"Man, I just need a job"

Serving People Experiencing Homelessness in an Economic-Focused Society

by

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ABSTRACT

People going through homelessness in the contemporary U.S. struggle with a number of dehumanizing challenges. Even as some attempt to secure employment and end their homelessness, they may run into difficulties because they have been Othered to such a significant level. They have effectively been left out of society because of their lack of participation in its dominant activity as prescribed by market fundamentalism, the creation and exchange of goods. The following thesis seeks to explore the experience of homelessness for those within a homeless shelter environment in an economic-focused society. It utilizes Midrash Social Research Methodology (MSRM) to focus on the voice of the person going through homelessness, the marginalized Other. It relies on the phenomenology of the 20th-Century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in an effort to explore the meaning and knowledge to be found in conversations held with the Other. The goal of this thesis is to propose a purposeful refocusing on service through conversation. The issue of homelessness is multi-faceted and its causes are as diverse as the people who experience it. Service providers in particular must engage those being Othered, and they must provide support in ways that allow for pluralistic realities, not prescribing singular means of ending homelessness.
DEDICATION

To my mother and my father.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“If you were starting a new employment program to serve people experiencing homelessness, what is the first and most important task you would start with?”

“Building a relationship with the client.”

The following thesis is my account of the conversations I have held with my clients, building those relationships. I have been working as an Employment Specialist at a homeless shelter in a large urban area, directly meeting with people experiencing homelessness and supporting them in their employment searches, with the hope that earned income is part of the client’s path toward ending homelessness. A primary lesson that I have taken away from my experiences, as instanced by the quotation above, is that paramount to helping people in any sort of service environment is the duty to connect with the people whom one is serving. There is a vital need to recognize them and their inherent assets, which are most frequently gleaned from conversation.

Vocabulary such as “relationship-building” and “conversation” can ring somewhat hollow and business-like, but the words’ proposal here attempts to offer a different focus. The goal here is to significantly reformulate how social service providers, employers, stakeholders, and people throughout society interact with people going through homelessness in a way that compels recognition of each individual for
their humanity. The types of relationships and conversations exampled and advocated for in the work below should focus their attention to the perspective of the “marginalized Other,” the person going through homelessness in contemporary society. The relationships and conversations should be alert to the struggle of the Other while also striving to significantly serve and empower them in creative and dialogic ways.

The work below focuses primarily on my perspectives, and it instances the knowledge I gained from my first year in my position at the homeless shelter. This work utilizes a methodology which values the conversation between self and an-Other as an authentic way in which knowledge is produced. This is Midrash Social Research Methodology (MSRM) as developed by Levinasian scholar Devorah Wainer in her work, *Beyond the Wire: Levinas Vis-Á-Vis Villawood* (2010). This methodology relies heavily on the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas, and it has been utilized in an effort to bring critical attention to the experience of those living in homeless shelters, particularly those looking to secure employment. This methodology brings down barriers between the researcher and their data, allowing for and encouraging the researcher to explore and examine their experiences working with people who have been marginalized. It utilizes autoethnographic narrative while focusing on the relation of the Self to the Other and allowing each to present themselves as they are in all of their uniqueness. Thus, as I write, I at
once present the perspectives of researcher, author, student, homeless shelter employee, service provider, Employment Specialist, and the many other hats I wear as a person. Important to the perspective that I bring to this account is the value that I personally hold on employment and my career. I remember coming out of a private university with a solid internship experience under my belt, and not being able to find a job anywhere—I spent months looking for work, applying for jobs, and not receiving any calls back for interviews. This not only brings a connection with the people I serve who have been unsuccessfully looking for work, but it shapes the way that I converse with those who are not actively looking for work. In a homeless shelter environment in which people are almost universally encouraged to use their time to find work, we must find ways to engage them in conversation and recognize their unique humanity despite a lack of economic participation that I and the rest of society may take for granted.

Shelters, as social service agencies, can not function as businesses despite rhetoric pervasive throughout the field that non-profit agencies must operate in business fashion. They cannot be focused solely on any singular or one-size-fits-all approach to ending homelessness. They must focus on relationship-building. If a Case Manager or Employment Specialist is to reconnect a client to society, they need to start by providing them with a real connection to somebody. Organizations that provide emergency shelter have to see the talents and
capabilities in their clients that no one else sees. Shelter organizations can not just identify the people they serve through their lack of housing. They have to build relationships with the people they serve, and we, speaking as a member of this staff, need to fully understand how/why the people we serve have become disconnected to this severe degree.

This complements any sort of strategy that service organizations may employ to end homelessness because it is a dramatic and necessary re-focusing on service. No matter where clients are—on the streets, in a shelter, in supportive housing, living independently—the necessity remains for these organizations to be willing and able to listen to their stories and to focus primarily on building relationships through conversation. Homelessness, like any other social issue, cannot end without conversation. Particularly, homelessness cannot end without conversation in which the person who finds themselves pushed to the margins of an economic-focused society (the client going through homelessness) encounters people driven to serve them, support them, and connect with them. Finding a job to emerge from homelessness and to re-gain self-sufficiency (the social expectation of economic independence and the purpose of my position) can not happen without conversations in which service is the emergent and vital goal of social service workers.

A significant majority of the clients who we serve come to us and say, “Man, I just need a job,” implying that they want a job, any job, to help
them end their homelessness. They feel the pressure to find work, even when they do not truly wish to work, because of the constant emphasis on economic participation as a necessary precursor to participation in society. This pressure is imperative for those of us working as social service providers to recognize. Including the phenomenology of Levinas is important for explaining the quasi-autoethnography to service professionals in particular because it provides a vital context for working in social services. It places value on the “face of the Other” without the inhibition of judgment or social expectation while emphasizing the necessity of serving each individual for no other reason than they are human (Levinas 1961). There is infinite value in each individual’s infinite perspectives, and service providers must be free, indeed, must be compelled, to bring all their disparate perspectives with them to the jobs that they do. Clients can not show up for the providers if providers do not fully show up for them. No doubt, providers offering social services to people experiencing homelessness must show up fully for each client because these are the people who have been pushed to the margins of society to such a significant level.

Levinas’ work contributes to this analysis in the way that his phenomenology presents the “ethical event.” By including his work, there is an encouragement for the researcher to support the marginalized Other, recognizing and valuing the infinitude of the Face of the Other. In so doing, the researcher is compelled to serve. The researcher is compelled
to act in ways that will support the marginalized Other that are vital for social justice research—social justice research must be active and do more than it observes or accounts.

Giorgio Agamben (1998) brings value to this account because his description of Homo Sacer so closely matches the way in which I understand people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. Others who have worked with this population, such as Feldman (2004), also use Agamben’s Homo Sacer. Homo Sacer is a concept that, in its complexity, helps describe and make more relevant the lives of people experiencing homelessness because it describes how people experiencing homelessness are denied membership in society. Agamben’s Homo Sacer is the “sacred man” of ancient Roman law who has been cast out of society as an outlaw, thus lacking rights and protections all else can assume while maintaining an ambivalent relationship with the rule of society in which the exception of this outlaw helps to distinguish the boundaries of the socio-juridical order. This explanation has been valuable for me as I have been working with people going through homelessness because they can so closely match the experience of being designated as outlaws.

Working as an employment specialist, it has been extremely evident to me how homeless people are denied membership in society because of their lack of participation in the economy. Recognizing that ours is a society in which participation is focused in economic relations,
people experiencing homelessness are designated as Homo Sacer because of their inactivity in the formal economy. Kathleen Arnold (2004) highlights this sort of extreme focus on one’s economic activity, and she helps to place in context how people experiencing homelessness in particular are deemed outlaws because of their lack of economic participation. Agamben’s and Arnold’s perspectives, as well as that of Margaret Sommers (2008), inform and help to describe my understanding of how people going through homelessness are challenged in their efforts to gain access to society. They inform how a normative society considers people on the streets to be irresponsible, thus justifying that they should not be members of the social order.

The goal of this thesis is to propose a paradigm shift for those serving people experiencing homelessness. This is important as a social justice issue because those going through homelessness are prevented from full membership in society, and there must be an effort to more seriously consider their perspectives as human. There needs to be a refocusing on service and a dramatic refocus on the recognition that people going through homelessness are people. In current shelter situations, there are efforts to create structures which are meant to provide each client, each individual going through homelessness, with plans of action which can lack variance and which can be dictated. Clients must be empowered to create their own decisions about how to move their lives
forward, and this is to be accomplished first and foremost through conversation.

The following accounts emerge as a conversation, including dialogues between myself and my clients as well as myself and my co-workers. While these dialogues are informed by exterior theories and texts, the emphasis should be placed on how vital perspectives revolving around the issue of homelessness emerge from the person-to-person dialogues.

The inherent value of conversation among staff and client comes from the fact that I have noticed how the people who do not achieve a level of intimacy or connection are the ones who flounder in their homelessness. Human connection encourages and empowers the people within this marginalized population to flourish. Human connection also functions to counter social injustice in that it promotes the recognition of individuals' humanity, thus demanding greater acknowledgement of a need for membership in society. This thesis is unique because it strives to depict, as quoted by my co-worker,

Hey, actually the most successful—and most challenging—tactic to actually serve and help other people is genuinely opening up your ear and your heart. Otherwise, it's empty, meaningless delivery of goods that probably won't actually create a foundation for people to end their own homelessness.
Chapter 2

SETTING

The first people I see in the morning, though they can’t recognize me, are the dozen-or-so men who sleep on the cracked and broken concrete slabs on the block of 10th Avenue and Washington. The sun has not yet broken the horizon at 6 am, and my headlights shine upon them as I make the turn towards the campus where I work. I have driven in from the suburbs, only passing people in cars—these stationary and horizontal forms covered in heaps of clothes and blankets are the first figures I can identify as human. It is clear that they are sleeping. Many of them lean against the fence which blocks them out of the parking lot of the J.D. Boxing Gym. I am conscious of how my vehicle’s headlights may wake them prematurely from their slumber.

I know these sleeping masses are nearly uniformly men because few women make it a habit of sleeping out in the open where they can be subjected to unsolicited violence. My mind stops and considers this thought, the realization that homeless women can be limited in their freedoms as homeless persons compared to their male counterparts.

I quickly refocus on the road as I pull into the campus gated employee and volunteer parking lot. Gated. As in the kind of gated that requires a pass key for access, gated. Gated. As in the kind of gated that separates the employees and volunteers from the surrounding blocks of people living on the street, gated. This is the first physical evidence of the
perceived and framed dangerousness of the environment. The gate designates the enclosed area as something separate, something distinct from the area which surrounds it. And the gate accomplishes this quite effectively. This campus is *not* just another part of the city, it is *not* just another few acres between the State Capital building and the downtown district. It is an area unto itself, with its own rules for behavior, decorum, inclusion, and exclusion.

