

Opinion

To help the homeless, first think of them as part of your tribe

Mashable, by Chris Taylor, June 30, 2016

Powell Street, just south of Union Square, is San Francisco's busiest transit hub. Here tourists line up at the Cable Car terminus, eager to get to Fisherman's Wharf, squinting up in surprise at the cold summer fog streaming overhead, squinting down and frowning at their phones to avoid the panhandlers.

But regular commuters know the most shame-inducing section of Powell. It is the long, wide entry tunnel where people sleep during the day, huddled up against the walls, their faces buried in coats and other makeshift blankets. On those walls, and sometimes on the floor and ceiling, marketers have posted ill-advised wrap-around ads.

Most times when you encounter people who live on the streets, you can at least look them in the eye, human to human. Express your sorrow, hand them a dollar, hand them your leftovers. But in the tunnel there are no eyes to connect with, just a gauntlet of sleeping forms.

Above them, the giant ads scream at you to buy a \$2,000 laptop, to watch a meaningless movie, to play a blood-soaked video game. Order your coffee via an app and you won't have to wait in line, the wall says — oblivious to the line of people who can't afford beds to sleep in, let alone coffee when they wake up.

Walking down to the BART train you shudder, flush, grow angry at the whole mess. You feel powerless to fix it, so you turn up your headphones and focus your mind. *Just get through this. Just get home.* Then you get a double-dose of guilt for having a home to go to.

In tunnels like this, little bits of San Francisco's soul die every day. This is where the homeless become a "crisis" or a "problem" or a "tragedy" to passers-by, instead of unique human beings like you — each of whom has their own story, and needs a little help in changing the plot.

As part of the SF Homeless Project, in which 70 media organizations have united to spotlight the plight of the city's worst-off from June 29 onwards, we at *Mashable* have tried to focus on the humanity at the core of the issue. The more we reported it, the less we saw the homeless as a homogenous whole.

Instead, we saw Philip Jones, a 24-year-old footballer and recovering meth addict who slept on the sidewalk until he turned his life around with the help of a group called Street Soccer USA. We saw Charles Hardigree, who slept in a four-bedroom house and drove a minivan until unemployment and health problems came calling at the same time — a perfect storm of homelessness.

"It sucks to generalize people," said Mariah Holmes, a young mom who struggled to find housing because cheap motels looked askance at the subsidies she received from the city. We couldn't agree more.

For too long, the strong ties of society — the kind that allow us to see each other as our brother's keeper rather than generalizing people — have been disintegrating. In fact, they started to disintegrate in the 1970s and 1980s, right around the time the U.S. learned a new word: homelessness.

In his excellent bestseller from earlier this year, simply called *Tribe*, author Sebastian Junger faults civilian society for failing war veterans in a similar fashion.

They may mouth the words "thank you for your service," says Junger, "but they still see vets as something apart from the whole, something other, with experiences we can never understand, so why bother? They're respected, but not really part of the tribe."

"Two of the behaviors that set early humans apart were the systematic sharing of food and altruistic group defense," Junger writes. He continued:

Other primates did very little of either but, increasingly, hominids did, and those behaviors helped set them on an evolutionary path that produced the modern world. The earliest and most basic definition of community — of tribe — would be the group of people that you would both help feed and help defend.

A society that doesn't offer its members the chance to act selflessly in these ways isn't a society in any tribal sense of the word; it's just a political entity that, lacking enemies, will probably fall apart on its own...

Lack of social support has been found to be twice as reliable at predicting PTSD as the severity of the trauma itself.

Clearly, society has taken this approach to the homeless too — often meaning well, but still "other-izing" them. This process starts at the very top, with a large and fast-growing body of laws that effectively criminalize homelessness.

Even in supposedly enlightened California, a recent UC Berkeley Law School study found 592 laws on the books in the state's 58 largest cities, or just over 10 laws per city, that target homeless behavior. The number of anti-homeless laws in these cities is growing by around 100 per decade.

Most ban sitting, lying down or sleeping in public places. But in 15 percent of the cities, laws have actually turned the most basic way we can connect on a human level with the homeless — by offering our spare food — into illegal behavior.

And it isn't like the laws aren't being enforced, either. Quite the opposite. "Arrests for general 'vagrancy' crimes — the status of being homeless — have more than doubled since 2000," the report notes, "even as enforcement of laws criminalizing specific behaviors like 'drunkenness' and 'disorderly conduct' has fallen."

In San Francisco, as we have seen most recently this year, there has been a series of clueless opinions on homelessness shared by frustrated tech entrepreneurs. They, through poor choices of words, betray a sense of entitled anger that the homeless even exist.

The irony being that these entrepreneurs think their apps are creating a more connected society, when it's really their attitudes to their fellow humans that are tearing its fabric apart.

An extremely connected society often emerges in the wake of an earthquake, in a city under siege, or after a terror attack — like in the United States after 9/11. Every time researchers have studied such situations, they are shocked by the results. Crime drops. Suicide rates plummet. The barriers between rich and poor vanish, at least until the threat has passed.

If you're sleeping on the streets, at the end of your tether, afflicted with diseases like depression or drug addiction, you desperately need society to tell you still matter in some way. Instead, the entire legal system is weighted against your ability to sleep and eat.

Prejudice against whatever subsidies you're able to scrape out of the local bureaucracy is allowed to run rampant. Making assumptions about an "underclass" is just as insidious as generalizing about race.

So before we start to fix the problem, we need to stop talking about it as an abstract problem. Let's visualize it as exactly what it is: humans having a long series of bad days, humans who need your helping hand because they're part of your tribe, and because helping is what we do.

Let's all turn our faces away from the wall, and get our vision out of the tunnel.