

What If the Key to Ending Homelessness Is Just That—a Key?

By Mike Kessler, Takepart.com, May 8, 2015

The whole mess started around noon on a Sunday in March, when two homeless men on L.A.'s Skid Row got into some sort of spat. Something about a tent, or the location of a tent, or the contents of a tent. Typical Skid Row stuff, the kind of thing you can't avoid seeing in a 50-block area where 1,500 of the city's most destitute souls—most of them mentally ill or drug addicts or both—sleep in their own filth and throw elbows just to survive. So there was an argument, and someone called the cops, and when they arrived the officers approached Charly Keunang, a Cameroonian national known among fellow street dwellers as Africa. Video footage captured by a civilian and a surveillance camera tells us the rest. Keunang is pretty worked up when the cops arrive. Uncooperative, he retreats to his tent. The cops—four of them—pull Keunang out. A scuffle ensues, and in short order police take the man to the ground. They hold him, try to pin and subdue him, punch him in the head, and attempt to restrain his flailing legs. One of the officers yells something unintelligible about a gun and then, a moment later—shots. No fewer than five of them. Keunang dies on the sidewalk.

Had he not been living on the street, Keunang would likely be alive today. The timing of his death couldn't have been more poignant or tragic, coinciding as it did with the growth of an initiative called Home for Good. Launched in 2010 by United Way of Greater Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, Home for Good is the city's most concerted effort to solving homelessness in decades. It uses a radical method called Housing First, which several other cities—none nearly as big, or with anything close to L.A.'s homeless population—have been trying with surprising success.

The premise of Housing First is both counterintuitive and palm-to-the-forehead obvious. The simple part goes like this: Give the chronically homeless what they need most—homes. There's a clear humanitarian reason for doing this, but what's changing minds now is data indicating that the expense of managing homeless populations is far greater than the expense of just housing them. There's the tough-to-quantify cost to the local economy—what economists call an “opportunity cost”—of homelessness detracting from a city's appeal to residents and tourists. Then, every time someone decides not to go into a store to buy a bag of Takis Fuego because there's a homeless person sleeping next to the doorway—that's an opportunity cost to the business owner and every entity she pays taxes to. Add to those the price of the homeless cycling in and out of hospitals, jails, prisons, shelters, emergency rooms, halfway houses, courts, probation offices, drug treatment centers, the VA, and whatever other institutions bear the logistical and financial brunt of homelessness. So far, cities that have tried Housing First have saved money.

The part that's harder to grasp is that beneficiaries of Housing First don't have to “earn” their new permanent residences. They aren't required, as they typically have been, to become “housing ready” in temporary shelters, halfway houses, or rehab facilities. The roofs over their heads aren't contingent on sobriety, community service, a steady job, or visits with a therapist. Housing First recipients are not discouraged from addressing addiction, mental health issues, or whatever led them to, or kept them on, the streets, but neither are they required, or even

expected, to “fix” themselves. People who qualify for Housing First are simply given a permanent place to live. No strings attached.

The apartments in which Housing First beneficiaries are placed are paid for in large part by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and, to a lesser extent, by money from state, county, and city budgets. Nonprofits and philanthropies kick in some funds as well. Essentially, HUD provides housing authorities throughout the country with money to fight homelessness, and each decides how to spend it. Those that want to try Housing First and have minimal vacancy might put the money toward constructing new apartments. Others might buy and refurbish existing buildings, perhaps co-investing with a developer. At the same time, those who work with the homeless search for candidates for Housing First. It’s not always free; HUD requires that participants receiving government subsidies such as disability payments contribute toward their rent, which varies. They can still qualify even if they have no income, though they will nonetheless need to figure out how to eat.

Using the Housing First approach, New Orleans in 2014 housed all 227 of its homeless vets; now officials can focus on prevention and efficiently help veteran service members who newly become homeless. Things are going well with the city’s campaign to fight nonveteran homelessness too. After Hurricane Katrina, 11,600 people there were homeless by 2007. While many recovered, others needed help. Through its Housing First program, New Orleans is on track to meet the end-of-2016 goal of placing virtually all its chronically homeless—defined as people who’ve been on the streets or in shelters for a year or more—under a permanent roof. To be clear, it’s impossible to eradicate homelessness. There will always be someone down on his luck. That’s why people in the industry use the term “functional zero,” which means that a city has the housing and infrastructure in place to find a permanent residence for anyone who qualifies, whether it’s a veteran, someone who’s chronically homeless, or another candidate who might be eligible under a particular program.