This physical space unto itself is peculiar in the way that it serves as a hub for and specifically caters to people experiencing homelessness. Within the city, this is the main place where homeless people are recognized as *people* in need of services. It is unique in the ways that it allows people who are otherwise left out of normative social activities to find those services and participate in those activities which we consider to be naturally and justifiably human. These services include healthcare, access to food/food security, mental health services, employment services, recreational programs, public restrooms, a post office, substance abuse counseling, and a chaplaincy for the homeless. I work here in one of the employment service programs.

This area is extremely unique in the way that it has been set aside. The gated campus and much of the surrounding area seems harsh and unwelcoming to anyone, though it is open to the public. The campus can readily be linked to Agamben’s description of the state of exception. The concept of exception is here described in *Homo Sacer* (1998):
The exception is a kind of exclusion. What is excluded from the general rule is an individual case. But the most proper characteristic of the exception is that what is excluded in it is not, on account of being excluded, absolutely without exception to the rule. On the contrary, what is excluded in the exception maintains itself in relation to the rule in the form of the rule’s suspension (18).

This area is peculiar in how it remains a part of Phoenix, yet it is set apart by the gates, people, and security which identify it as a distinct space. The campus is non-normative not because it lacks the rules of the surrounding city, but rather, because it has its own rules of behavior, decorum, inclusion, and exclusion. That is, the rules and expectations of the surrounding city are suspended in this area in the interest of serving this population.

The campus has its own security force specially designated by the county to work with homeless people on and around the campus. These officers are empowered to execute rules that would not apply elsewhere in the city, removing people from the space for days, weeks, or permanently for varying offenses.

One of my clients once missed a follow-up appointment that he had scheduled with me, and he came back a week later.

Client: “I’m sorry I missed our appointment last week man, I had a little run-in with D.” The name was that of a portly security guard we both knew.

“Oh, really? What happened? How long were you off campus?”
“Well I was just sitting in the Day Room, trying to cool off from the heat, and D opened a door into my seat. I gave him some lip, and he just started yelling at me.”

“He just started yelling at you because you gave him some lip? Did you say something about his mother or something?”

“I didn’t say anything about his mom, but then he gave me a 10-day eviction from the campus. I still don’t know the exact rule that I broke.”

The client in this case was prevented from accessing the campus because of the area’s exception of normative rules in the surrounding legal structure (for instance, the ability of security personnel to make decisions of punishment, “eviction,” without even articulating the wrongdoing to the offender is an excluded behavior in the rest of Phoenix). The campus’ exception does play out in a very positive way as well—the space’s exceptional nature allows it to serve people experiencing homelessness in ways that would otherwise be less tolerable in the surrounding society.

Homeless people are generally considered separate from the normative, housed general public. As sociologist Howard Bahr describes, “There are some functional bases for the generalized distrust of the disaffiliate. It is not so much that he is a deviant as that he is outside the usual system of sanctions, and hence his behavior cannot be predicted with any certainty” (Skid Row, 1973, p. 41). Bahr is describing what he suggests to be a process of “disaffiliation” of homeless people from a
normative public, but his words here apply in the way that they help to describe that people experiencing homelessness are perceived as a group that should be feared because they do not participate in the activities of society as expected. Those who do not operate on the same scale of incentives cannot be trusted because there is no way of predicting their behavior. Their activity/non-activity challenges the validity of our way of life, and we not only fear them because of their difference, but attempt to shun them from the very things that would enable them to participate in society on the same level of activity.

The plight of people experiencing homelessness can be bare, tiring, physically and emotionally draining, disempowering, dangerous, and dehumanizing. In most ways, they are denied the full freedoms, rights, and expectations that the majority of us are able to enjoy uninhibited, and this is because they are stigmatized by their lack of what we understand to be a home.

Political scientist Leonard Feldman (2004) analyzes how homelessness can play out within our society, and some of his most valuable contributions come in the form of analyses of legislation and police practices that reinforce homeless persons’ bare life. Some of these come in the following: “panhandling restrictions, sidewalk-sitting ordinances, public-sleeping bans, police sweeps of homeless encampments, and the confiscation of street-dwellers’ property” (57). These laws and practices seem to be specifically directed at disturbing
and criminalizing people who are experiencing homelessness. Each of these also only serves to further criminalize persons who are already separated from our understanding of acceptable behavior of society’s members.

Within his analysis of legal precedent, Feldman makes clear that the legal and social expectation is for a type of liberal citizenship which is based nearly entirely on individual responsibility. He illustrates, “Within an individualistic framework of voluntarism, agency, and lifestyle choices, the court both ‘recognizes’ the agency of the homeless and turns the homeless into bare life, identified with trash, dirt, and willful criminality” (66). In this method, homeless people are to be punished for the seemingly anti-social decisions they have made for themselves. They are said to have made certain life choices which have led to them being considered Other, and now it is the role of the court (indeed, most every social institution) to protect the rest of society from them.

Feldman concretely connects Giorgio Agamben’s conceptualization of “Homo Sacer” (1998) to persons experiencing homelessness in the U.S. Homelessness may be the experience of life in our society which most easily allows us to recognize Homo Sacer. Feldman uses Agamben’s description of the “sovereign ban” to show how homeless persons are prevented from taking part in public activities. The ban simultaneously excludes and includes the bearer of the punishment because that which is excluded defines the rules and boundaries of the
community. In this way, homeless people are banned from taking part in
the normative activities of society, such as utilizing public space in the
form of parks and sidewalks; however, they are still recognized because
their lack of what we define as a home is understood as the boundary or
prerequisite for membership in our society.

My clients, though they live through this experience of being
“banned” from public life, only extremely rarely have an understanding of
the concept of Homo Sacer. I asked a client one day, after he had just
reported a story of being hassled by the police for sitting on the sidewalk,
“Hey man, isn’t it hard living on the street? Don’t you ever feel a bit like a
Homo Sacer?”

“Homo Sacer? What’s that? You calling me a name?”

I explained the basic idea briefly before moving to more immediate
issues. “Homo Sacer” is the “sacred man” of archaic Roman law—he may
be killed without punishment, but he can not be sacrificed. Agamben uses
this ancient status of punishment to describe how one can be considered
in a state of exception, simultaneously both inside and outside the socio-
political order. Agamben quotes the law’s definition from Pompeius
Festus,

The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged an account
of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him
will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it
is noted that ‘if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the
plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide.’ This is why it is
considered customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred
(Agamben, 71).
The law of Homo Sacer establishes a state of exception to which the experience of the sacred person is relegated. The experience is made distinct by their exclusion from both civil and canon law (unable to participate in civil procedures and unable to participate in religious happenings due to their unsacrificability) as well as “the violence to which he finds himself exposed” (82). This violence comes from nearly every angle, including the state, and it can be unrelenting.

People experiencing homelessness experience this designation as Homo Sacer in the way they are left out as participants in society. They experience society as the exception—they are the exception which defines those who are full members of society, citizens. People lacking a home define a normative, housed population of citizens who enjoy full membership in society. Without that membership, there are no protections of safety; to the extreme, there is no recognition of humanity.

As mentioned above, the campus is the exceptional space created for people to realize their humanity and for society to interact with this exceptional population that is otherwise separated.

I work here at the campus that serves as the state of exception. This is where people experiencing homelessness can experience a greater recognition of their humanity, and it is difficult not to be self-critical of how little I have explored the place. I have largely remained secluded behind the parking lot gate and within my office. I know little about the
campus, except that it nearly exclusively serves persons experiencing homelessness.

After driving into the gated parking lot each morning, I park mere steps from the back door of my office. I rarely, if ever, need to leave this office, and I almost never have occasion to venture out into the day room of the center.

The office in which I work is very different from the rest of the building, and is particularly different from the day room which serves as the core of the center. This has been done on purpose, to create an office which holds an air of professionalism despite its surroundings.

The day room, on the other hand, is not an area of professionalism. It is structured as a loose octagon, with different services’ office doors and a library lining the periphery. The room is lit primarily by sky light, but also uses florescent bulbs. It is never very bright. There is a welcome desk near the front doors to the center, from where clients can be directed to the various social service agencies inside the center and in Phoenix in general. Randomly placed throughout the middle of the room are circular tables which could maybe fit eight chairs around each.

The most striking thing about the room is the smell. Even after all the surfaces have been wiped down with bleach, the unpleasant, musky, salty, sweet odor of un-showered bodies remains. Everyone in the center has access to showers through more than one service. Every surface is either linoleum, plastic, or metal, and it is wiped down twice a day. The
odor remains. It is not a heavy, lingering odor, nor does it seem to be emanating from any particular spot. But the odor is one that seems to simply be a part of the room, something as natural as the light, which will forever remain a defining aspect of the space.

Doors to the center are unlocked at 7:30 am. The most apt comparison to the center’s door opening procedure is the opening of the doors of a department store on a weekend morning in December. The people standing outside waiting for the doors to open are all hopefully peering in through the glass doors, while the employees inside bustle around making last second adjustments before they stop and stand calmly, waiting for the hands of the clock to turn before they turn the lock of the door. Some clients are more eager than others, rushing inside somewhat hungrily. Others stride in slowly and take their time, though they had made a point of being near the front of the queue for entrance.

Both speeds head to the periphery of the day room first. Some duck into a service office. Others grab chairs off the stacks created on the perimeter, dragging them to the tables or areas of the room to which they wish to lay claim. This second group’s behaviors speak directly to one of the center’s main purposes, which is to provide a space where people can come to relax, congregate, socialize, and just be, all safe from the elements. Some people seem not to come to the center for any purpose than to sit inside. I wonder at how many of the people I see in the room on
any given day are the same men I risk waking with my headlights in the morning.

The center serves as a social hall for many to converse, as a place to nap, or as a place to play chess. It creates a certain sentiment of community where most are familiar to each other. This mutual recognition reaffirms each individual’s humanity, and this is important within an environment filled with people who are not held in the highest regard by society. The recognition of peoples' humanity is what makes this day room so special. The way that people joke and interact is something that I can miss when I am secluded within our employment office.

One struggles to imagine a room filled with such a visually diverse population. All are represented here: tall, short, skinny, obese, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, old, young, dirty, clean, professional, tattooed, bald, blonde, brunette, dentured, weighed down with bags, confused, angry, high, drunk, fashionable… The list goes on. And yet, I feel like I stand out here. Sitting in a huge room with all kinds of people surrounding me, with most likely not one of them interested in me or what I am doing there, I am uncomfortable and aware of my status as an intruding outsider. Perhaps this was recognition that I was an outsider—that by walking through and not taking part in the activity of the room, wearing my button-down shirt, slacks, and shelter ID, I somehow make my own presence unnatural. Perhaps this was simply an egotistical focus on myself and my place within the fray.
One of the most difficult aspects of working in a homeless shelter can be that the clients who you think of most often and most readily are the ones who have remained homeless for a long period of time or who have been in and out of the shelter repeatedly. They are easy to remember by the simple virtue of their constant presence in and around the shelter. Thinking about some of these long-term clients, I remember them because I will have a standing appointment with them every two weeks to discuss their job searches, and then I will also see them doing chores around the shelter during the day, playing cards in the day room of the shelter, or returning to the shelter with a plastic bag of food from Circle K in the early afternoon. I find it difficult to see them all the time like this because if I am seeing them in the course of my work, that means they are not doing as much as they could in order to move out of the shelter and to end their homelessness. If I see them playing cards in the shelter, my job can be viewed as pointless because they are not spending their time looking for work.

