

## **Homelessness is ugly. But some of our views about this problem are ugly too.**

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Homelessness is ugly. Uncollected garbage is ugly. Miserable shelters made of blue tarps are ugly. Worn out, unlaundered clothing and ratty shoes are ugly. So it's not surprising to see, on a Facebook post, the line "I shouldn't have to look at that."

But that line was about more than garbage, makeshift tents, or worn out clothes. It was about people. It was part of a rant about why people who are homeless are despicable, and what we should do to drive them out.

This genre of visceral hostility was on vivid display last week in a hearing before the Lacey Planning Commission, which was considering revising an ordinance to allow nonprofit organizations and governments to host managed encampments for the homeless. The current law only allows faith communities to do so. This change is similar to one made recently by Olympia.

The purpose of these changes is to create more safe tent camps with garbage service, portable toilets, and access to services – in short, to make homelessness less ugly. Typically, these sponsored camp sites have governance structures where responsibility for rules and decision-making is shared by camp residents and camp sponsors.

Yet one Lacey resident said, "I beg you, don't do this. You will destroy the city."

Another said all homeless people want "is something for free," and that they are "damaging everything they come into contact with and it costs the city." His proposed solution is to "increase the police force and enforce our current laws. That's the first step to making this problem go away."

Regular readers of The Olympian will not be surprised to learn that we have a different view. We think permanent supportive housing, lower rents, a higher minimum wage, and better and more accessible mental health help (including addiction treatment) are more effective responses to homelessness.

But progress towards those goals will continue to be slow if we can't change the views of people like those who spoke out in Lacey, and those who spew fear and hate on social media.

So here are some counter arguments we hope may find their way, like cupid's little arrows, into the hearts of people who want homeless folks to go "away."

First, we will stipulate that some people who are homeless are rude, selfish, dishonest and obnoxious. But some people who live in houses are too. The percentage of obnoxious people is probably about the same in both groups.

And we agree that police should enforce the law, and neighbors of unsanctioned encampments should not have to put up with having their lawn furniture stolen.

But if the guy who stole lawn furniture lived in a sponsored, well-governed tent camp, he probably wouldn't have committed that crime, because showing up with stolen property would be prohibited.

Also, there are some questions we might want to ask about that guy: Who raised him? Did he come home to find his mom dead on the bathroom floor from an overdose when he was 11? Did he lose count of the number of foster homes he lived in?

Can we as a society expect people to develop an attachment to the values of mainstream society if a person has never been part of it? And what would it take to help that person find his way to a better life?

This scenario is an amalgam of a lot of common stories we hear from homeless people. They include early traumatic experiences, childhood poverty, a disordered upbringing, and profound disconnection from the dominant culture.

There are, of course, radically different stories too. Some homeless people do come from stable homes, but are overcome with mental illnesses so profound that they hear voices and see people that we don't.

Others were leading mainstream lives, but were overcome with grief after family deaths or divorce or lost jobs, and fell into a bottle or other chemical coping mechanism.

Still others worked hard until their bodies wore out and they became disabled.

And, of course, there is a growing legion of families with children, young adults and elders who have simply been priced out of housing.

All of these people ought to make us think about how much good fortune we take for granted. We might think that because we are hard-working and law-abiding we deserve our comfort. But if we had been born to different parents, or if our brains had been wired differently, our lives could be radically altered.

Finally, two last little arrows: First, there is no "away" for this problem to go. All homeless people are not going to move to Tenino, or to Timbuktu.

Second, people who lack housing have hearts and souls. All of us come from the same Creator. Knowing this, a moral society does not throw people away.