Then there’s Salt Lake City. Getting anything accomplished in Utah requires the political will not just of conservatives but of the highest ranks of the state’s other bastion of orthodoxy, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That’s who bought in and helped make Housing First a reality there. “When homeless advocates first told me about it, I thought, ‘These guys are smoking something—you can’t end homelessness,’ ” Lloyd Pendleton, the manager of the LDS Church Welfare Department at the time Housing First was being considered in Salt Lake, told me. A former corporate executive who’s always up for a challenge, Pendleton said he thought, “If anyone can do this, it’s me.” In 2006, he became the director of Utah’s Homeless Task Force; under its Housing First campaign, chronic homelessness there has dropped from 1,932 people to 178 over a decade, putting Salt Lake, too, on track for its December 2016 goal of functional zero.

Housing First practitioners have made giant strides toward ending chronic homelessness elsewhere, including Denver, Seattle, and a long list of smaller cities. But Salt Lake City’s entire homeless population was about the size of the homeless population just in downtown L.A. and a tenth the size of L.A.’s chronically homeless population. Success in a city where nearly 40,000 homeless are spread out across 4,000 square miles is another challenge entirely.

Charles Henry, who was homeless for 20 years until he was identified as eligible for a low-cost apartment under Los Angeles' Housing First program, gives a tour of his new residence and where he used to sleep.

The bed that Charles Henry slept in from 2010 through 2014 is approximately three feet wide by six feet long. It consists of nothing but dirt, just like the one next to it, where his best friend, a 27-year-old paranoid schizophrenic named Danny, still sleeps. He and Danny made their beds by hand. The spots are on a narrow terrace of a short, steep hill in a park next to a freeway in North Hollywood. Twenty feet away, cars whiz by or stand parking-lot still, depending on the time of day. Homeless for more than two decades, Henry has the experience to know a good spot when he finds one. Drivers are unable to see the small encampment, which is hidden by brush and shaded by tall trees. Sometimes garbage tossed from vehicles lands on the site, but litter is a small sacrifice for a place that's out of view of police, other homeless people, or thugs—like the guy who bashed Henry's face with a brick, or the kids who kicked his teeth in, took his fortune of \$6, and left him for dead while he was trying to sleep just a few hundred yards from here. It doesn't hurt that the bivouac is in walking- or bus-riding distance of Dumpsters, convenience stores, shelters, public bathrooms, running water, and other amenities one needs to stay alive when homeless.

Henry is a slim 63-year-old man with leathery skin; his sunken, seen-it-all green eyes convey skepticism toward others, shame for his choices, anger at himself, and a longing to feel any other way. "I spent the first half of my life running from things I did," he said during one of our visits a few months ago. "Then I spent the second half of my life running from things I didn't do. I was a bad person... a bad person."

"For a while I slept in my own car," he said. "But it got taken away. I've been on the streets all over the city. In doorways, alongside freeways, in vacant cars, Skid Row, everywhere."

About a year ago, Henry found his way to a shelter in North Hollywood, where a counselor and a caseworker determined that he was worthy of a roof over his head and the dignity that a real home affords a person. It took eight months of jumping through various bureaucratic hoops and waiting for a unit to become available under Home for Good. He moved into his new place last November. "I haven't had keys to anything in 25 years," he said. "I was laying here last night in bed thinking, 'God...thank you.'" Without Home for Good, he says, he'd still be living by the freeway on-ramp—"or dead."

His building is a three-story affordable housing construction in a middle-class part of town about five miles from the park where he used to live. It looks like a newer dorm on a liberal arts college campus. When we first met, he'd been in the new digs for about a month. His apartment is a humble one-room affair with concrete floors, cinder-block walls, a north-facing window, a kitchenette, a small round table with two chairs, and a few stacks of magazines and paperbacks. He didn't have much to bring with him when he moved in—no shopping cart or bulging trash bags full of belongings. The shelter helped him get the place furnished and fronted him some cash for a set of sheets. "I keep it simple and pretty clean," he told me. "I don't need much."

Henry speaks slowly and carefully, and a cocktail of psych meds and methadone causes him to slur a bit. Over tacos down the street from his apartment, he told me he used to be handsome and eloquent and sharp. “I read extensively; I wrote well,” he said. He made this statement as if I needed convincing.

