

What Habitat Teaches Us About Our Humanity

Habitat for Humanity Breakfast

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Being asked to pinch hit to give the keynote for this Habitat for Humanity breakfast at first felt a bit intimidating. But then I realized I was about as intimidated as are volunteers who arrive at a Habitat for Humanity building site in Seattle and South King County not knowing where to begin or how to actually go about building a home. They learn quickly that they need to depend on others. So I decided also to depend on others: five college students named George, Sarah, Andy, Gabby, and TJ; all of them are Habitat for Humanity volunteers; four currently at Seattle University, one a recent graduate. I owe them whatever I construct in this talk; they showed me the building plans, and put the hammer in my hand. I just put in a bit of sweat equity.

“Habitat for Humanity.” They taught me that the biggest question is, “What is the quality of our own humanity?” – yours and mine. How deep is our humanity, how wide, how rich, how compassionate, how comprehensive, how humble? What is the true home of our own humanity, what habitat does it need in order to grow, and how do we hold it? These five college students put this president in the classroom and lectured him on what Habitat teaches us about the quality of our humanity, theirs, mine, all of ours.

You may wonder what college students can teach us about life, about our humanity, when they are only now discovering their own. But that’s just it; they have fresh eyes, they are not yet completely encrusted with our competitive culture, they don’t yet have in place the defenses all of us build with time, they can be touched, they feel things more fully, they are vulnerable because they are in the process of being formed, shaped, putting on skin. The young of about this age, especially if they are serious and can think and can articulate their experience, are the barometers of how life is emerging, of the future unfolding, not only of what the world is becoming and who they are becoming, but of whom we are becoming. They are the harbingers of our humanity. Their experiences of Habitat for Humanity are a wonderful laboratory, an experimental testing of the quality of our humanity. George and Sarah and Andy and Gabby and TJ are worth listening to.

Surprisingly, yet unanimously, these students showed me that the foundation of our humanity lies not, as we often think, in ourselves as individuals but in community. We don’t have our humanity, we share it with others. We don’t possess it; it is owned by all. They each told me how Habitat builds community, it blurs boundaries between people, it throws you together with different people, and it shows you that although everyone is different we have a commonality when we have a common project. All of these students already knew community within their families, their hometowns and neighborhoods, with their college peers. But they all said, “This is different; this is not self-chosen community, this is real community; here you don’t just know community, you get immersed in it; here it is not as you’ve known before that community is nice; here you learn that people survive only because of community.” Part of what they were saying was that they discovered something about their own humanity because these were not people they chose or selected to relate to but were thrown in with, people very unlike themselves,

and people they had to depend on. Andy said, “This was great because it was an a-religious community, and that is not that available.” (A great remark but not endearing to this religious priest!) Curiously, almost all of them were most intrigued by the contractors they worked with. Astonishing discovery: an older person, probably retired, knowledgeable, fun, flexible, with great people skills, capable, helpful, geniuses. Wow!

What if the distillation from the experimental laboratory of Habitat is for us as it was for these students, that we are wrong to think we are in ourselves fully human, what if we don’t hold or possess our humanity but our humanity is held in common and we can only be fully human if we are fully in community, helplessly thrown together with others especially unlike us and not of our choosing, engaged in a common project, and only find there in community the foundation of our humanity, the solid platform on which we build our homes, our lives, our individualities, our uniqueness. I propose that the first thing Habitat for Humanity teaches us is that the true habitat for the quality of our humanity rests on and is built on the foundation of community. Each of us holds something of the full humanity of the other that we can only discover and enjoy together.

If our shared humanity is the first lesson these college students teach us from their experience of Habitat, the second is a lesson on the true face of poverty in America, and how it changes us when we encounter it. None of these five students are from a wealthy family; they come from ordinary families like yours and mine. Each of them has had an experience of a certain kind of poverty whether helping a homeless person on the streets of Seattle, giving a hand to a teenage drug addict on Broadway, serving a meal at a soup kitchen, or walking among the destitute and dying in a slum in Calcutta. But somehow this is “poverty out there.”

Habitat is about a different kind of poverty, “poverty is here”, very low income family poverty, women the same age as these college women yet working three jobs and trying to feed three kids, Latino poverty, hard-working-no-education-no-breaks poverty; in short, American poverty. What shocks these students is the truth about American poverty. As Sarah says, “Oh I always knew this, grew up with this knowledge, but now I actually understand it, really comprehend it. It’s now in my body. By working in Habitat this American poverty, through my manual labor, through building a home with these very low income people, this poverty has now become my full-body experience.”

