

Dying for a Home. Fighting for the Right to a Home.

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Human Rights. Human Diversity.
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Thank you for inviting me to speak here today. My talk today is about a very basic human right, the right to housing, the right to a home. CBC's Rex Murphy recently said that the concept of home is the essence of our being. He said 'home' is a very powerful word, third only to mom and dad.

I'd like to begin this talk by getting a little bit personal and tell you about three different metaphors that have been important to me, metaphors that continue to inspire me in my own work for basic rights and human justice. The first metaphor is about the seed. I relate the seed metaphor to my friend David Walsh, a long-time social justice activist who helped found the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee. David said:

"The victories of Gandhi (showing non-violence works), Martin Luther King (civil rights), and the prophetic work of Archbishop Romero (Latin American justice)...sometimes these victories are more like planted seeds that will yield greater victories in future years."

It's not just these great figures of history that can plant seeds, you and I can do the same, and when the seeds of social justice do get planted and when the right thing to do begins to take root in society, it is amazing what can be accomplished.

My second metaphor, which follows the first, is about the wind. When people do come together and form a movement, it creates energy – like the wind.

There's a Ken Loach film called 'The Wind that Shakes the Barley', a title he borrowed from an 18th Century Irish ballad, by Robert Dwyer Joyce.

*"The mountain glen I'll
seek at morning early
And join the bold united
men, while soft winds
shake the barley."*

The ballad tells the story of a doomed young Wexford rebel who is about to plunge into the violence of the 1798 Irish rebellion. The reference to barley refers to the fact that the marching rebels would carry barley oats in their pockets as provisions. Years later, barley grew and marked the "croppy-holes", the mass unmarked graves that the rebels were thrown into. The wind that shakes the

barley came to symbolize the regenerative nature of Irish resistance to British rule.

The third metaphor originates with one of Canada's best progressive thinkers Naomi Klein, who coined the phrase 'movement muscle'. She used it to reflect what is needed to fight for climate justice but I think she would agree with me that we need that muscle in a few different places today!

I think of these metaphors – seed – wind – and muscle - to inspire me but also to help me understand what we must accomplish to make real wins on the issue of homelessness.

When the seed is planted and the wind blows strong, consider the kind of movement muscle we've achieved in Canada:

- Suffrage, in 1916 women in Manitoba were the first in Canada to get the right to vote;
- Economic rights, to organize trade unions, a shorter work week, a minimum wage;
- Social programs, like Medicare, the Canada Pension Plan, social assistance and unemployment insurance;
- The election of Jimmy Simpson as mayor of Toronto in 1935 - the first socialist mayor of a major city in North America (a sharp contrast to today!);
- amendments to the National Housing Act in Canada in 1973 which ensured the funding of about half a million co-op and non-profit homes;
- the win against the return of the death penalty;
- human rights such as same sex marriage.

The seed from these initiatives became huge movements of people, caught up in the wind of change, and ultimately movement muscle was formed that led to these wins which we all benefit from today.

With respect to homelessness, housing and poverty issues, we need to once again stir that wind.

People in Canada are dying for a home, in both interpretations of that phrase. It's the double entendre in the title of my book 'Dying for a Home'. Homeless people and those precariously housed are dying to find a home and some in fact have been leaders in the fight for that basic right to a home.

Near the waterfront in downtown Toronto, on empty land tucked away beside the Gardner Expressway, homeless men and women with few choices left, came together and formed Tent City. These men and women created a community and were part of the largest act of civil disobedience by homeless people since the Great Depression. Their fight for a home is beautifully portrayed in the Michael

Connolly film 'Shelter from the Storm' which also chronicles our larger fight, for the return of a national housing program.

Nancy Baker, the first woman at Tent City helped break the news that they were being threatened with eviction. She would always speak to the press, take part in our actions, and she would celebrate when we brought into Tent City what we referred to as disaster relief, such as her new pre-fab house, a Dura-Kit.

Dri, at first reclusive, lived under a tarp and then a tent, and later a Dura-Kit. He became more and more engaged in our work. In one magazine article he said: "Homeless die everywhere, in the street or in a hospital, about 100 a year in this city. Every three and a half weeks we have a Walkerton-scale tragedy in Toronto." Dri not only spoke at national housing rallies in London and Quebec City but later took the director of the National Coalition for the Homeless in New York City on a disaster tour of Toronto's crisis. Dri helped us fight against Toronto's Olympic bid which would have taken over our waterfront. Today, he is a member of the TDRC's Steering Committee.