According to the most recent national homeless count, approximately 610,000 people in the U.S. are homeless on any given night. That may not seem like a big number, but if you emptied the cities of Atlanta, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, or Miami of people and tried to fill any of them with all of America’s homeless, there wouldn’t be room. Still, the number is somewhat misleading because it’s just a snapshot; around 2.5 million children experience homelessness over the course of a year.

About 85 percent of homeless people in America are fleetingly down-and-out. They lost a job, couldn’t make the rent, couch-surfed until they overstayed their welcome, or stopped asking for help out of pride. Some of them might have been forced out of the homes of family or friends because landlords enforced occupancy caps. These are the temporarily homeless people who bounce back—sometimes on their own, sometimes through temporary, government-subsidized programs or with help from charitable or faith-based organizations.

The other 15 percent are chronically homeless—the year-or-more folks like Henry. In the scheme of things, housing 84,000 people is not that expensive—figuring \$1,000 a month rent for each of them, it comes to about \$1 billion, or roughly what humanity has spent to see *Furious 7*. But what’s keeping us from solving homelessness has always been about more than money. Explanations for allowing people in the richest nation in the history of civilization to live in conditions that Neanderthals recognized as unsafe, unhealthy, and undesirable basically come down to one of three things:

1. It’s their fault, so they deserve it.
2. It’s their choice.
3. They’re not a good investment.

It’s hard to change anyone’s mind about the first two explanations. The third—the cost-benefit component—is what Housing First dispels. In the past, it’s been assumed that before the chronically homeless can be given homes, the issues keeping them on the street need to be addressed. Drug-addicted or otherwise mentally unstable people, the thinking went, couldn’t possibly stay in an apartment, but once they get their shit together, they’ll have proved they’re worth the public dollars. This paternalistic, up-by-the-bootstraps philosophy disregarded the possibility that it might be especially hard to get one’s shit together when one is homeless.

“A lot of programs were started in the 1980s, but their philosophy was that we need to fix people’s problems so they can get it together and find housing,” Steve Berg, the vice president for programs and policy at the Washington, D.C.–based National Alliance to End Homelessness, told me. What well-intentioned lawmakers and service providers failed to acknowledge, Berg

said, is that “lack of housing is usually the barrier. It’s a lot harder to fix your problems when you don’t have a home. Once people have a home, they can better deal with their problems.”

Generally speaking, subgroups of homeless such as teens and young adults tend to be more transient, finding their way back into housing before too long. So most cities trying Housing First are starting out by applying it to the chronically homeless. The other subset for which Housing First has worked well is homeless veterans, of whom there are about 50,000 nationwide. (For vets, the year-or-more requirement is waived.)

Data and studies tell us that Housing First works a whole lot better than the old housing-ready model. Proponents of the philosophy, from NGO executives to policy makers to employees of government agencies at all levels, usually cite a success rate of 85 percent—meaning 15 percent of Housing First recipients can’t pay their token rent payments or abide by the rules of their leases and wind up homeless again. The rest of them stay put. The generally agreed-on success rate under the fix-’em-first, house-’em-later approach we’ve been using for more than a generation is 45 percent or less.

In other words, say the likes of Berg, we’ve spent the last 35 years trying to teach people a Randian lesson in personal responsibility when we should have been asking ourselves this: How can we expect someone like Henry to seek counseling, fill out forms, trek to doctor’s offices and hospitals, apply for jobs, appear in court when he’s cited for loitering or littering, pay his tickets, negotiate overcrowded and strained institutions and agencies, and otherwise be a responsible member of society when he’s preoccupied with finding his next meal, locating a dry place to sleep, or worrying about whether some thugs are going to use his head as a soccer ball?

There’s more to Housing First than that it works. It’s cheaper than anything else we’ve been trying, and that may be what gets it over the hump to becoming national policy. Housing First is as much as 40 percent cheaper than providing the services people need when living on the street, according to HUD and a good number of professors, nonprofits, and policy analysts. “The more vulnerable the person, the more expensive they are to take care of,” said Benjamin Henwood, an assistant professor at the USC School of Social Work, who just finished writing a book on Housing First. “People with complex problems who require intensive services cost a lot of taxpayer dollars.” And the chronically homeless tend to need a lot of those services.