My job as an Employment Specialist is to support the “job-ready” clients in their job search. My position has been created in order to provide resources and guidance to people experiencing homelessness so they can rejoin the ranks of normative society.

Potential funders for the shelter love the sound of my job. The Employment Services office is always a highlight of a tour because the funders almost universally remark, “Wow, what a great program! This is
what they really need.” It can seem all too easy for a student of the social sciences to criticize people of wealth and how they can be so disconnected from reality, but I think there are some important tones to draw from the above quote.

First, those wealthy people can recognize that as people find work, they become more fully human. Securing employment and earning enough money to become self-sufficient is something with which they can seriously identify.

Stop. I am no longer writing from my own perspective. I’m explaining the inner thoughts of wealthy donors, an experience with which I can not identify in any way.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

The methodology utilized in this project is not based upon the projected opinions of others. It is based on the writer's own experiences, and focuses primarily on the knowledge and critical perspective to be gleaned from conversation. This is Midrash Social Research Methodology (MSRM), and it has been developed as a way of critically addressing and researching social justice issues.

MSRM was developed by Devorah Wainer in her 2010 work, *Beyond the Wire: Levinas Vis-à-vis Villawood*. In her account of working with asylum-seekers in Australia, she laid out this method as a way of bringing into the account the voice of the marginalized “Other” in a way that recognizes the complexity of the relationship of the researcher and researched.

The methodology resembles autoethnographic narrative in the way that knowledge is uncovered from the story of the author. MSRM was created as a kind of arts-based research practice as encouraged by Sociologist Patricia Leavy’s *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (2009). Leavy advocates for arts-based practices because they can accurately meet researchers’ goals, as posed here: “Arts-based practices are particularly useful for research projects that aim to describe, explore, or discover” (12). MSRM seeks to describe the truly lived
experience of the marginalized Other in critical and authentic ways that recognizes the human perspectives involved in the researcher’s work.

A chief consideration for the utilization of arts-based research practice in the current project is the way in which it presents a realistic and critical view of the difficulties people going through homelessness struggle with within an economic-focused society. Leavy presents how arts-based practices can be vital within social justice research in the following:

“[A]rts-based practices can be employed as a means of creating critical awareness or raising consciousness. This is important in social justice-oriented research that seeks to reveal power relations (often invisible to those in privileged groups), raise critical race or gender consciousness, build coalitions across groups, and challenge dominant ideologies” (13).

Utilizing MSRM in this project serves to present a critical view of how people experiencing homelessness struggle to be recognized as fully human in ways that bring to life the emotional and social challenges they find in attempting to secure employment.

Wainer’s unique methodology is founded upon the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas’ phenomenology of ethics helps to reframe the dominant paradigm of Western political thought which has contributed to the statelessness of people experiencing homelessness in the United States. Wainer’s *Beyond the Wire* serves as the originary example of the methodology, and the work here serves as a valuable instance to explain how Levinas’ philosophy can offer a shift in paradigm
for addressing how we recognize, serve, and hold responsibility for the Other.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Kaunas, Lithuania in 1906, a town so heavily influenced by Judaism as to be known as “Jerusalem of the East” (Malka 2006, 3). This early Hebraic influence would carry through to his later philosophy. As a young adult, he moved to Strasbourg, France to begin his studies in Western philosophy. His studies in this period would also have a major influence on his later work. Citing Peperzak in Wainer, although his work also refers to Buber, Bergson, Rosenzweig, Marcel, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and others Husserl and Heidegger are the only twentieth-century philosophers who are almost constantly present in his thought, whether as inaugurators of a new way of philosophising or as respected adversaries with whom he is in discussion (Peperzak 112).

Levinas appreciated the philosophy of Husserl so greatly because rather than focusing intently on the study of the self, the ego, as is present in the majority of the Western philosophical tradition, Husserl emphasized a more grounded consciousness based on presence and non-formal theory. Simmons (2003) helps to describe this movement toward more grounded philosophy, “Truth must be based on ‘direct intuition into the phenomenon’ and not theoretical ideas” (26). Philosophy is rendered useless if it does not take into account the normative thoughts and behaviors of humans, particularly if it constantly reproduces itself as an abstract study of the ego. Levinas was also heavily influenced by the work of Heidegger because of the way that the German philosopher
concretely brought the experience of the world into the tradition of philosophy based on the totality of Being.

Levinas attempted to break with not only Husserl and Heidegger, but the majority of Western philosophical tradition because of its heavy reliance upon totalizing themes. Totalizing themes such as Husserl’s Consciousness and Heidegger’s Being reduce the entire world into terms that are knowable and explainable. The designation “homeless” in our society represents a totalizing theme in the way that if an individual is deemed homeless, their lack of housing can tend to serve as their only identifying trait. Such totalizing, from Husserl and Heidegger to more contemporary homelessness, objectifies everything and everyone in an effort to make the world and humanity comprehensible. By so doing, no room is left for the transcendent, that which is infinite and cannot be readily explained. Levinas sought to pluralize the way in which we see reality, pushing us past an expectation of an objective and fully knowable reality.

Since Plato and Aristotle, the emphasis of philosophy has been placed in ontology, on discovering the knowable. It has also focused inward, negating the importance of the Other. In this way, totalizing themes are “anti-human” as well as politically totalitarian in nature, because they value the ideal of a theme even more than humanity.

The phenomenology which Levinas puts forth is born from his plural realities, his own life experiences as a Jew, as a prisoner of Germany
during the Second World War, and having his family killed at Auschwitz.
The totalizing and authoritarian themes of Nazi Germany’s project enabled
the destruction of humanity to an extreme level.

Levinas’ philosophy and his experience as a Jew during WWII can
indirectly be applied to the experience of homelessness for some in the
contemporary United States. Being separated from society, with a lack of
“a right to have rights,” and a simultaneous destruction of identity in the
form of a relation to other people translates loosely between Levinas and
the life of someone living on the street or in a shelter. Both have been
made distinct and separated from full social life because of totalizing
themes. For Levinas, the themes were caught up in the violence,
conquest, and anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime; on the other hand, for
someone experiencing homelessness, the theme is a market
fundamentalism which reduces people to labor inputs and non-participants
to Homo Sacer.

The Levinasian project is to create a radically different framework of
thought, one of relation to one another, one based on ethics. He begins
with the appearance of the Other. This appearance disrupts and
displaces the formerly inward focus of the ego, and in the consideration of
the Other, the ego is able to define itself. The ego is *a priori* animalistic
and focused on maintaining being, but this is shattered by the presentation
of the Other. “However, with the appearance of the human—and this is
my entire philosophy—there is something more important than my life, and
that is the life of the other” (Levinas, et al., “The Paradox of Morality” 172 in Simmons). The ego is shaken from self-contemplation to recognize and respond to the transcendent greatness of the Other. The importance of the self is forgotten as one strives to contribute to something more imperative than itself. In the current project, where a service provider (me, the author, the ego) strives to support the Other (the client staying in a homeless shelter), the provider is brought outside of him or herself, induced to serve and work for the “important” and significant human in front of them.

In this, Levinas is not simply creating a philosophy based on the arche of Other. The Other has value, but the most vital part of this phenomenology is how the Other interacts with and displaces the ego. We cannot possibly understand everything that the Other is, has been, or will be, and that infinitude extends the Other into transcendence which we recognize as more important than our own lives. When the researcher accepts this foundation for the methodology, the practitioner of MSRM is compelled to look at reality from the perspective of the Other with whom he or she is working.

Levinas examines the ethical moment from the presentation of the face of the Other. This is the point from which his phenomenology takes off. This is not the face of any single individual, but rather, the ambiguous face of human-ness. In Hebraic terms, the face is that which the light of God shone upon at Sinai when the Israelites and all peoples were given
the Ten Commandments in the Book of Exodus. Thus, when one sees the face of the other, he/she sees the light of God.

Simmons here describes the Levinasian face of the Other:

The face of the Other has a paradoxical and dual structure. While it is extreme frailty, it is also ultimate authority. The vulnerability of the face commands me to respond, to do something, to ease its misery. This command does not carry the weight of force, instead it originates in frailty. The face is so destitute that it can only command. Thus, the face is pure expression. It expresses alterity itself, an alterity which overflows thought (Simmons 2003, 41).

From a Levinasian perspective, when one sees the face, they are immediately called to not only respond, but to respond in service. The self will call into question their own ego/actions/existence to promote the greatest level of being for the Other. When the self sees the Other and the infinite face, they are challenged to justify their own existence.

The self does not have a choice in its service of the Other’s call to action—the responsibility is extreme and pre-eminent and the ego is thus subject to the Other. There is no limit to the responsibility the ego has for the Other. Contra so-called “reason-based” philosophy, the phenomenology of the ethical relationship with the Other is grounded in an experiential exchange or conversation between the ego and the Other. The conversation can offer a new grounding for knowledge in the form of Midrash.

Conversation is vital to this methodology. Levinas here identifies conversation as the primary action of relation to the Other, “The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as
conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an ‘I,’ as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself” (2005, 39). The way in which the self relates with the other is primarily and most basically through conversation. In this conversation, the self moves past an inward focus on the ego and is compelled to consider another reality, a transcendent Other.

The exchange between self and Other is the origin of knowledge. Levinas expresses, “Discourse is not simply a modification of intuition (or of thought), and original relation with exterior being… It is the production of meaning” (Levinas 2005, 66). We are to find meaning through discourse, through talking with the Other. This concept is vital to this methodology in the way that it allows us to focus our attention on the significance and lessons which arise from talking with the Other.

In Otherwise than Being (2008), his major work after Totality and Infinity, Levinas responded to claims that his ethical framework was unethical. He particularly offered a new presentation of his thought as a response to criticism from his friend Jacques Derrida. Derrida suggested that the conversation between ego and Other occurred with language which is inherently “thematizing, violent, and appropriative” and thus unethical. Levinas tightened the scope of his ethics to focus on the ethical moment, the primordial and pre-linguistic relation of self to Other. To achieve this, Levinas explains the moment in terms of the “saying.” The saying represents an immediate and contemporary expression which
occurs before definitions, and it is thus nonviolent because it avoids totalizing themes. The saying dislodges the ego and lays it bare before the Other, “Thus, the saying is otherwise than Being” (Simmons 2003, 51) because the ego is defined through infinite and transformative expression rather than a simply totalizing essence.

The “said,” then, is the thematizing language for which Derrida chastises. It allows description and the insertion of totalizing themes which are necessary to attempt to describe the transcendent instance of saying. In the order of occurrence, ethics (saying) precedes ontology (said).