The Colonel also took part in our disaster tours, where we encouraged homeless people to give testimony to politicians, union leaders and other prominent Canadians. So did his best friend Brian Boyd. In fact, on the infamous September 11 when the twin towers in New York were destroyed, their own pre-fab house in Tent City burned to the ground. The Colonel was hospitalized with burns, and both the Colonel and Brian, now doubly homeless, remained only concerned about the New York City victims.

Marty Lang was invited to speak and present at the first national conference on homelessness, held at York University. In fact, he spoke just about everywhere and was even trained to deliver a baby should a pregnant woman at Tent City not make it to hospital in time.

These are just some examples of the lengths homeless people will go to, while homeless, because they are dying for a home.

Marty and Nancy were regulars at our monthly Homeless Memorial in downtown Toronto. Yes, we have a Homeless Memorial – like the War Memorial, like the Memorial for the Chinese immigrants who built the railway. Ours isn't very fancy, but it's a memorial none the less.

Sadly, people are literally dying for a home, and dying while they wait for a home.

Four people profiled in my book have died.

88 people have died homeless in Toronto since my book 'Dying for a Home' was published in early 2008. Those are just the deaths we know about.

Last week at Toronto's Homeless Memorial we added 13 more names of men and women to this monthly memorial.

The homeless crisis in Canada has brought us to the point where we have launched a Charter Challenge in the courts on the basic right to housing.

Let me explain that I never thought as a nurse, I would be situated in a place where I would be seeing so many homeless people, attending so many funerals and now involved in a landmark court case.

I began my career in cardiology and slowly followed a path that would eventually lead me to work in the community, but still, I never thought I would be working outdoors so much.

I never imagined a nursing specialty called street nursing. I still use the term 'Street Nurse' because it is political. It says volumes about the state of homelessness in this country.

The circumstances and the conditions I have witnessed have simply necessitated a different kind of nursing response and mostly I've done that with the TDRC. Being a street nurse sometimes included bringing in necessary supplies during heat alerts to municipal buildings that were stingy with juice and food for homeless people. Sometimes it meant direct action, squatting in tents outside of Queen's Park, to appeal to the government and city for more shelter beds. Sometimes it meant taking rallies and actions outside the grand hotels where housing ministers were meeting such as in Gatineau. In that case we built a straw bale house outside that had a banner saying 'Broken promises kill'. We actually unfurled it inside during our group's formal presentation to the housing ministers and explained that all the names written on the banner were the names of people who had died.

The conditions I continue to see were a recent wake-up call for me to run for the New Democratic Party in the 2010 provincial by-election in Toronto Centre.

As I canvassed door to door during the election and over the years speaking in communities like yours, I am constantly reminded of how homelessness in Canada came to be and why it does not have to exist.

We once had a national housing program. Most people don't know its origins.

Returning World War II veterans, facing a housing shortage, fought back for their right to housing. In Ottawa, Montreal and Vancouver, women's groups joined in. They protested, they held picket signs, they demonstrated, and they actually took over empty buildings like the Hotel Vancouver and the Kildare barracks in Ottawa and squatted in them. Franklyn Hanratty, the leader of the Ottawa protest said that:

“scores of Ottawa families are living under intolerable conditions”.

That campaign led to empty military buildings being freed up for housing; it led to a federal agency ‘Wartime Housing Ltd.’ that built 19,000 temporary rental homes over 4 years. It led to the creation of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, now the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which came to be our national housing program. The resulting war-time housing, co-op housing, supportive housing, city ‘public’ housing is today evident all across Canada.

CMHC helped to build affordable housing for close to 2 million Canadians until that program was killed.

That program was quietly killed between 1993 and 1995 by both the federal conservative and liberal governments. By 1998 we had a crisis of homelessness, with growing numbers of people on our streets literally dying for a home.

In recent years other priorities for federal spending have been made.

Canada’s 2008 spending in Afghanistan could have built 3,500 units of affordable housing. The 2008 military budget of \$18.2 billion could have funded 9 years of a national housing program. The new accounting for the purchase of F-35 fighter jets, \$29 billion, could fund the next 14 years of a national housing program.