The price tag for Housing First varies, but research in Denver, Salt Lake, New Orleans, and elsewhere shows remarkable numbers. Seattle was spending about \$4,000 a month on each homeless person; once it implemented Housing First, the price dropped to \$958. In Rhode Island, the \$2,600 monthly cost of services for a chronically homeless person fell to about \$1800. “This is a clear, evidence-based practice,” said Beth Sandor, the director of Community Solutions, whose Zero: 2016 initiative aims to end chronic and veteran homelessness in the U.S. by Dec. 31 of next year. “It’s counterintuitive, but it works.”

Unlike so many ideas about governance, then, Housing First hits all the right political notes: It helps the less fortunate, improves society, and saves money. Conservative or fiscally minded publications such as *The Weekly Standard*, *The Economist*, and *Bloomberg News* have gotten behind it, and Housing First seems to be one of the few issues that politically opposed lawmakers

can agree on. Wisconsin Sen. Paul Ryan, who doesn't suffer freeloaders, didn't even mention it in a recent budget committee assessment. "No one will be hurt by this," said Berg. "It's just a matter of deciding whether to put a stop to the old system or to layer a new system on top of it."

Other things you should know about Henry: He grew up in Tucson, Arizona. His father would punish young Charles by making him kneel for extended periods on uncooked rice. His mother and grandmother raised him, if that's what you want to call it. Henry didn't badmouth them, but he shut down my inquiries pretty quickly. At 14, he started using heroin. It was the mid-1960s, a time when addiction was viewed as a character flaw and rehab wasn't a readily available option for poor folks like the Henrys. There were arrests for minor offenses, truancy, reform school. The most consistent thing in his life was a needle. Strung out and strapped for cash at 20, Henry made the mistake of demanding money from a store clerk while holding a knife to his throat. Strong-arm robbery is a felony. He served six years in prison.

Nailing down the exact chronology of Henry's major life events is all but impossible. Addiction, marriage, petty arrests, incarcerations, prison survival tactics that landed him in solitary confinement, psychotic episodes while in the hole, antipsychotic drugs and their side effects, release from prison, more heroin, divorce—it all bleeds together. The only dates he seems to regard with joy or certainty are the birthdays of his two kids, a daughter who no longer speaks to him and a son whom he tries not to bother. Henry has been locked up in California's Chino and Soledad state prisons, and Arizona's Florence state prison, among other places. He told me his sentences were for minor infractions, mostly shoplifting. "I've done all this time for property crime and theft that probably doesn't add up to three thousand dollars," he said.

I asked if he remembered the most expensive thing he lifted. "A tool set from Sears," he said from across his kitchen table, where a small arsenal of prescription bottles shared space with a coffee mug, a couple of pens, and not much else. "I think it was worth about \$300. I've spent 27 years of my life behind bars. The only violent crime I committed was the robbery."

I did some quick math: 27 years locked up, 20 years homeless—that's 47 out of 63 years, or about 75 percent of Charles Henry's life. Four years ago, he managed to kick heroin on his own, while living on the streets.

Americans have come up with nasty ways to "fix" homelessness, and cruel ways to treat the homeless. [Related: "America's Spring Break Hot Spot Adopts Draconian Solution to Homelessness."] Many cities ban sleeping in parks. Seattle, in the 1990s, made it a crime to sit or lie on a sidewalk in commercial districts downtown, which a spokesperson for the Coalition on Homelessness characterized as "out of sight, out of mind." "Patient dumping" is when hospitals drop homeless people, sometimes still wearing gowns and I.D. bracelets, back on the streets. In San Diego, the California Highway Patrol arrests people—many of them homeless—in the city's most neglected neighborhoods for the express purpose of training officers in how to identify signs of drug use. Once they're done using their subjects, they throw them back on the streets. In New York, in the 1990s, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani tried to get tough on the homeless by arresting those sleeping outdoors, under the unassailable logic that "streets do not exist in civilized societies for the purpose of sleeping there." None of this helps the homeless, of course.

Sam Tsemberis thought he had a better idea. A New York City–based clinical psychologist, he was working for a city-funded effort called the Homeless Emergency Liaison Project in the early '90s. Project HELP performed old-school, street-level outreach—triage for the city's most destitute men and women. "Our job was to determine whether homeless people were a danger to themselves or others," he told me. "We would take them to Bellevue hospital so they didn't freeze when nodding off drunk on the sidewalk, that sort of thing."

