

On My Mind: Finding the unexpected

One man's story of homelessness and healing.

1 of 6

Fred Waitzkin, part-time Islander and author of “Searching for Bobby Fischer,” told me that for years he had been “oblivious to homeless people. They had become part of the furniture of the New York, where I live. We all fall into that way of thinking, because there are 200,000 homeless people on the streets of New York. It’s a subterranean city functioning within a city.” It becomes overwhelming to recognize the humanity of each of these humans, a quarter to two-thirds of whom are mentally ill, often smelly, withdrawn, medically ill with open sores, coughing, and emaciated.

Homelessness is a growing national phenomenon that is directly correlated to housing prices. So Washington, D.C., where housing is expensive, has seven homeless people per 1,000 inhabitants, while Mississippi has 0.3 per thousand. Those numbers don’t include the people who are couch-surfing, moving from one friend’s home to another because they can no longer afford rent. Given the real estate prices on Martha’s Vineyard, it shouldn’t surprise us that there are homeless people here, too. “A federally sponsored program counted 28 individuals experiencing homelessness on the Island on a single night this past January,” according to this article in The MV Times (mvtimes.com/2024/06/27/islands-hidden-homeless). And that number is certainly an underestimate.

Before I moved to the Vineyard, I ran a therapeutic community for homeless, mentally ill addicts at New York City’s Bellevue Hospital. When I told people about my work, more often than not, people would respond, “Oh, that must be so discouraging!” In fact, it was just the opposite. Take a person who has so little, is medically and psychiatrically ill, and give them shelter, feed them, treat their medical problems, give them the tools to remain sober, and their lives are utterly transformed. Suddenly, it becomes obvious that they are normal humans, no different from you and me. Indeed, they often prove to be deep-thinking, wise, compassionate human beings. In my years in the therapeutic community, there was never a theft, and doors were left open. As one former gang leader told me, “Anyone can take anything that I have. I don’t want to live with that paranoia anymore. Nothing that I possess or might have in the future is worth living in constant fear.”

So I was not surprised when I read Fred Waitzkin’s new book, “Anything Is Good,” about how Fred’s genius, alienated, abused, childhood best friend, Ralph Silverman, found wisdom, connection, and compassion during his 20 years as a homeless man in Southern Florida. As a boy, Ralph had few friends other than Fred and a parakeet, and the parakeet “disappeared” when Ralph’s parents decided that his attachment to the bird was odd. Ralph spent countless hours inventing mind-altering music on an early computer, doing complex math problems in his head, and solving unsolved mysteries of philosophy. He later befriended some of the great philosophers and scientists of his time. All of that came to an end, however, when his father lost the fortune that had supported Ralph. A cousin with whom Ralph lived briefly in Southern Florida kicked him out with no shoes, no money, no computer, and a pair of broken glasses, and Ralph was homeless for the next 20 years.

According to Fred, once you are homeless, no one wants to listen to you. Friendship among the homeless is transactional, because people are always on guard. Intimacy is hard to find. But after Ralph was homeless for a number of years, people started to sense that he was unusually empathic. Just as Ralph had a special ability to understand the intricacies of music, computers, and philosophy, and could develop a deep rapport with birds, possums, and other animals in his homeless encampments, it turned out that he had a unique ability to understand and communicate with marginalized people. Having grown up disconnected from others, Ralph understood people who were disconnected from

society. He became a lay therapist, spending his days speaking with other members of the unhoused community, who would line up on benches waiting for the opportunity to seek his counsel.

I spoke recently with Ralph, who confirmed what Fred describes in his book: For people who live exposed to brutal heat, cold, and hunger, sustaining themselves on food found in dumpsters, without family and often without friends, without money, plagued by physical and emotional challenges, the pretenses of everyday life are wiped out. Past prestige, educational background, family, wealth, or fancy possessions all become irrelevant. Ralph, despite his ability to understand complex mathematical and philosophical systems, had a very limited ability to connect with others of his species before he became homeless. But as a homeless man, he found empathy, deep human connections, and even love in homeless encampments.