A quote from Friends House, a Quaker organization says it all:

“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defence than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual doom.”

I mention this because a significant Housing not War campaign tried to bring these political choices to the public’s attention.

Thanks to Tommy Douglas and the wind behind his back, we have a national health program. Douglas also recognized the need for a national housing program, calling for a ‘million new homes’. We would never let Medicare be cancelled but we let our national housing program disappear and it continues to be a real challenge to get it back.

I’m often asked ‘why are people homeless? What do you think is the primary cause?’

We have to remember that during our national housing program 650,000 new units were built and 2 million Canadians were housed!

As a street nurse I saw personal tragedies. I’ve worked with people worn down by grief, with medical and mental injuries, women fleeing abuse, mass

unemployment and seniors living without the benefit of pensions they deserved. But then something very startling occurred, like a flood of refugees. In 1998, newly homeless people, newly evicted people, newly unemployed people – all without social safety net protection. They were the victims of the housing program cancellation (both federal and provincial). Mike Harris' 21.6% welfare cuts and cutbacks to social support spending ended a person's ability to respond to the sudden need for emergency shelter.

It felt like we were witnessing a disaster. We were. We saw the number of homeless people double in day shelters. We saw clusters of homeless deaths, even freezing deaths. We saw the return of tuberculosis and other horrific health conditions.

We, meaning the few of us working in the field, decided we had to act.

We formed the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee with a small group of like minded individuals - Lawyer Peter Rosenthal, social justice advocate and developer David Walsh, Bay Street's progressive John Andras, activists Gaetan Heroux and Beric German among others. We wrote and issued a State of Emergency Declaration declaring homelessness a national disaster. Our Declaration called primarily for two things:

First, that federal emergency relief money had to be released to communities across the country so they could provide disaster relief for their rapidly growing homeless populations. This type of effort is what should have happened in the Gulf coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Second, we called for a long-term solution, the 1% solution, a National Housing Programme where all levels of government would spend an additional 1% of their budgets to build affordable housing. The 1% solution originates from research done by Professor David Hulchanski, who determined that when our federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments were allocating money towards building social housing, they were spending on average 1% of their budgets.

In the midst of our homeless crisis we planted a seed, and the wind began to blow. This declaration of disaster jumped like wildfire across the country with numerous city councils and organizations endorsing the statement, including Canada's Big City Mayors.

Central to this campaign were two basic truths: that this disaster was not caused by natural forces and that this disaster was man-made. David Hulchanski coined the phrase 'The weather did not cause mass homelessness' and internationally recognized social justice advocate and physicist Ursula Franklin declared 'Homelessness is a man-made disaster...and we have the legal and technical means to end it.'

Our Declaration's first demand was won. Prime Minister Chretien appointed for the first time in history, we think in the world, a senior cabinet position 'Minister Responsible for Homelessness', filled by then Minister of Labour Claudette Bradshaw. This appointment led to a \$1 billion program that provided much needed homelessness relief across the country.

Yet of course without housing ministers actually doing their job, without the funding and construction of affordable housing in an actual program – surprise, surprise homelessness was not lessened and in fact became worse. Today in Canada:

- 8 million people are precariously housed* (Wellesley Institute)
- 1.8 million people lack adequate shelter and are in 'core housing need'
- 300,000 Canadians are homeless
- Thousands sleep outside
- 60,000 are youth
- Over 22,000 are children!!!* (Wellesley Institute)

Here in Ontario the numbers are equally staggering. Our provincial slogan **"Yours to Discover" allows us to discover this:**

- 2006: 122,426 low-income households are on social housing waiting lists
- 2010: the list grew to 141,635 households
- 2011: there was no new housing money in the Ontario budget
- 2012 – in mere weeks we will learn if there will be any new money for housing in Premier McGuinty's budget

Here is Miloon Kothari, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Affordable Housing commenting on our country and homelessness.

***"As a very wealthy country, with significant surplus in federal budget, immediate attention is required for the most vulnerable part of the population living in inadequate housing and living conditions. There is no justification for not massively engaging in the improvement of the situation of all those that face inadequate housing and living conditions throughout Canada."* (March, 2008)**

Over the last thirteen years TDRC has worked on homeless issues in a variety of ways.

