monumental.

The more we talked to people who are unhoused, and the people working on the frontline trying to help them

The more I had the sense that once people lose their housing, become disconnected from a healthy social environment, become gripped by the demons of addiction or mental health,

It's like they are being pulled down by quicksand

And the sustained effort it takes to climb out against that pull is monumental.

And so many of the obstacles to getting out lie in the way policies and programs have been created

I met one woman living in a tent, when she came out to talk to us I could see a knife lying on her bed that I assume was there for self protection

I asked her if she wanted to be in housing. She said "of course I want to be in F'ing housing". "Why would I want to be out here like this" She said she had a son and she wanted to be in housing to reconnect with her son.

She said that for over a year she's been trying to get the right ID needed to get a bank account which she needs to be able to apply for housing under the Social Income Support program

But in order to get a bank account she needs an address. But you can't get an address if you don't have housing. It's a vicious cycle.

The government also recently changed the rules so that they don't provide rent directly to landlords but give it to people as cash. Same thing with utility payments.

People with addictions and mental health issues then need to ensure their rent is paid up, and the utility bills.

As of May over 4,000 people were in arrears in the province on SIS. People are being set up to fail.

At one point the businessman, realtor, MLA, surgeon, banker and I all sat with Courtney, a housing support worker at Sanctum Care to learn how to fill out the forms to try to get housing.

For 30 minutes we tried to fill out the forms figure out the ID requirements and the steps needed to get housing – reinforcing exactly what we heard from the woman in the tent.

With all of the degrees and social status in that group we were still confused and more and more flabbergasted by how people are set up for failure.

We learned that if we did get all of the ID and forms figured out you get 600\$ for housing

We started looking up the kinds of housing you can rent for 600\$ in Saskatoon.

Courtney offered to show us one of the apartment buildings she has arranged housing for clients in where rents are over 600\$

It's the apartment directly behind the McDonalds on 22nd St. We walked in and there was a woman passed out on the landing. There were needles right in the entranceway and the walls were scrawled with graffiti. The whole building reeked of a toxic smell. The only way I can describe it as smelling the opposite of what health smells like.

One of the things Dr. Morris Markentin from Westside Clinic who was on the challenge with us said is hardest to watch is that so often they work with people who start to turn their lives around, even get into treatment and start to see hope –

and then they work hard to find people housing to keep up their success
And the only option for them is to live in one of these toxic apartments.

I heard Sanctum participants often say they didn't think they would be able to overcome these barriers if they faced them.

The exhaustion, the invisibility, the disdain, the potential for violence around every corner.

And yet over and over again we met people who were kind, generous, and proud.

At one point we went to the bridge for Lunch. There is a waiting room outside of the dining room where people gather and about 15 of us were sitting there. There were a few characters in the room who started to make some jokes and tell a few stories, and the room filled with laughter. Someone called me out as the Mayor and people made jokes about taxes and potholes.

Then people started sharing some of the very little supplies they had with each other. Blankets, shopping bags, granola bars.

One man I met outside of the Library on 20th street named Colton was bright eyed with such a warm smile.

He gave us advice about where to find cardboard to sleep. He told me that he had been sleeping outside since February in the same spot right off 22nd St. He said he had calculated it and he was averaging 8 -10 hours of sleep a week. 8 hours of sleep a week. Can you imagine the resilience it would take to keep going?

When you get closer to the ground you find a common human story and are faced with the chasm between those who have and those who don't.

In tolerant, multicultural, peace promoting Canada

we have also for generations become comfortable with the idea that people who are homeless are there because of their choices, because they haven't pulled themselves up by their bootstraps.

This is especially the case with the original people here – our brothers and sisters who are First Nations and Metis

We have gotten used to poverty. The roots of it run deep.

Sarah is doing amazing nation leading research on how the economy of housing actually makes it profitable for big companies to buy up thousands of rental units, where often evicting people is more profitable than addressing housing insecurity for people.

Social Assistance programs are not built on curiosity about why someone has ended up where they are.

They are built on making it very hard to access. Giving people less than what is needed to survive, in the hopes that by making it so difficult people won't want to stay there.

From what I can see the success of the program is measured by how many people they get off it. Even if they get off the program and end up homeless it is counted as a success in their measurement.

These are deep, overwhelming issues. As the Mayor of that beautiful city to the south of us,

I wish I could stand here and say I have the answers.

One source of wisdom for me lately in trying to find hope has been the book the Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan

One of the principles that is primary in the book is Miyo-Wicetowin – The law of good relations

The book states that under the law of Miyo-Wicetowin

The Circle represents a coming together or a bringing together of a community or nation.

And a nation/community united under the laws of the creator represents a healthy, strong stable nation.

Possessing the capability to nurture, protect, and care for and heal its people.

Is building this strong circle of relationships that possesses the ability to look after all of our neighbours the same as the house of prayer for all people that the Old Testament reading refers to?

Once again this Scripture emphasizes paying attention to who is outcast – and making sure they are included.

We have in our communities many who are outcast. I am concerned that that number is growing larger rather shrinking.

We also have in our communities so many beautiful people every day working to hold the circle together – to provide moments of love, connection, support.

Every day those on the streets hold each other up with acts of care and kindness.

And so do the amazing outreach workers, social workers, librarians, nurses, doctors, paramedics, firefighters, police officers, bus drivers, and the volunteers.

But these people are picking up the pieces of a broken circle.

Our kingdom isn't a house of prayer that gathers the outcasts –

We have become too comfortable leaving them where they are.

It takes a fundamental shift in thinking from who we have become to decide as a society that these are our neighbours,

That no one should be outside the circle.

And that the measure of our success is our capacity to nurture, protect, care for and heal for each person, especially those who have become outcast.

But imagine what our kingdom would be like if we did.