Fred told me that he would try to entice Ralph to leave the street, and offer to help him, and Ralph would say, “You don’t understand, Fred; that way that you feel on the boat on the big sea and exploring a little island, that is how I feel living in the park, the thrill of the weather; I love this life.” He was regarded as a guru and sage in his community. He was respected. He felt that he was living a full and meaningful life in the park.

But eventually, Ralph realized that homelessness and old age were incompatible, and Fred helped him navigate the social services system and get off the streets. He has lived in a small apartment in Florida for the past several years.

I asked Ralph if he regretted living 20 years of his life as a homeless man. He paused and thought about it. “Maybe this is a rationalization,” he said. “But I wouldn’t change it. I don’t feel that it was something that I could have avoided. This is going to sound like something in the crazy department, but it was something that I had to go through. It served some higher purpose. It was a high price to pay, but it was inevitable. Would I do anything that I could do not to have been homeless? No. I believe in destiny.” Ralph asked about how and why I became a psychiatrist, and when I explained my father was a psychiatrist, and that at a certain point in medical school, I just knew that it was what I had to do, he said, “Exactly. Life has a kind of inevitability that is beyond our control.”

Reflecting on his work as a lay therapist, Ralph said, “The skill is just about asking questions. When they are explaining it to you, they are explaining it to themselves, and then they emerge. When I asked about their paths in life, they felt that there was nothing that they could have done differently.

“In a normal life, most people play out their existence based on social roles. I am the pedestrian, you are the police officer. I am the teller, you are the depositor. I am the therapist, you are the client. I am the homeless person, you are the housed. But in the places where I lived, I was a bum, and you were a bum. We were just people living with each other. Of course, some people tried to express themselves as being more important. Gang leaders tried to teach you that you should be afraid of them. But in the end, disaffiliated people just deal with each other as individuals. We are the same. Because you don’t have the pretense of usual social roles, I am just a person, you are just a person. When you are homeless, you are living in the here and now. You need a pair of socks, and that’s the whole story. And so with therapy, we just talked as equals, and that was healing.”

I asked if Ralph ever had mental illness, and he told me, “Mental illness plays a role in every aspect of human life. You are the psychiatrist. I am the patient. Part of the role-playing of society. Mental illness comes out under stress for all of us. Among the homeless, people become more spontaneous because they have nothing to lose. Sometimes that looks like mental illness. I remember a bunch of us sitting around in a gazebo in a park and not saying much, and then all of a sudden we are all laughing. We are experiencing life together despite what everyone thinks of us. It is the inexplicable mirth of people who have nothing.”

I read “Anything Is Good” in about a day. I am not a quick reader, but I just couldn’t put it down. Reading it, and talking with Ralph later, shifted my perspectives on material possessions, free will, and the roles that we all play in our worlds. I suppose that, like Ralph, I would not change much about the path that I have taken so far in life. Certainly, I wouldn’t choose to experience the deprivations that Ralph endured during his years of homelessness. But I do find myself newly aware of the gifts that lie outside a life rooted in a home, profession, and the pursuit of security. There is a kind of wisdom and knowledge that comes from being stripped of the money, status, creature comforts, and the possessions that most of us consider essential. Like Fred, and perhaps most of us, I know what it is like to walk by a homeless person with disgust or indifference to their humanity. And yet, I remember being a teenager in NYC and walking into Central Park to talk with homeless people. I knew that they would not judge me, that I could expect kindness, revealing stories, vulnerability, and understanding. In reading “Anything Is Good” and talking with Ralph, I was again reminded of the reservoirs of wisdom that reside in all of us.

It is all too easy to assume that we know about the lives and weaknesses of other people, and to disregard their humanity. It is also easy to let our prejudices guide our behavior toward others. The truth is that none of us will ever be able to truly experience what goes on inside another person. But in the end, as Ralph reminds us, the most important asset that we have as people is our ability to find an open-hearted connection to others; and it is in working to find empathy that we also find healing.

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