

Foreword

Love and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up. If we love each other enough, we will bear with each other's faults and burdens. If we love enough, we are going to light that fire in the hearts of others. And it is love that will burn out the sins and hatreds that sadden us. It is love that will make us want to do great things for each other. No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too much.

—Dorothy Day, *House of Hospitality*

In the fall of 1972, I began a college work-study job in Portland, Oregon's, skid row. I had asked the university I was attending for a position that had something to do with my major in Sociology, and this was it. Once there, I worked with conscientious objectors (COs) to the war in Vietnam. Each of them had been required to prove their opposition to war of any kind to the local draft board. For that they were given two years of civilian alternate service. These COs introduced me to the writings of Dorothy Day and the example of the Catholic Worker; a woman and a movement that believed offering hospitality to poor and homeless people was a personal responsibility, not one belonging to the state. Their clarion call to the works of mercy and to direct action as a response to social injustice was predicated on nonviolence. Dorothy Day's and the Catholic Worker's commitments would inform, inspire, and challenge every pursuit I followed for the rest of my life.

Through the '70s, I continued for a while to work in skid row, married one of the COs, helped open and for five years lived in a Catholic Worker house of hospitality, adopted my son and daughter, divorced, and came back to the skids to once again find a job.

In 1979, my coworker Sandy Gooch and I, challenged to reinvent our CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) jobs, realized we could not make our own assumptions about what an entire poor and homeless community needed. We took the time to ask men and women in the all-night shelter, the women's day center, and at some of the missions and soup lines about the biggest issues in their daily lives. At the top of their list was the need for an alternative place to eat where they could gather as a community and dine with dignity. Later that year we opened Sisters Of The Road Café, with Sandy bringing the restaurant

knowledge and me the Catholic Worker philosophies of gentle personalism and nonviolence.

Dorothy Day died in November 1980, a few weeks after Sisters' first anniversary. With a heart full of sadness and gratitude, I dug deeper into my work.

From the start, Sisters was guided by these beliefs: People are made up of heart, mind, body, and soul. When confronted with a problem, if the solution disregards this fact and only addresses one part of a person, it will fail in the end. Solutions must be as unique as the homeless man, woman, youth, or child who is asking for your help. Sisters would never do for anyone what they can do for themselves. We would all, customers and staff alike, assume the responsibility for ending homelessness. The reflection and action necessary to accomplish that would come from mutual aid and information, shared vision and power. Sisters would be a place where you could walk in with any number of problems (homelessness, joblessness, mental or physical health issues, etc.) and be welcomed, and recognize you still had choices left in your life. No one would be coddled and all would be held accountable for what they said and did. The best part though, was after you solved your problems, you would be equally welcome in Sisters. The meals would stay affordable, your success stories would educate and inspire others, and when mistakes happened you would be offered respect, tender mercy, consequences, and another chance. Sisters would be profoundly about love.

Our customers led me to the beloved community. Mo was one of them. Native American, he could speak truth to power with his poet's voice, and often enough I was the one he was talking to. He changed my thinking. A jokester too, his playful spirit softened the sharp edge of his lessons. As one customer put it, "He had strong medicine."

In a letter the staff received from Mo, he wrote, "I must give credit to the Sister's "family" for always being there to listen and support me in my recovery endeavors. Even after relapsing and coming into the cafe looking like some beat down animal, you all (past and present staff) always were there treating me as a human being. I know that it may not have been the most pleasant sight to see or experience; I know it's hard for me to handle when I see someone I care about hurting themselves. I just wanted to say thank you for always caring about your fellow human beings—you are an oasis in a land of despair to many people." What Mo experienced in Sisters was testimony to our beliefs. Mo's and all the rest of our customers' stories hold a precious place in my heart and mind. The web of our lives has taught me well.

Once I tried to tell Linda, a sweet and eight-months-pregnant woman sleeping nights in a shelter, what to do. I pushed her to sign up for low-income housing and be on time for her doctors' visit all in the same day. She looked at me like I had three heads. How the hell was she going to travel on the bus to both of these appointments, at opposite

ends of the city, in four hours' time? I was designing plans for her based on my comfortable reality, not her impoverished one. She was not prone to change because of my ignorance, so I was compelled to walk a mile in her shoes and learn.

In our first year of operation, Sisters decided to open on the Fourth of July to point out the irony of "liberty and justice for all." But prior to opening that day, the ceiling fell in and almost knocked me out cold into a stockpot of boiling water. Instead of my head, the pot's enamel lid caught the debris. Its pummeled surface scared me. I didn't want to ask for help, I needed to be prodded by a friend. A lifelong introvert, still shaking from the near miss, I forced myself out of the Café and into the neighborhood where I immediately found customers willing to join me in the cleanup. They brought their own tools and scrounged nails and a sheet of plywood to temporarily cover up the gaping hole. They changed what would have been "my" sorry story into "our" miraculous one.

Contractions and childbirth are as common as a cup of coffee in Sisters, and sometimes they come together. It happened one late January evening, the mom-to-be thought her baby would be born on the Café's old green linoleum floor. As she cried out in pain, I timed her contractions while the rest of our customers looked confused and then dumbfounded by the imminent arrival of a newborn. They could sense her fear. She was penniless and not eligible for welfare until the first of the month, more than a week away. She was new in town, didn't have a place to live, and had nothing for her baby. Through her tears she pleaded with me to stay with her for the birth; a coworker drove us to the hospital. There was confusion to begin with because she had no doctor, no chart, and no history—a hundred questions consumed the first hour—then we were whisked away to a delivery room where they taught us both how to breathe. Within forty-five minutes, the head emerged and we heard the baby cry. There was so much care and concern and the longest few moments until all of this five-pound, fourteen-ounce baby girl was born. Her mother named her after me, moved her into a run-down hotel room, and swaddled her in an old wooden dresser drawer. The welfare worker took Genevieve within weeks and she was lost to her mother forever.

Then there was Hugh who died from the ravages of hypothermia, pneumonia, and alcoholism in the South Park blocks. He was a faithful customer and barter worker who would scrub out pots with me for long hours after the Café had closed for the day. His ancestors fished for salmon with nets or long poles at Celilo Falls before The Dalles Dam was built on the Columbia River. After Hugh died, I was invited to attend a Pipe Ceremony honoring him. Martin, the medicine man who led it, urged each of us to find a humble place within and bring forth a new habit sheltered in Hugh's spirit. It came to me. I would strengthen my will to be in this world; learn to love more fully; do the best work I knew

how; let go of the anger; and not be complicit in feelings of low self-worth. Some of those have proved more difficult than the others.

Dorothy Day once said. "It is when we treat strangers specially that the world is transformed." All of our stories, mine and Sisters' customers woven together, have propped up my will to live in the world as if there already were life, liberty, and justice for all. It is a place of steadfast truth and extraordinary hope.

- Genevieve "Genny" Nelson



Genny Nelson
Photograph by Orion Gray