Wainer expands upon two Hebraic concepts to achieve a greater understanding of Levinas’ goal in creating a new ethics, Chesed and Hineni. Chesed relates closely to the event of the saying, and she defines it as “the first act that has no cause” (Wainer 2010, 49). The presentation of the Other originally has no purpose, and Chesed/saying only serves as the initiator of the subsequent interaction/communicated said between ego and Other. Moreover, chesed is “an action, not a thought, concept or attitude” or “loving-kindness” (50). The orginary act of ethics is thus rendered an-archical, without guiding principle, and it is indelibly marked by an initial kindness which draws the ego out of itself and towards the Other.

Wainer begins her description of Hineni with an etymology of the word described by Putnam. The word is a combination of two elements:
hiné and ni. She defines the ni as a contraction of ani, translated to I, the self (Putnam 37). Hiné most directly translates to “behold,” but since the root meaning does not offer any reference to “seeing,” it relates to a presentative “here” (38). “So, Hineni…is the presentation of myself” (Wainer 2010, 50). Further, hineni is the making of oneself available for the Other. Wainer explains that this availability is not locational; rather, it is a full situational presence of the whole self.

For Wainer, however, hineni is more than a simple, “Hello, I'm here.” Hineni itself is a call to action, one which deeply relates to the ethical response of responsibility of the ego to the Other. There is a commandment of action that rests within the presentation of self. Within the current project, the author’s ethical response to clients who experience homelessness is necessarily initiated by a hineni event. It is an episode in which the self sees the Face of the marginalized Other and he/she knows they have been called to respond. The exchange which follows the ethical moment invariably offers an exposure of each-Other’s uniqueness, disallowing any potential for universalizing strategies for our “Employment Specialist-Client” relationship. Recognizing that each has an unknowable and transcendent selfhood, particularly in terms of a vocation, the author’s outlook must constantly return to the ethical event, or there emerges the risk of universalizing practices and relationships. This would diminish the humanity of people who already are viewed with suspicion, distrust, and as less than human. Each interaction with each
client must be attentive to the peculiar and special relationship presented
as one presents themselves fully and actively, as instanced within the
following midrash.
Chapter 4

MONDAY MORNING FOLLOW-UP

I walk into my office first with my client quick to follow. I have just offered an invite of “Come on back, Mr. F.,” which may outwardly seem like more of a mandate than an invitation in the office outside of my own hearing of myself.

I always call my clients “Mr. _____” or “Ms. _____.“ I always call them “sir” or “ma’am.” I feel that it is professional and respectful. My elderly father would be proud, having never accepted “yeahs,” rather, “yes sirs” and “yes ma’ams.” To a certain degree, I am hoping my respectful titles will humble myself before my clients so that I will seem less like an authoritative agent of the occasionally over-bureaucratic shelter. This is important because I often feel that clients shut themselves off when they feel threatened or lessened by some sort of authority. I’m hoping that I can encourage a professional mindset and confidence they can take with them as they search for a job. I also use the vocabulary of “client” because it portrays a business-like service relationship. Persons at the shelter are not “patients” because they are not being “fixed” or “cured” in any way, nor are they “customers” because they are not purchasing anything from us. Instead, they are clients because we are here to serve, act as advocates, and support them. I thought long and hard about much of this terminology when I began working at the shelter.
I walk across my office with my hand in my pocket to the seat the shelter allows me to use behind the desk. My client jovially suggests from behind me, “You don’t have to call me Mister, you can just call me J.”

“Are you sure, sir? I only call clients Mister out of respect.”

“Oh yeah, please don’t call me mister. You make me sound like my dad. And ‘sir’ just makes me feel old.”

“Oh yeah, I remember you telling me that. Sorry.”

“No problem”

We sit in the office chairs across from each other at once. He slouches back in his seat, with his elbows on the armrests and his palms on his thighs. I lean forward with my elbows on my desk.

“So how’s your job search going?”

“Uhhh… it’s OK. It’s going.”

“It’s going? That’s good. What’ve you been up to? Go for any interviews? Get calls back from putting in applications?”

“No, not really.”

“Well what have you been up to?”

“I put in a couple of applications online last week, but I haven’t heard nothing back yet. I think it might be this address. Everyone knows it’s the shelter.”

“You mean employers aren’t calling you back because they can see you’re staying at a homeless shelter from your address?”

“Yeah, man. Nobody wants to hire someone homeless.”
“There are some employers who really do want to hire someone staying here at the shelter because they know you’re having a rough time and they want to give the job to someone who really needs it.”

“C’mon man, you know that’s not true, at least not for the kind of jobs I’m looking for. They want someone stable.”

I lean back and shift in my seat a bit. “Of course they want to hire someone from the shelter—they know you’ll work hard. On top of that, employers love that rags-to-riches story.”

“Whatever man, there’s no such thing as rags-to-riches. They just want everyone to believe that so everyone thinks they have a shot. The truth is, if you don’t have anything, you’re homeless, no one believes you can work. They start off thinking you’re a lazy bum as soon as they know you’re staying down here.”

At this, I’m stumped. I’m at a complete loss of words because I don’t know how I could react. I am suddenly re-conscious that I have never been homeless. I have thought about this before, and about four months into my tenure here, I had the idea that I would try to stay a night in the shelter just to see what it is like. I never actually tried to stay in the shelter because I realized that I am too well known by clients and staff—this connection with me made me feel like the experience would be less authentic.

I have seen my other clients secure jobs, but I have no clue how hard it is to find a job when one is homeless. I have definitely been
jobless before, and I felt like I had no prospects before starting graduate school. But the entire time I spent jobless, I was living either at home or in my aunt’s townhome in Chicago, able to eat as much as I would like whenever I cared, with cable television. I remember my months-long experience looking for a job, any job, but that experience was so different from what the person in the seat before me was experiencing.

I have helped multiple homeless job seekers secure employment, encouraging them and attempting to guide them towards finding jobs. However, I have only ever served as a guide, seeing each client for a few minutes each week. I know what it is like to struggle through creating a resume with clients who cannot foresee themselves ever working again. I know what it is like to go through mock interviews with clients suffering from debilitating depression who cannot see any of their own assets. I know what it is like to help someone who has been homeless over a decade to pick out clothing to wear while submitting job applications in order to look more professional. These have been my experiences. This has been my reality.

I have never experienced homelessness. I do not even have any experiences that could come close to homelessness. I have spent a limited number of nights camping recreationally in the forest, and one night each sleeping on the floors of an airport and train station while traveling in Europe. I do not have a full understanding of what it is like to go through homelessness. Thus, I do not have a full understanding of
what it is like to conduct a job search while going through such a difficult, turbulent, exposed, and dangerous experience as homelessness. That is the reality of my clients, and there is no way I can claim to know it.

I have no clue what it is like to be homeless. I have no reference point for searching for a job while living in a shelter. Sleeping in a room of nearly 200 other men with remarkably terrible body odor and loud snoring, nothing but cold showers each day, and being forced to adapt my daily schedule around the shelter’s hours would have made my months-long job search an even more frustrating trial.

“If you really think it’s the address that’s holding you up, is there some other address you could potentially use? A friend’s place? A family member?”

“No,” he responds curtly.

“You seriously don’t know anyone in town whose address you could use?”

“I said no,” he spat, this time with a steely anger that showed in the clinching of his jaw. I thought back to my own hectic job search post-undergraduate. I always had an address I could put down on a resume. I always had a friend or someone I knew for support. Even if I was applying for jobs out of town, I would ask a friend in that town to use their address on my resume. I realized how luxurious it has been to have some sort of support nearly everywhere I go.
“OK then I really don’t know what to tell you about the address right now, I’ll have to get back with you with some other ideas. How else can I help you with your job search?”

“Matt, I don’t know,” he shrugs, shaking his head and looking down at the desk between us.

“I’m here to support you, man. This is all up to you. You’re the boss, I put the big chair on that side of the desk for a reason.”

A few weeks prior, I had switched office chairs. The chair that I had been using was a large, black office chair with comfortable armrests on wheels. The chair that I started using in its place was a smaller office chair that seemed less sturdy with a back that did not rise nearly as high. I made this transfer because after re-reading the mission of the organization, I really began to refocus my attention on how I could better empower my clients.

One of my first thoughts of how to empower was to really focus more on giving clients the option of how best I could support them in their job search. I did this by asking clients, “How can I best support you in your job search?” A problem I recognized, however, was that clients did not really know what to do at that point.

I hypothesized that by giving clients the larger, more comfortable and sturdy office chair, it would visibly and tangibly show that they are the “boss.” The switch would be allowing them to take charge of what they wanted from our office of resources. The symbolic gesture of the chair
would prove to clients that they choose how to conduct their job search. Further, it would show that they have the responsibility to make the decisions.

All of my co-workers noticed. None changed their own offices.

In the month that I had left the chairs switched, only one client mentioned anything about the chairs (Client: “Oh, I get the big chair!” Me: “Yeah, you’re the boss”). That particular client did not show much progress in his job search at all. None of the clients who sat in the chair sat up any more straight, none spoke more confidently, none made more requests, and none showed any kind of special progress beyond the pre-switch norm. I don’t think that any client noticed beyond the one client who commented.

I was a little hurt when I realized the futility of my experiment.

It was not truly a failure, but it showed a differentiation in values. The value I placed on the larger chair was not one shared by my clients. The experiment showed how I wanted to show up for my clients as someone wishing to empower. I presented myself as someone who takes notice of the power dynamics posed by placement of office furniture, and my clients showed up not noticing the furniture more than to sit on it.

The client sitting before me in the larger desk chair took his time in responding. “I’m just discouraged. It’s hard for me to continue to put myself out there in applications and stuff without even a response back
telling me they got it. It’s like no one can even see me and I’m working so hard.”

“Oh,” I replied, feeling like I had the answer to the client’s problem. “Don’t worry about not getting responses to your applications. That’s the reality for everyone looking for a job right now. We just have to focus more on having your application really stand out.”

And then I realized what he had said. I froze and felt a lump in my throat, caught by the realization of what the client had just told me. Internally, I thought, “Like no one can see you? Is there something more to that? Is there something I’m really not getting?”

My mind flashed to an image of my morning commute, where if I had not known better, I would have recognized the bundled masses laying on the concrete slabs behind the boxing gym as trash. If I wasn’t aware of where I was in town, knowing a lot of people sleep on the streets in the area, I wouldn’t have recognized them as people. If I hadn’t had this experience of working with men and women sleeping on the streets, would I even consider them people at all, or would I have just called them “bums”?

“Wait,” I say, “go back for a sec. What do you mean, you feel like no one can even see you? You mean physically?”

“Well no, it’s not just that. I can’t even get in to see anyone physically. The way they have things set up, there is no way I can see
anyone. They want you to do everything online, and then they will contact you.”

“So how do you think we could improve your applications or resume so you can get more contacts? If you can’t just walk in and introduce yourself so they can put a face to your application, what can we do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you gone through all your professional contacts? All the ex-co-workers, all the ex-bosses and so on?”

