

“An Image of a Homeless Person: realized in Psalm 31”

(by Joe Colletti, PhD, Institute for Urban Initiatives, December, 2008)

"I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances,
those who see me in the street flee from me.
I have passed out of mind
like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel."
(Psalm 31.11-12)

I came across this passage around 15 years ago while practicing Lectio Divina which is a mutli-step spiritual practice that involves reading scripture, meditating upon scripture, praying in response to scripture, and contemplating after praying (see [www.http://www.urban-monk.org/new_site/images/PDFS/Lectio_Divina.pdf](http://www.urban-monk.org/new_site/images/PDFS/Lectio_Divina.pdf) for more information about this spiritual practice). At the time, I was a social worker providing case management services to homeless persons including veterans who had served during the Vietnam War.

As I was reading Psalm 31 I began to read and reread verses 11 and 12 and began meditating on them several times over the next few weeks. I was gripped by the image of the person being described by the psalm because I was previously gripped by the feelings several homeless veterans shared with me about their homeless experience.

One feeling that they shared concerned the “1,000 yard-stare” which they described as a painful experience that happened too often while they were walking the streets. They would first describe to me the 1,000 yard-stare as an unfocused gaze of a battle-weary soldier who wanted distance from the unpleasant things that they saw too often. They would then describe the looks that they got from people who would walk by them. They described the looks as unfocused. People would look down in front of them or would look to the side of them or look right through them as though they were not there.

They knew people did not want to be reminded about homeless people but they also knew that some of them struggled with what to do. Either way, however, they knew that others not wanting to be reminded or not knowing what to do were the source of the painful 1,000 yard-stare. Thus, the pain that they felt was the result of the trauma they experienced as an active soldier abroad that was compounded by the rejection that they felt as an inactive homeless veteran at home. The pain that I felt was the result of hearing their pain and the result of my own struggles to keep focused on them and their social service needs. Verses 11 and 12 helped me stay focused through the practice of Lectio Divina.