This experience of poverty in America—not the out-there kind of poverty, but the in-here kind of real people like ourselves but without the advantages and educations, working people—changes us. As one student says, “because it is here, is real, is in front of me, then life is more real and I am more real.” Another says it teaches him “I do not have to go to Latin America or Africa to encounter poverty... it is right at hand, in our state and in our community.” Though each of them spoke of this as the true American poverty, the very low income kind, they also said they would not have really known it or been changed by it if it had not been for Habitat. Habitat confronted them for the first time with the truth about poverty in America. It put a face on it, gave it a voice, made it possible for them to be touched or moved by this poverty in simple but profound ways. George speaks for all of them when he gives an example:

“One of the most moving experiences with Habitat was at the final dinner... when Juan, the father of our house’s family, stood up and in broken English thanked each of us for helping him provide a home for his wife and two children. It was clear that he was incredibly nervous and embarrassed about his limited vocabulary, but it was so important for him to express his gratitude to us. It was a powerful moment that I don’t think any of us forgot.”

These students are witnesses to how the real poverty of real people enriches the quality of our own humanity in a way that nothing else—even all the riches of opportunity, education, travel, and the arts—could do. I think they are saying to you and to me that the poor—if we work with them—are in fact our best friends and our best teachers—limited in our vocabulary but articulate in their own—of a quality of our humanity that we badly need. The real poor are the best friends of our real humanity.

The third and final lesson about the quality of our humanity that college students who volunteer for Habitat teach us is about hope. All college students are caught in a struggle between fear and hope. When they are honest they tell you that they live in an environment of fear. It’s a certain kind of fear. As one student put it, “We live in a world in which anything might happen... and probably will!” But within this world of fear that is not just out there but seeps into their souls, they grasp for hope, they find it, and because of it they against all odds believe they will make a difference in people’s lives and will change the world. They are indomitably hopeful, they get hope from their experience of service, of making a difference in someone’s life. This builds a hope against the preponderant fear, and makes them believe they can change the world. This hope through service seems like such a slender reed to me. For them, service is not an add-on or extra-curricular—at least it should not be—it is critical to sustaining their hope against fear and believing in themselves and in humanity. In my view Habitat for Humanity is the clearest example of the kind of service that gives them hope and therefore should give us hope about the future, which is after all not so much ours as their future.

Listen to them. TJ: “Before Habitat I had this frustration of not being able to get out of my little world.” Andy: “Ordinarily you just don’t get a full experience of humanity on a wide spectrum. Habitat put me in touch with what matters. I had a deep longing to know people. Although Habitat was painful at first, the first word that comes to my mind now about it is “beautiful.” Sarah: “I learned that I don’t have to choose between short-term service and long-term benefits, do one or the other, because Habitat is both short-term and long-term.” They described the difference one Habitat house made: “the owners took care of the house, cut the lawn, put flowers in the yard; it transformed the whole block because people took pride in what was theirs.” Gabby said, “With a little assistance I saw how people were given a little step up, were given a foundation from which they could advocate for themselves and for their own needs.” George put it all together:

“Habitat, at its heart, is direct service to the poor but also addresses the long-term cycle of poverty that traps too many people... It transforms low-income families into homeowners and mortgage-holders... This pride in ownership shows itself in long-term

residence and maintenance of the property, in improved self-esteem, improved productivity and improved grades and high school graduation rates for Habitat families.”

(When George gets steamed up he rolls. Here’s where he goes next.)

“Habitat for Humanity addresses problems both with mind and heart, principals and practicality, economic sophistication and human tenderness... It provides physical labor, but also a solid intellectual approach to housing issues, while never overlooking the power and grace of human interaction, cooperation and empathy.”

Go get ‘em George!

There you have in George and Sarah and Andy and Gabby and TJ from service in Habitat their experience of a solid hope that is strong enough to overcome fear. No slender reed is Habitat hope!

Isn’t that precisely what all of us need as the missing quality of our humanity in this fear-filled world: hope, real hope, demonstrated hope, seen hope. Of course, our partner families need—and receive—this hope. But mightn’t we need it even more than they, if we are even a bit jaded or cynical or just a bit old or tired. What if even we—like these college students—really knew from our participation in Habitat for Humanity as they know from theirs, that we can change the world. Wouldn’t that be the discovery of a new, fresh, promising quality to our own humanity, a new quality of hope.

Real community, real poverty, real hope, are in summary, the stories five college students tell about Habitat for Humanity. Even better, as the harbingers of our humanity, these are the lessons by which they instruct us about what they hope will be the quality of our humanity and that they know really can be true for us as it is for them. May Habitat build a new home for this humanity in all of us.