“Yeah, no one knows me around here.”

I was racking my brain at this point. How can someone make themselves visible when someone does not want to see them? I had heard this more than once from clients, that potential employers would not even give them the time of day. People would look at them “expecting to me to ask them for money, as if I was panhandling in their store.” How can anyone accomplish anything in society if they are not even acknowledged?

The client continues, “I tried stopping in to one place the other day where I already applied online. They wouldn’t let me in because I had my backpack with me. Pissed me off. They didn’t stop one guy with a computer bag or a woman with a big old honkin’ purse, but they stopped me because of my backpack. I was dressed nice too. Polo and slacks.”
“Have you tried carrying a different bag with you when you go in for jobs? I mean, a backpack isn’t super professional, and to be honest, with it all packed like that, it makes you look like you’re living out of it.”

We didn’t address why potential employers wouldn’t want an employee who looked as if they had been living out of their backpacks. It’s actually a very rare conversation that I have with any of my clients—discussing why no one seems to want to hire someone experiencing homelessness. It seems to be accepted as given, and nearly all my clients wish to hide their status at the shelter from an employer. The example of this client shows how members of society, particularly those members of society who are understood to be different or dangerous, are disciplined to behave in a manner that more closely matches the expectations of the contemporary nation-state.
I began working with people experiencing homelessness on a whim. I was at a job fair for young professionals looking to pursue careers in the non-profit sector, and there was a very wide array of organizations present. I felt the need to choose a field in which I would like to specialize, and I was struggling to determine what cause I was really passionate about. Ridiculous it was, of course, to say, “You know what, I just decided a minute ago that I’m going to devote myself to serving homeless people without ever having worked in this field.” I only had the faintest idea that people experiencing homelessness were suffering from injustices—I knew that I wanted to be serving people working against injustices. In all reality, a major factor in my sudden interest in homelessness was a desire to avoid working with children. If I was working with homeless people, I thought I would be more secure in working with adults, but I didn’t yet understand how many children experience homelessness.

I was excited to take on a position as an Employment Specialist at a homeless shelter. I had always held these grandiose ideas about labor and the value of labor for one’s sense of self-accomplishment. I felt like everyone really wanted to work if provided the opportunity. I thought that somehow, everyone, even those who were disabled or could not work, wanted to create things, serve people, and make a living so they could financially support themselves and their families. I thought that if I came in
as an Employment Specialist, just offering them some helpful tips for their job search, helping them think through their career path, and helping them to create a resume, all of my eventual clients would be successful. They would all be able to find jobs of some sort because they would be driven to work at finding work.

I was wrong. I was surprised by how many people simply did not want to work, and by the great multiplicity of reasons for them to not want to work. Some were discouraged by their life circumstances, needing to face certain challenges such as substance abuse and/or mental health issues. But others simply do not have the motivation to find a job. When I started serving clients, I was struck by thinking, how, why, would you not want to work? It is a question with which I still struggle with, almost a full year into this position. Why would any individual, in their right mind or not, NOT WANT TO WORK? Is this a personal value I have placed on work? I’m positive that it is a social value. I still become upset when I have a client come in to meet with me who simply does not want to work.

A full year into the position, I am still growing into it. I am still learning that not only do some people not want to work, but that it is up to them to orient their lives in such a way. The client, the Other, sitting before me may want to work or not work for any multitude of reasons, and they are free to establish the reality of their lives in whatever way they see fit. This speaks to Levinas’ pluralistic realities—not only does my totalizing theme of some sort of universal employment not fit with the realities of my
clients, but it dehumanizes my clients in how it places a lesser value on those who do not fit in. A totalizing theme of employment demeans and mentally handcuffs clients in the way that they are forced to follow my plan. The imposition of my plan blatantly fails in any attempts to foster their growth, development, or empowerment.

Strangely, the clients who do not want to work are almost always early for their one-on-one appointments with me, or they miss them completely.

I’ll start the conversation as we sit down at my desk, “So, how’s your job search going? What have you been up to in the past week or so?”

“It’s going.”

“Well what have you been up to? Find any good leads? Did you go to that job fair I told you about?”

“Oh, I’ve just been trying to get some other things taken care of, you know.”

“Like what? What’s more important than looking for a job so you can get out of here?”

“I dunno man, I just haven’t been ready yet. I’m going to go out this week and start lookin’ though.”

“Where are you going to look?” At this point, I know I am badgering the client, but I want to challenge him to actually think about what he has been doing and about where he could be working harder to find a job.
“Um, you know, go down to that mall up there on Bethany Home. I’ll put in some applications all over there. I might try the ballpark too.”

“Are you seriously gonna go?”

“I dunno man, why are you always pressin’ so hard? I just haven’t found the thing that I wanna do yet.”

This frustrates me. To a point, I always question why someone who is experiencing homelessness is not doing anything possible to regain self-sufficiency. This would mean taking any sort of job, anywhere, any time, for any boss in my mind. I imagine that if I was homeless, I would not care if the job was something that I wanted to do, I would not care how early I had to get up in the morning, I would not care if it was linked to my previous job history.

Some of my clients are even more discouraged by their seeming inability to find work than they are by any lack of initial motivation, substance abuse, or mental illness. This was still me thinking in totalities, with hourly employment serving as the cure-all for homelessness, but this was the exact point at which I became seriously bothered. I was bothered that my clients could not secure the employment they needed so direly to move past their experience of homelessness when they honestly wanted to do so.

Why not? Why was it that they could not be hired for months on end? Each one of my diverse clients had a different story of course, a different reason for them to not be able to find work. But what they held in
common was that they felt the need to hide that they were staying at a homeless shelter. Very few of my clients were open with potential employers about their current living circumstance. Employers seem very distrustful of potential workers who are staying in a shelter because there is an expectation that people who find themselves without shelter are irresponsible.

Irresponsible? Why does this word come to mind? I have never actually hired anyone to work for me, so how would I know that people think of irresponsibility when they think of homelessness? Is my membership in this society enough for me to profess some sort of expertise in how different groups can be perceived generally? Having a home is a social expectation—each of us is expected to be able to meet our basic human needs through the economic market, including shelter. When any of us are unable to accomplish this, we are viewed as outside of the norm. We lack whatever it is that is necessary to participate in the activity of society (in our current market fundamentalist paradigm, the main and organizing activity of society is the economy), and we are distrusted because of our inability to find a way to participate. Those of us without homes are viewed to lack the responsibility to act independently, which is prerequisite for social membership.

In her *Genealogies of Citizenship* (2008), Margaret Sommers speaks to this expectation that in order to participate in society, one must be active and independent within the economic market. She reframes the
relationship that was formerly between individual and state to one that
more realistically exists as “a delicate balance of power among state,
market, and citizens in civil society” (2). When this relationship breaks
down, citizenship fails to function as an institution and statelessness
ensues, resembling Agamben’s Homo Sacer.

For Sommers, the basis for participation in society should begin
with a de facto right to social inclusion within a civil society instead of
within an economic market. In order to operate as citizens, we must first
be recognized by others and be recognized as members rather than
outsiders. Sommers recognizes that the current paradigm in which our
society performs is one based upon market fundamentalism, and this has
had a formative impact on the ways in which people are able to be
recognized as members of society. Market fundamentalism takes as a
given the concept of social naturalism. This suggests that the
institutions/activities which are “natural,” i.e., the market, are to be revered
and protected, while those viewed as unnatural, i.e., the state and civil
society, are demeaned. The market has in this way become the
predominant organizing feature of society.

If people are not involved in economic transactions (such as those
who experience homelessness), the other two facets of Sommers’
citizenship (state and civil society) crumble. Even these two themes are
subjected to market logic. Citizenship has been transformed into a
contract, where inclusion and moral worth are privileges which depend
upon one’s participation in market exchange. Within the contract, there must be reciprocity— inherent and inalienable rights fall by the wayside unless the terms of the contract (paying one’s bills) are met. Because of this, the people whose contracts with society lay unfulfilled due to (perceived) economic inactivity are left out. Economic non-participants, particularly those who are experiencing homelessness, experience statelessness and the punishment of Homo Sacer in a very real and tangible sense.

People who fail to perform in an economic sense are deemed to have failed in the project of the national community, namely, the growth of the market. This failure marks them as unfit and constitutes them as Other. However, people experiencing homelessness and others who are excluded may still consider themselves included as members of the nation. As Sommers explains, “Any potential resentment they might feel is quelled by the oldest salve known to political rulers—the balm of fictive belonging by virtue of one’s authentic and natural roots in the national soil in tandem with a fervent stigmatization of the internal others who threaten the survival of the true nation” (139-140). The “internal others” of the description applies to those who experience homelessness because they are characterized as dangerous to society coupled with a fear that they are dangerous to ourselves, our businesses, and our property. These people who are most victimized by market fundamentalism’s adoption into such a prominent place in social thought are often driven to continue the
regime which perpetuates and exacerbates the national system which keeps them socially and economically oppressed by a sense of patriotism. These people are oppressed, criminalized, and prevented from taking full part in society, but they can feel like they are still members because they were born here and they live here in the U.S.

This same society presupposes individual responsibility for economic self-sufficiency. Kathleen Arnold (2004) progresses from the general stigmatization of Sommers’ “social-contract breakers” and focuses her attention more specifically on how people dealing with homelessness experience this negative characterization. She notes how the perceived moral deficiency of persons experiencing homelessness can play out in the following: “The lack of a home signals an asymmetrical power dynamic: homeless individuals are not merely inconvenienced by their homelessness but culturally stigmatized and politically disenfranchised. In this way, those who have become homeless also experience exclusion from the modern nation-state” (3). Exclusion from the modern nation-state marks an individual as Other within their own home country, and as noted by Sommers, they may still maintain a sense of belonging.

Arnold goes on to explain that the lack of a home (a physical space with a street address where one can claim semi-permanent residency) can symbolize a lack of economic contribution. This deficiency of economic contribution, a duty of a citizen demanded by market fundamentalism, is in
turn recognized as an inadequacy in reason or responsibility, those traits prerequisite for membership within civil and political life.

This lack of rationality transfers even into the economic sphere, where those who are viewed as non-citizens because of their lack of economic independence are precluded from gaining access to economic life because they are already non-normative and thus irresponsible. Potential employers are often extremely wary of hiring anyone perceived as irresponsible because they distrust their reliability in doing work. Employers need to be able to rely upon employees in order to plan revenues and expenses—at a very basic level, employees are cogs or inputs into the machine of revenue generation.