It didn't take long for Tsemberis to notice a pattern. The people he and his colleagues helped, he would soon see back on the street. Tsemberis said that back then, most people saw the chronically homeless not as a function of a flawed system but as individuals who were unwilling or simply unable to get well—people who were either too ill or failing themselves and society by choosing to stay homeless. Tsemberis likens this line of thinking to Freud's notion of resistance to treatment, a kind of father-knows-best practice whereby the psychiatrist insists he understands what the patient needs better than the patient does. "The existing system was blaming the patients and claiming to have more insight," he explained. "And the patients were saying, 'I just need a place to live.'" As Tsemberis saw it, chronically homeless people "were being swept downstream in a raging river, and the people in the system were on the banks saying, 'You got yourself in there—if you want to get out, just swim harder!'"

Tsemberis wanted to see what would happen if the chronically homeless were instead given a rope. The grant proposal he submitted to the New York State Office of Mental Health in 1992 for his Pathways to Housing organization didn't mention that the housing component of his plan had no strings attached. He got his funding, and during the experiment's first year, Tsemberis and his colleagues secured homes for 50 people. "Putting them into apartments was a piece of cake, even though they were diagnosed with things that would make you think otherwise," he said. "It was joyful for them and unnerving for me because it was untested." Soon Tsemberis had confidence in his idea: During the first year, only eight of his 50 test subjects went back to the streets. A five-year follow-up study showed an astonishing 88 percent housing retention rate for Pathway's clients.

For the next decade and a half, New York City put limited resources into approaches similar to Tsemberis', including a federal subsidies program that either placed people in homes or provided Section 8 vouchers, which landlords who had registered with Washington could exchange for cash. Mayor Michael Bloomberg, however, put a stop to the practice in 2011, citing the need to save money. New York went back to the old, short-term housing-ready model, and people were kicked out of their apartments before they found a place to land. According to the Coalition for the Homeless, 44 percent of people in the Bloomberg program, many of them families, ended up back in shelters, causing the city a greater financial strain.

While Tsemberis was trying to push the Housing First philosophy in New York, a determined social worker in Los Angeles named Tanya Tull was promoting a similar approach, albeit with an emphasis on helping homeless families. Tull had seen the homeless explosion firsthand in the early 1980s, when she started Para Los Niños, a nonprofit family and children's services organization. Homelessness got worse as affordable housing vanished from the L.A. market, and officials responded by building shelters rather than long-term housing. It didn't work. "Families

were cycling through every new shelter in town,” she told me, “but in the end, the homeless were still homeless. So what had we accomplished?”

Tull spent the next two-and-a-half decades trying to convince whomever she could that families, more than anyone else, needed permanent housing. She cofounded L.A. Family Housing, the organization that built, with taxpayer and private funding, several affordable housing buildings, including the one where Charles Henry now lives. Tull’s work, however, has been bittersweet. She’s happy to see the Housing First method being embraced by cities big and small, and by HUD, which is beginning to require that some of its budget to fight homelessness go toward such efforts. But she’s resentful of how the homeless have been classified and prioritized. “What kind of society vows to end veteran and chronic homelessness by the end of 2016 but hasn’t vowed to do the same for homeless families?” she said. “That’s insane!”

Christine Margiotta’s office at United Way of Greater Los Angeles is in a high-rise about nine blocks from Skid Row, where Henry once lived and where Charly Keunang was killed by the LAPD. But Skid Row’s population accounts for just a sliver of the homeless in L.A., who are spread across a huge area and sprinkled among a population bigger than that of 40 states.

Margiotta, who is the vice president of community impact at the nonprofit and holds a master’s in social work from UCLA, is the ringleader for anyone with a stake in helping people get off the street. That’s pretty much everyone—government agencies, philanthropic groups, nonprofits, businesses, religious leaders, politicians, the general public, and the 23 housing authorities in L.A. County that decide how to allocate the federal funds and vouchers they receive. Municipalities have their own expenses managing homeless populations, which gives them an economic incentive to get on board with Margiotta.

“When I first began here, I discovered that there was a lot of good work happening,” she told me one recent afternoon when I visited her office. “But it wasn’t unified under one effort and one initiative. It was in pockets. Our aim was to bring everyone together.” Some 200 agencies, she said, needed to play nice for Housing First to work in L.A.