We've done action based research including shelter inspections, we've held rallies, press conferences and different actions to call for more shelter beds. We've used secret video cameras to expose inhumane conditions, taken people on disaster tours and even facilitated 'under cover' visits to shelters by journalists. Larry Scanlan devotes an entire chapter in his book 'The Year of Living Generously' to his experiences with us.

Despite our best efforts, without the solution of a national housing program, conditions in Canada remain intolerable.

Depression era line-ups for food, for shelter, even to use the shower in some facilities.

There are shelter conditions across the country that in many cases do not meet the UN Standards for Refugee Camps. Only a few years ago a yellow school bus was used to shelter homeless people in Calgary during a cold alert.

Homeless people are forced to rely on themselves and create outdoor squats to live in. Conditions which rarely provide for adequate heat, toileting facilities or safety.

We have literally rotten infrastructure in existing housing, ranging from rooming houses to high-rises, left that way without federal infrastructure spending.

We have health catastrophes resulting from forced congregate living which includes exposure to Norwalk virus, tuberculosis, H1N1 and bedbugs.

We have growing family homelessness in many cities across Canada and politicians remaining ignorant or resistant to the opening of proper family shelters. In Calgary, families with children were forced for years into a nightly movement from church basement to church basement until community pressure was mounted for the city to open a real shelter.

All of this was worsened by the recession and job losses that lead to more homelessness.

What we are seeing today is what Naomi Klein refers to in her book Shock Doctrine. We are in the middle of a national disaster, so what has government done?

We have a growing reliance on the charitable sector to replace existing social services. Consider Toronto's 25+ year history with the faith-based Out of the Cold program.

We see cuts to social programs ranging from social assistance rates, to housing funding, to the Special Diet allowance in Ontario.

Despite numerous reports, social assistance reviews and research, there has been almost no movement on the basic issue of hunger.

Various government policies have looked to the private sector to solve our housing crisis including support for home ownership models and even the idea of privatizing Canada's largest landlord Toronto Community Housing Corporation.

Where did some of these ideas come from?

Well, you might be surprised to know that George Bush's homelessness czar Philip Mangano, as he is known, has spent a lot of time in Canada promoting his 'Housing First' model and what are known as '10 year plans'.

Housing First policies function as the overall umbrella for practices that include policies that target homeless people, new laws that criminalize visibly homeless people, the closing of shelter beds, street counts of people who are homeless, streets to homes type programs and the de-funding of survival supplies and outreach.

Policies that target range from the types of street furniture cities choose to where police cameras are situated.

Streets to Homes programs are one of the primary tools used to target the most visibly homeless, and it is doomed to failure without adequate, affordable, safe housing for people to move into and enough money for people to live on and eat.

Rules that prohibit city funded agencies from providing life-saving outreach supplies such as hot food and sleeping bags, seem the ultimate insult to basic human rights.

Without fighting these practices, we will see a growing intolerance and hate directed towards people facing housing need.

So let's face it, Housing is a right, a very basic human right.

Vancouver MP Libby Davies' Bill C-304 is now at third reading in the House of Commons. It is "An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians." This Act must pass.

We must also mobilize around our Constitutional Charter Challenge on the right to housing, filed in the court last year, so that we can win back our national housing program.

And finally, there is something for each of you to consider.

It's called 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 and it is a new way to think about your personal response to homelessness. Whether it is your time, your energy, your passion, your writing skills or your money – consider giving 1/3 to the services and programs that directly help homeless people (the shelters, food programs etc.), 1/3 to the solution which is housing (find a project in your community that is trying to build) and 1/3 to the advocacy work – to the groups that do not receive government funding but help to plant the seeds, create the wind and flex their muscle.

In closing, I have a personal anecdote to share. While playing a superhero game with my two grandsons age 2 and 4, they suddenly began to lose their superpowers. I was the wizard and I turned to the 4 year old and said "I grant you concentration so you can help focus your brain to solve the emergency." To the 2 year old I said "I give you a heart." This is all related to the Wizard of Oz of course. The 4 year old suddenly stopped his play, turned to me and said in all seriousness **'Heart is justice'**.

There can be no justice in Canada given the state of our homeless crisis, people are dying for a home and the problem seems to worsen daily. The answer, the real solution to our homeless emergency is simple; we need to reinstate our national housing policy. Like the Wizard of Oz story, our governments and our elected representatives need to find their heart, some brains, and the courage to bring about the basic rights and human justice that Canadians so desperately need and deserve.

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