The recognition of the Face of the Other is negated when people are perceived as inputs to the economic system because their infinite humanity is suppressed, focusing instead on the potential for production. There is a contradiction present in the way that the shelter organization, operating within the social paradigm of market fundamentalism, expects clients to engage with the economy and to pursue citizenship because this too focuses on a totalizing theme of potential for production. At once, the expectations of citizenship, the economic participation of the Other, operate counter to the necessities of service and empowerment where clients would be able to make the choices of how to lead their own lives. This challenge of recognizing our clients as human prior to their social membership is often ignored completely by employers.
Chapter 6

JOB VERIFICATION

I think back to some conversations I have had with employers, people who have hired my clients. As an employment service, we verify that our clients are working either by calling employers or by acknowledging that they have received a paystub. It is necessary to verify employment for a number of reasons. One that seems primary is to track the numbers of our clients who find employment so we can show the numbers that back up our claims of serving people and justify our activities to funders. Another reason is that our clients are offered perks within the shelter if they have verified employment. These perks include an individual cubicle where they can sleep and store their belongings and a much more relaxed check-in-check-out policy that allows them more freedom within the shelter structure.

I have always hated talking on the phone. I find it difficult to try to carry on a conversation based on someone’s vocal tone alone. I very much dislike calling to verify jobs for clients because I feel like I am cold calling and interrupting managers’ days. I am always nervous to make these calls, feeling like my call will make employers question the legitimacy or quality of their recent hire. My heart rate always elevates when I make these calls.
When I call employers to verify that my client is working for them, I try to have a very pleasant phone voice. I don’t know why, but this just seems like the professional thing to do.

“Hello?”

“Hello, this is Matt Warren with H Employment Services. I wanted to verify the employment of one of my clients, may I please speak with a manager?”

“Um… Sure. One second.”

“Thanks.”

“Hello?”

“Hello, this is Matt Warren with H Employment Services. I wanted to verify the employment of one of my clients.”

“Um… Who did you say you were?”

Employment verifications are done regularly for all sorts of occasions, including for securing loans or apartment leases. I don’t really understand why managers so often are distrustful about conducting verifications with our office.

“We are H Employment Services. We are a non-profit organization that offers different resources such as access to computers and transportation assistance to people looking for work.”

We say an abbreviation which stands for “____ Employment Services” as one more way to hide that we work in a shelter. There is a great deal of effort undertaken in order to not tell employers of clients who
are already working that they are staying in a homeless shelter. There is very serious fear in my mind that they will be fired because of some sort of discrimination against homeless people. My attempts to hide the instance of homelessness from potential employers reflect the aura of distrust directed toward those living in a homeless shelter or on the street. We are afraid that any assumption of irresponsibility that a potential employer could see in someone staying in a homeless shelter would result in our clients losing their new jobs.

“Oh, okay.”

“The client that I was calling about was P.K., and my paperwork says that she started working for you last Monday, the 13th?”

“Yes, she started working for me on Monday.”

“Great, thank you. Do you mind if I ask you a couple more questions about her employment?”

This is a line that I have taken directly from one of my co-workers. It is helpful to keep the conversation going in order to obtain all the information we need for our data tracking.

“Alright.”

“According to what I have here, she earns $7.35 and hour and she is paid on a weekly basis?”

“That’s right.”

“I have here that her days and hours and vary. Do you have any idea of her schedule?”
“Ya know, I actually hired her because she said her schedule was wide open, so I was planning on changing her schedule to fill in gaps every week.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic. Well, I really appreciate your help, thank you for answering my questions.”

“That’s it? Alright then.”

“Yup, thank you. You have a good one.”

I’m always slightly scared that these verification calls will spook employers and make our clients suspicious in their eyes. I am terrified that somehow the employers will find out from our calls that our clients are staying in a homeless shelter, and I am scared that this will endanger their employment. I would prefer to have job verifications done simply through submissions of pay stubs, but I feel like some clients would be upset that they would have to wait a matter of weeks to be paid before they could enjoy the benefits of being a working person within the shelter environment.

Have I done enough to express why it was that I was bothered? I have been bothered by the extreme difficulty my clients have faced in finding employment and bothered further that they have been cut off from employment to such a severe degree because of they have been cut off from society due to their economic non-participation.
Chapter 7

CO-WORKERS

Something that has bothered me a great deal while working in a shelter environment is how this lack of full personhood can be perpetuated by the personal views of staff. First off, I’m consistently surprised by the social and political conservatism expressed by some of the people working for a social service agency. I have this unfair and unrealistic expectation that people working in non-profit organizations, particularly those working with people who have been marginalized to such a heavy degree as those experiencing homelessness, automatically have giving and forgiving demeanors.

Instead, I frequently hear in meetings comments such as, “Yeah, we need to just make it mandatory that clients be doing something productive.”

One discussion I remember particularly well was with a staff member working at the family shelter. We were both slightly frustrated at the low level of turnout for clients to utilize my services on a particular day, one of the few days of the week that I spend at the family shelter.

I asked her, “You’re here all the time, you deal with these clients on a daily basis. What do you think we could be doing to improve client buy-in and attendance?”

She responded in a different vein, in a way that told me that she had been thinking about a separate topic for a long time and that she was
going to use this opportunity of me asking her a question about anything to seriously let me know her thoughts on what is going wrong in general. “You know, I’m really surprised that no one wants to come use your services and to use you as a resource. I get really frustrated because they’re not really doing anything. I hate to see my tax dollars go to waste like this.”

I did not feel it the right time to correct her and to let her know that my position was not funded by tax dollars. Instead, I was somewhat stunned by her response. Her words were mixed with a disdain for laziness, coated heavily in the words, “…they’re not really doing anything.” I wondered if she saw my position as worthwhile at all. I do not want my job to be considered a waste of anyone’s dollars, but I feel like someone so concerned with their tax dollars going to projects where people are “doing anything” (meaning doing something deemed socially worthwhile) would expect to be more protective of individual responsibility, and thus, more politically conservative.

Why is it important to include this conversation? Because it shows that not everyone working in a social service environment recognizes a vital premise of the organization—service. People going through homelessness are struggling with a disconnect from society, and as this account posits, a disconnect from economic activity that leaves them alienated as non-participants in society’s dominant activity. Clients are not going through pleasant life circumstances if they have to come to a
homeless shelter. A main goal of most homeless shelters across the US is to help and encourage people to end their homelessness, hopefully on a long term or permanent basis. In order to help these clients move on with their lives, we must be able to meet them where they are instead of expecting them to meet some sort of exterior social expectation. This conversation is significant in the way that it can reflect generalized attitudes of shelter staff—this is not by any means representative of all staff at homeless shelters, but in its extremity, it assists in the portrayal of the type of behaviors that fail to best serve clients. When clients face externally imposed expectations for solving the problem of their homelessness, they are not permitted to show up as they are, and they are not empowered to take control for their long-term self-sufficiency.
Chapter 8

I WROTE

Never before sitting down to reflect on my exchanges with my clients had I realized the level of trauma and emotion that I had wrapped up with my clients. I had hinted at it before, knowing that I had some rough days and some rough experiences with clients in which I found myself emotionally disturbed, if not distraught. The deliberate reflection of going through some case notes, my calendar, and my journal triggered many memories. As I mention later in the midrash, those clients with whom I have spent the most time are those who usually do not end up finding employment and who remain homeless. When I go through my calendar and see the same names repeatedly, I feel sadness, frustration, and a certain sense of failure, as if I have not done enough to help each individual move forward with their lives.

I am reminded that it is not up to me if people find employment. Each client, each Other, should be able to pursue the activities they see worthwhile, and I should not place value on things that they do not want for themselves. Why should I behave in this way, why should I maintain this sort of attitude? Because if I am to truly serve and empower each individual, it must be on their terms. This runs in line with the lesson gleaned from the midrash with my co-worker in just the last section. That is, if one is to be of service, he or she must be fully present with all of the perspectives that make them who they are, and the self can not expect the
clients with whom they work to share their perspectives. The Other should shape how service takes place.

I reflected on my conversations with my clients anywhere and everywhere I had time, a pencil, and paper. This was simply my reality as a student—studying happens wherever and whenever I can find the time. The place that triggered the most significant memories was my office in the shelter. I often sat down at my desk after the office had closed to reflect, to think about the conversations I had with my clients. The bright florescent lighting, cheap office furniture, linoleum floor, my fake fern on the filing cabinet in the corner, and my bulletin board of educational opportunities and job fairs all served as triggers for memories of/with clients.

Memories of client interactions come forth like a knotted chain, one after another, tied by small details like job fields and clients’ age, some coming in bunches, twisting and conflating into each other. Some knots come slowly, others flowing quickly through my mind. Certain traumatic exchanges caused tears of anger, frustration, and sadness. Consistent throughout much of the process of remembrances was a sense of first tension, then relief. There was a sense that I could be unburdened of the trauma by just placing a pencil to a legal pad, but before relief, I felt my back and my trapezius tighten. I wrote in almost a stream of consciousness, considering the different conversations I had held with clients.
Through the process, I felt like the trauma that I experienced had been eased. It was still there, it had not been taken away completely. Listening to people struggling through some of the most difficult situations of their lives has been difficult for me. More challenging though was listening to people’s difficulties achieving the things they wanted/needed in order to move on with their lives. I was upset by the clarity that these individuals were made stateless *because of* their status as homeless.

Clients frequently do not have similar outlets nor relief for their trauma as I have.

As much as I wanted the stories of my clients to come forth, I realized that the words that came from the scribble of my pencil formed my story, my experiences. I could not tell their stories for them because I had not lived them. If I was to be honest and rigorous in following through with this methodology (Wainer 2010), I had to slowly admit that I could only authentically report how I had interacted with them and the resulting lessons for me. There was no way that I could only describe their stories as victims, as people who did not have control over their lives because my clients are so much more than our brief interchanges. As people, they have so many more thoughts and experiences than I could ever glean from them.

We laugh together. I share jokes with my clients, and we laugh together. Victims don’t laugh. People laugh. People smile. People get excited when something good happens such as finding a job. This speaks
to Levinas’ phenomenology of the Other which lays at the heart of MSRM—the Other can not be described through a totalizing theme. The Other (clients) are infinite and transcendent, beyond singular descriptions. As Levinas claims, “It is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the Infinity of the Other” (2005, 80). The infinite-ness of the Other resists singular designations or identifications through particular traits. It forces the self to recognize the fullness and the unending potential of the Other.

When I started writing, I wanted to really show that my clients are victims. I felt like if my clients were shown as victims, this project would be that much more powerful at showing the difficulty and hopelessness of their situations. I feel now that my goal instead should be to show that the people I serve are human, that they are multi-faceted gems with infinite experiences and infinite potential. Employment and participation in economic society are not the only ways of defining humans, and thus should not be the main foci of membership in our society. This midrash helps show us that people experiencing homelessness are just that—people.

Does Levinas’ phenomenology here provide us with a means of exploring some sort of inherent value in humanity? Can we say that by beginning with the ethical relationship with the Other, we will be able to recognize our immanent and infinite responsibility to the Other, we will be somehow compelled or called to serve people experiencing homeless?
Will we improve the way that we behave towards people experiencing homelessness when we recognize their amazing wealth of life experiences and opportunities?
Chapter 9

I READ. I SAW THE LACK. I ANALYZED.