So far, she said, it has gone pretty well. Since Home for Good started in 2010, Los Angeles-area service providers have housed more than 12,000 veterans and nearly 7,000 chronically homeless. The number of people housed annually has more than doubled in the last four years. What’s more, said Margiotta, all of this was done at 43 percent the cost of letting people stay homeless. The math can be nitpicked to death: Should, for example, a cop’s overtime pay for a court appearance concerning a homeless person count toward the cost of leaving people on the street? But it’s working well enough in Los Angeles to inspire Mayor Eric Garcetti, who isn’t known as a risk taker. Last summer he vowed to, by the end of 2015, house the city’s remaining homeless vets. With 1,200 to go, the mayor and Margiotta might just pull it off.

These are all reasons to celebrate, but the homeless situation is still dire. Close to 10,000 chronically homeless people remain on the streets of Greater L.A. Housing authorities are finding homes for 125 of them a month; to bring chronic homelessness to functional zero by the end of 2016, they will need to up that to 525. The figure is certain to creep up soon: Under A.B. 109, California’s prison-de-crowding law, thousands of former prisoners (read potentially

homeless) have been trickling back into Los Angeles. And voter-approved Proposition 47, which passed in November 2014, calls for the release of thousands of nonviolent inmates from prisons and jails for the foreseeable future. Both efforts are a major accomplishment in the war against mass incarceration for low-level offenders—it means a guy like Henry won't get locked away if he fails to pay a fine. (It also means the arresting officer won't have to make a court appearance and get paid overtime.) But many more people will be swimming in a current of bureaucracies, stigma, job ineligibility, financial crisis, unchecked mental-health and substance-abuse issues, and, for some, homelessness. Once they're all housed, another 30,000 or so nonveteran, non-chronically homeless people in Los Angeles—many of them members of poor families at risk of becoming chronically homeless—must be considered.

Charles Henry's street name was Rabbit. In the building where he's been living the last six months, people address him as Charles. Besides prison, his apartment is the only residence he's had in two decades with four walls, a door, and consistent neighbors, all of whom are formerly homeless. He doesn't know any of them from the streets, but one is a guy he did time with up in Chino. When Henry isn't home reading paperback thrillers, he spends his time at a nearby L.A. Family Housing facility, where he sees a counselor and helps the staff with small jobs. He isn't required to work—not that he'd qualify anyway, given his history—or do anything else, for that matter. He gets by on \$221 a month in disability pay, \$51 of which goes to his rent. He's still getting used to sleeping indoors and trusting strangers in the building. His case manager, Jamie Biggs, told me that most people don't feel settled until they've been housed for about six months, whereupon they start taking advantage of the health and wellness services available to them through various government agencies and charities. For Henry, that will be easy; some of those services, like counseling, are on-site. "Charles is going to make it," Biggs said. "I'm certain he'll stay housed." Some will have a tougher go of it. They'll violate their lease agreement by having too many guests or causing a disturbance, or might even abandon their apartment during a psychological breakdown.

One afternoon, when I was driving Henry from the park in North Hollywood back to his apartment, we got to talking about trust. He'd remarked that I had no good reason to believe anything he told me. I explained that although I'd have to verify his claims to the extent possible, I had no cause to doubt him. "Why should you trust me?" he asked, a trace of anger in his voice. "You don't know me."

I got the feeling that he might be, as a psychologist would say, projecting. What he really wondered, I gathered, was whether he could trust himself. For most of his life, he'd made decisions, from using heroin to robbery to shoplifting, that came with a terrible set of consequences. Sitting in the passenger seat of my geriatric Subaru, he let loose a monologue of personal regret. "I didn't take care of my family, my kids. I didn't live up to my responsibility," he said. "I have shame, regret, remorse. People say, 'Let it go'—but I can't get out of it!" He was almost shouting.

Staring at the freeway, I could feel the tears building behind Henry's eyes, but I knew he'd learned long ago to suppress them. "It's easy for someone to tell you to let it go," he said. "You ain't never been there." I suggested that since he couldn't change the past, maybe he should try

to accept it, own it, and forgive himself. “That’s easy for you to say when you don’t have to walk in my shoes,” he replied. “I’m ashamed of what I did. I’m ashamed.”

Distracted by the tension and the anguish in his voice, I missed our exit, and we drove mostly in silence as I navigated my way back to his apartment complex, where I pulled up to the curb and put the car in park. Henry thanked me for the ride. I couldn’t think of anything to say; he was inconsolable, and it was clear he was through talking for the day. I told him to take care, and he closed the door. Pulling away, I glanced in the passenger-side mirror. In one hand, Henry held a to-go bag with leftovers from lunch earlier that day. With the other hand, he reached into his pocket for the key to his home.