I read a lot of material regarding the trials and difficulties of people experiencing homelessness within American society. Much of contemporary academic literature I found, such as “Employment Status and Income Generation Among Homeless Young Adults: Results from a Five-City, Mixed-Methods Study” (2011) from Ferguson, et al. (and most that I agreed with, such as M. Jain’s description of the DC Right to Housing Campaign (2010)) is largely sympathetic to people experiencing homelessness. I mean sympathetic in the sense that people experiencing homelessness are perceived only as being acted upon by factors outside their control. I agree because to a large degree, they really are acted upon by others--they are not seen as full members of society, and they are not seen as capable of making decisions as agents within their own lives.

People experiencing homelessness in the US are not normal to us. They do not make sense to most of us--many US citizens struggle to imagine what it is like to not have a home, a building in which to sleep each night. People experiencing homelessness in the US, being not of the norm, have their circumstances exacerbated to the level of not even being recognizable as fully human. Feldman does well to compare their circumstances to the confusingly dual nature of Agamben’s Homo Sacer. People experiencing homelessness in the US are subject to violence from multiple angles, including from the State itself—Feldman’s description of
laws that criminalize homelessness show how officers of the State (including police and other representatives) are provided some leeway in how they punish people for not participating as everyone else.

An important part of the story that I do not think is explained by most of the literature is that people experiencing homelessness have a significant role as agents. I do not think that the literature is wrong, by any means, in focusing on the social dehumanization of people who do not live inside a physical structure as owners/renters; rather, the literature is incomplete. People without homes in the traditional sense still have agency—they made choices that may have brought them into their situation, and they can make choices to leave their situation.

There is difficulty in this appeal. I do not want to claim, “Well homeless people choose to be homeless and they can fix their situations easily whenever they want.” This is not fully true. Things are not easy, and they are not black and white. That being said, homeless people are not people completely devoid of options and who can not find out ways to obtain the things they need for survival.

People experiencing homelessness are people. They make decisions based upon what they know and based upon what is happening around them. Much of the activity of our lives can be dictated by social influences, but as people, we still have the capacity to make decisions for our immediate behaviors.
I often realize with my clients that they have perhaps even more agency than I ever consider because they are constantly making decisions. Unique about these decisions is how little attention is paid to what many in our society consider to be normal behavior.

For instance, I have more than one client who decides that they want to further their education while they are living in a homeless shelter. I come from a family that values education perhaps more than anything, and I would love to encourage my clients to pursue educational opportunities which will provide them with greater job opportunities, greater job security, and greater self-confidence. However, I grow extremely frustrated because these clients are not taking the necessary steps to move out of their immediate situation. In my opinion, they should be focused on finding someway to regain self-sufficiency as close to immediate as possible. If they are focused on attending school, they may not be finding the employment that will help them regain self-sufficiency in their limited time frame within the shelter (three months for families, six months for single adults). Further, clients may be pursuing educational opportunities that will push them into debt.

Within our employment office, we promote only a few educational programs because each is less than six months and each has job placement assistance at the end of the training period. We still have people who want to begin an Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree online despite being ill-prepared and being in a poor study environment. These
clients are choosing to lead their lives in this fashion. They are choosing that they will begin a course of study in spite of (and perhaps because of) their experience of homelessness. My clients, despite being denied full access to much or normative society, still have agency. They still have the ability to make choices for themselves. Beyond ability, clients actively take opportunities to make decisions, in spite of social expectations, traditional mores, or even organizational and shelter rules.

The self-sufficiency that we are pushing for clients to achieve is mostly of an economic sort—people need to regain their ability to pay for their own housing, food, and things. This is a value that I hold, not one that I can really expect all of my clients to hold. However, a topic which I have frequently discussed with my co-workers and other people in our field is how we can come up with some sort of curriculum to offer clients that will improve their basic socialization skills. We talk about coming up with a “life skills” course because it is information that we feel is important to life within our society, yet we can not quite remember where we gained these skills ourselves beyond “life.”
Halfway through my first year as an Employment Specialist, my supervisor decided that I needed greater responsibility. He placed me in charge of offering employment services to the family shelter. Our organization’s emergency family shelter is 10 miles away from the campus where I usually worked, and it is a completely different environment. Families are allowed half the time in the shelter compared to the single adults at the downtown shelter. Perhaps this arises from an expectation that adults supporting their children will feel greater impetus to quickly regain self-sufficiency and move out of the homeless shelter.

One morning as I was walking into my office at the family shelter, I saw a client who I had met only briefly before waiting to speak with his case manager. I saw that there were a lot of clients waiting to speak with their respective case managers, so this client had some time to kill before he would be seen.

I had never met with this client one-on-one. He was dressed as if he had already been through a long, difficult, stressful day, though it was before 8 am. He leaned forward in his seat in the lobby, his head in his hands, his cuffs unbuttoned, his shirt open in the front, a tie draped around his neck. His black pants were well-pressed, and his shoes looked to have been shined within the past week.
I tapped him on his shoulder, “Hey man, where you headed today? I like that tie.”

“I dunno. Man, I just need a job.”

“You’re all dressed up and looking good, and you don’t know where you’re going?”

“Nah man, I was just gonna go look.”

“Why don’t you come into my office with me for a minute, and we’ll see if we can’t come up with some more concrete ideas about where you could go. Can’t let that outfit go to waste.”

He nodded quietly and stood to follow. We walked to my office, and as we sat down, I asked, “What kind of job are you looking for, A.?”

“I’ve just worked Parks and Rec.”

“Parks and Rec? That’s way cool. How many years experience do you have?”

“I think about 11.”

My client looked exhausted. The bags under his eyes were heavy. His shoulders slumped.

“11 years? Wow, that’s great. Do you have a resume yet?”

“No, I’ve never had a resume.”

“Well let’s take care of that first. I think it could definitely make your day a little more productive, and it will be helpful for the rest of your job search. What do you think?”

“Alright,” he responded warily.
“So when you say ‘Parks and Rec,’ I think about grounds-keeping. Do you want to be applying for grounds-keeping—landscaping kinda jobs?”

“No, I don’t know how to do that stuff.” He paused. “I organized programs for kids at the parks, like sports leagues and after-school programs.”

“Oh, my mistake. That’s awesome! Why did you leave that job?”

“Budget cuts. Just got laid off by the City.”

“That really sucks. It’s hard to get laid off when you thought you were doing a good job.”

“Yeah.”

“Is that what you want to be doing? Should we be making a resume that targets those sorts of jobs?”

The client looked agitated. He had been slowly wringing his hands as we spoke.

“Sure. I really want to do programs in gang prevention.”

“Oh way cool. Do you know anyone in town who is doing that? Any one you would like to be working for?”

“No, I don’t really know.”

As we spoke, I had begun to type a resume. I had his name, the address of the shelter, and other contact info at the top of the page, and I had inserted a few spaces before his 11 year position title. I angled the computer screen so we could both see it.
The client stated out of no where, “You know, you guys should have a counselor or somebody. Just someone we can talk to.”

I was a bit surprised and confused. “What do you mean? You can talk to any of us. You have your case manager. You can talk to me about whatever you want.”

He hesitated for a couple seconds, looking back at me from the corner of his eye.

“I have time, man. My schedule is clear for the rest of the morning. I’m here to listen if you need to talk. What’s on your mind?”

“I’m just having a hard time, Matt. My mom is in the hospital, and we don’t know how much time she has left.”

“Wow, that’s really difficult. Have you been able to go see her at all?”

“Yeah, I’ve been trying to see her everyday. Her hospital is over on the east side though, and it takes over an hour to get there.”

“That’s hard to deal with.”

“Yeah. She’s been in there for months, since right after I got laid off. I want to be there for her, I want to be a good son.”

I remained silent, letting him continue.

“I know I need a job, but how can I do anything when my mom’s dying?”

I was moved emotionally. Looking at the frustrated, exasperated, and exhausted man sitting across the desk from me, I wanted to cry. He
was having a difficult time in life. Despite the recognition that he needed to regain economic self-sufficiency, his reality was one where his mother needed his attention.

“That really sucks. I’m sorry man.”

“And I’m really struggling with my step son right now.”

“What’s up with him?”

“He’s a bully. He’s a really mean kid, and he beats up on our other two kids so they’re afraid of him. And my wife—she don’t want to discipline him or anything. He treats her bad too, he talks back, and I think he might hit her when I’m not around.”

“That’s terrible. How old is he?”

“He’s 12. He’s not like that with me because he knows I want respect. I don’t know what to do though because he’s not my kid. I don’t want him beating on my kids, but she doesn’t want to do anything. She says that’s just how he is.”

“Have you tried talking with her about him and really letting her know how much he bothers you?”

I had forgotten all about the resume. Earlier in my career, I would have told this client that he was simply reaching past my expertise. I would have said, “We’re here to talk about getting you a job. You should talk about family issues with your case manager, not me.” This had changed, however. I had grown into the job. I realized that I was there to serve. In order to be of service, I had to show up, I had to say, “Hineini.” I
had to show up more as a person than as an Employment Specialist. In this instance, the way to serve the client was to listen. He wanted someone to listen to him. He understood that he and his family were going through homelessness, and he knew that he needed a job, an income, to end that homelessness. In his reality (this is a lesson from Levinas, to acknowledge pluralistic realities), however, he wanted to be a good son and a good father more than he was concerned about ending his family’s homelessness. In our conversation, it did not even seem like he placed a higher value on one aspect over another (i.e., being a good son more important or higher ranking than finding permanent shelter). Instead, it seemed as though this was just something he needed to do in life, as though being a son and a parent were as vital to life as breathing.

“Yeah, we’ve talked about it a bit. I don’t know, man, I just want to be a good dad. I want my kids to grow up and do good.” He started to cry, with tears rolling down his face. I cried too. I sobbed. I wanted this person sitting across from me to be able to take care of his family.

“I know you do, man.”

We cried for a good five minutes together before saying another word. I thought of my own family and how I want to be a good son. I thought of the times I had heard my own father say that he wanted my siblings and me to grow up and “do good.” These thoughts and feelings came to me in flashes. I knew that these were mine, and they were not
those of my client’s. He had his own memories and experiences with his family.

As we both slowed our breathing and began emptying the tissue box on the desk, I finally asked, “What can I do to help?”

“Let’s make this resume,” he responded, gesturing toward the computer screen. “Then I’m gonna go see my mom.”
Late in the afternoon, I am rarely productive. I frequently go into the offices of my co-workers and my supervisor to chat about the day and to potentially brainstorm plans of action for challenging clients.

On one particular afternoon, I was standing in the doorway to a co-worker’s office. I heard from behind me in the lobby, “Hey Max, how ya doin’?”

I turned to see my former client, the source of the greeting. I instantly recognized him. This client never remembered my name correctly. He wore the same scratched and worn old leather jacket as he had always worn, every day that I had ever seen him. His hair was a tangled mess, and jutting from the top of his head, emerging right from the middle of his mangled mane, was the same hairless protrusion of skin and bone that he always had. He wore dirty and ill-fitting jeans, and he had fashioned a belt from twine in order to hold them around his waist.

“Hey there, Mr. E.! How are you doing? Haven’t seen you in a long time.”

“I’m not too bad, not too bad.” He took a sip of cold coffee from a paper cup. I remembered that he always drank coffee cold and black.

“What brings you around here, shouldn’t you be on the road?”

Months prior, I had helped this client gain admission to a truck driving school. The school trained people to drive semi-trucks and then
assisted with job placement after training. Truck driving seemed like the perfect career for this client. He had lived on the streets for almost 20 years. He did not like to be indoors and preferred to stay on the move. As a truck driver, he would rarely, if ever, need to shower or interact with people face-to-face. It seemed like the perfect job for him.

“Oh, just passin’ through town, thought I’d stop in and say hello to you all.”

“Passin’ through? That’s great. Where you headed?”

“No plans, really.”

“No plans? Are you still driving for the same company?”

“Oh, N.? No, I’m not workin’ for them no more. About a month after I started with them, S. offered me more money and I switched over.”

“Oh more money, that’s great! How is S. going?”

“I thought it had been going alright, but I just got laid off.”

“Laid off? What do you mean? I see them advertising to hire new drivers at least once a week!”

“Well my supervisor, see, has a problem with how I drive. I guess he had a problem.”

“Go on.”

“Well after a long day of work, when I’m sitting down to some supper, I like to have a beer with my steak. He seems to have some sort of problem with that.”
“Was this particular supervisor the only one who had a problem with it?”

“Well no, there were some officers in California who also had a problem with it. They took my rig.”

“Wow that really sucks. What’s your plan now?” Never before had we discussed any issues he may have had with substance abuse. For the first time, I realized that the coffee he was always drinking was perhaps not just coffee.

I had never really paid attention to what he wanted to do. I came to him with the expectation that he would find a job and move out of the shelter, and then everything in his life would work out. He would shower and change his clothes and go to work, or at minimum, he would just drive his truck. I had pushed the idea of going to truck driving school. He had simply gone along with the idea. This was an example of a conversation in which we had been talking past each other.

“Not really sure yet what I’ll do next. I think I’ll take some time off.”
Chapter 12

CONCLUSION

We are talking past each other in our conversations with people going through homelessness. There is something missing, as if we are speaking apples and oranges or baseball and hockey. When we say, “Let’s get you employed,” they may or may not be saying, “I need something else, like community, flexibility, or to go take care of my mother.”

What are we missing because we cannot hear what they are saying? What is the expectation we have that they are missing? There is something that we are doing as a society that is not working for a lot of people. Movements in the contemporary US such as the Tea Party and the Occupy Movement show that there is something in our economic order that is not functioning as humanely as it should. There are things that are not working for people living without stable shelter. At a time when other conversations questioning the viability of a society based upon market fundamentalism are arising, we must engage in conversation with those for whom the market fundamentalist order is working the least.

The goal of this thesis has not been to propose a new policy for dealing with people going through homelessness. The solution for ending homelessness once and for all has not been expressed within these pages. The goal instead is to propose a paradigm shift for those serving people experiencing homelessness. There needs to be a purposeful
refocusing on service and a dramatic refocus on the recognition that people going through homelessness are people. This is to be accomplished first and foremost through conversation.

Throughout this thesis, there has been an effort to say “people experiencing homelessness” or “people going through homelessness” instead of “homeless people or “the homeless” as if they could only be defined by that singular facet of their existence. This has been done in an effort to show the humanity of those with whom we work. These are people, and they are more than their lack of shelter. The diversity of this population further prevents the totalization of homelessness as an identifier.

Homelessness is a multi-faceted problem within our society. It is a circumstance which leaves some unjustly cut off from society with little recourse to fix their problem. It is a problem which very seriously affects lives. There must be a greater push to listen to the perspectives of each person living on the streets or living in a homeless shelter, of each marginalized Other. Further, there must be a greater push to allow the people going through homelessness to take charge in ending their own homelessness.

Any policy which aims to end homelessness must prioritize humanity. Any of these policies should listen to the voice of the Other for whom the policy is designed to affect. We must listen and present
ourselves fully in our interactions with the Other, remaining open to the pluralism of realities.

In an earlier draft of this work, Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1995) was drawn upon in an effort to explicate how people going through homelessness are acted upon by society. Foucault explains how modern practices of punishment constitute “docile bodies” (136). Foucault defines, “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (136); in other words, a docile body is one which can be manipulated.

This sort of discipline is inherently political because it takes away the ability to choose, to have freedom in the control of one’s body. The docile body is being shaped and trained to produce, to be a contributor to the economic order. This is the political project of the contemporary nation-state—to rehabilitate perceived criminals and/or those who have been Othered to participate in a society almost solely focused on economic production.

The addition of Foucault was helpful from an outsider’s perspective, potentially adding another lens for understanding the experience of homelessness and the criminalization of the Other. However, my attempted discussion with Foucault did not fit. It lacked flow and stuck out like a sore thumb in relation to the other literature.

This could have been for a multitude of reasons, including a lack of confidence in my comprehension of Foucault, but a greater challenge was
that I am uncomfortable showing my clients as lacking agency. I am uncomfortable suggesting that their experiences of life are completely shaped by and imposed upon them by society.

If anything, my clients are free of this punitive discipline. They shape their own preparation for participation in the economic order. In fact, my clients discipline my behavior. I rarely, if ever, wear a tie to work (I prefer to wear a tie, I feel more confident). Clients tend to shy away from me as overly authoritative when I wear a tie, and I have thus been disciplined in my attire. The clients shape their conversations with me, deciding what to disclose, what to withhold, and what the expectations for their progress will be. My clients are people with agency.

I say all this to underscore that people going through homelessness are people. They are identifiable as human, and as human, each is particular, unique, and transcendent beyond my comprehension. As Hannah Arendt (1998) claims, “Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction” (175). By speaking with each other, by engaging in conversation, we discover the distinction of each person. Also, we mark each other as equals, as people capable of making our own choices in life.

Conversation is very important—it allows us to empower others to take control of their lives. Conversation can be difficult, and it can be time-consuming. Conversation as it is currently taking place is not doing enough to bring each side to the same understanding of what is not
working on an individual basis and what is not working in our society.

However, if we ever wish to end homelessness, even for those men sleeping on concrete slabs behind the boxing gym, our solutions for doing so, our solutions for determining how to bring people back into society, must come from listening to the marginalized Other.
This project has been an amazing odyssey. Indeed, it has been a true Odyssey in the style of Homer—there have been major challenges, temptations, moments (and full weeks) of despair, achievements, peaks, valleys, etc. Throughout this process of reflection, conversation, and service, there has been an immense amount of personal growth. I have learned more about what it means to be human and to be engaged with other humans in meaningful ways because of the writing I have done for this thesis.

From the beginning of this thesis to this point, the end of the formal procedure, I have grown within the methodology. I have grown and changed in the way that I see each individual client and interact with them; thus, the perceived path of the thesis has changed. I started out wanting to show the people I serve as dehumanized as being bare life, as being challenged in any attempts they made in rejoining society as citizens, and my choices of contributing academic literature directly speak toward that end. Writing more and more midrash, I realized that these conversations resisted contextualization in this way. The authors Agamben, Feldman, Sommers, and Arnold provide valuable contributing insight; however, midrash, in an artistic yet steadfast way, presents knowledge in a manner which resists the manipulation of the researcher. Further, the artistry of
the methodology and the midrash allows the reader to interpret the data as they see it, not necessarily how the author wishes to frame it.

The review of literature took place throughout the period of research, but early on in this process of writing. Though still valuable in the perspectives it can help to frame, it does not connect in the same way as it did earlier in the project, prior to my immense amount of growth. In reality, the goal with which I initiated this project, of showing people experiencing homelessness as experiencing bare life, has been negated to a great level by the dialogues above. The midrashim, by instancing the humanity of the Other, show the agency of the people I serve. They show how people with seemingly zero options constantly have agency. They have the ability (and often have developed the skill) to manipulate their situations in the way they participate in larger structures, including the shelter as well as the economy.

The midrashim above describe something potentially more general and yet more potent than the showcasing of people experiencing homelessness as living bare life due to economic-Othering. They describe humanity. They describe the ambivalent relationship we each hold with society, at once being disciplined and influenced by society while also exerting our own influence, operating with discreet freedom inside and outside social boundaries. Here is a limit to the descriptions of Agamben’s Homo Sacer and the citizenship of Arnold and Sommers—despite the Othering of people experiencing homelessness, despite the
way they are separated from society, they are still able to perform acts of
citizenship. They are still able to subvert their totalizing label of
“homeless” and find jobs. They are still able to perform acts of humanity,
such as caring for an ailing family member.

The agency of people who are Othered instances their humanity. MSRM is particularly helpful in bringing forth this facet of their experience, and has thus made this effort at social research focusing on homelessness all the more unique. In a practical sense, homeless research which does not utilize MSRM does not come face to face with the Other, it does not build authentic relationships and allow for knowledge to arise from dialogic relation/conversation. In a theoretical sense, other research methods do not have the embedded and constant emphasis on the plurality of reality. They do not allow for the multiplicity of realities for each person. Research methods outside of MSRM do not allow for the recognition of the different hats of the Other or how they interact with each other.

How have the frameworks of Homo Sacer and citizenship interacted with that of the face of the Other? People going through homelessness are definitely Othered in the way that they are denied access to the activities of the economy; however, those who have been Othered in this way resist the totalization which would take away their transcendent humanity in the way they exert their agency. It has taken me this long to come to this understanding. It has taken a full year into my
position, of working with people experiencing homelessness nearly every day, to come to a higher comprehension that people going through homelessness still have agency. Further, this agency resists outer themes or expectations in much the same way as this methodology resists my efforts to present boundaries or descriptions which would preemptively describe the marginalized Other.

This agency is powerful. In a real sense, the agency of the other is the beginning and ending point of service because it is up to the client to tell us what they want to accomplish and how. It is up to them to decide if they will undertake a job search or if they will focus on spending time with an ailing parent or if they will attempt to fight an addiction. Service providers can not make those decisions for their clients, nor can they decide the order in which each decision takes place, nor can they even make the decision for each individual client as to whether they will utilize the services available.

This brings us to one of the most significant ways in which I have grown over the course of my year working with people experiencing homelessness. I started with the expectation that I would somehow be able to gain expertise in helping people find jobs. I would talk at clients and try to tell them what they should be doing for their job searches. Now, I find myself listening a lot more. I try to serve as more of a supportive coach than as an expert because the people I serve are the greatest experts within their own lives.
As I begin to structure a new employment program that provides employment services to people emerging from their experiences of homelessness, I have emphasized client agency. Mine is a program which is completely voluntary, and it is focused on empowering clients to control their participation in both the program and the greater economy. Of course, the paramount value of the program is “honest and direct dialog” in order to build relationships with clients. This would not have been a value to be included in this program prior to having gone through this growth process within MSRM, but it is essential as we continue to serve clients.
REFERENCES


