

An OK Place To Be

With a few paragraphs let me put you in the place of a homeless person who finds him/herself on the streets of our Sacramento community.

You are alive, thank God, but the clothes you have on and anything else you can carry with you, day and night, are your only possessions. You have no closets or bedroom bureaus in which to keep any changes of clothing you will surely need. There is no desk drawer available to keep your personal papers or documents, nor is there a place to store family keepsakes and photos. Every possession you own must be carried on your person at all times or it will be lost and destroyed.

You are unemployed. There is no job, no boss. In fact, there is not a single person to whom you must report today. You have no appointments to keep, no errands to run, no shopping to do, no assigned chores to finish, and no one is coming to visit, even if they knew where you were or how to find you. Nothing is required of you today. All that exists are the endless blank hours you need to occupy. You would count yourself fortunate if you thought someone even cared where you were or how you were doing. The truth is, there is no person known to you with whom you could have a personal conversation.

Depending on the time of month, you may have a few dollars in your pocket, but never enough to buy the things you really need. Your only mode of transportation is walking; it makes no difference if your destination is measured in blocks or miles. In cold weather, raining like the dickens, or hot as blazes, only walking will get you where you want to go.

You have no food except what is in your pocket. Public bathroom or bathing facilities are not available, especially in those places where the sign reads, "Customers Only," and unless you can find an emergency shelter bed offered by a local charity, you have no organized place to sleep tonight, or tomorrow either.

As difficult and as bleak as these conditions seem to you, they are nothing compared to the fear you feel. You are scared out of your wits, you fear for your life, you feel completely unsafe, and if you are a woman, you will surely

be raped, if not today, then likely tomorrow, or sometime soon. It is because of this fear you seek out places that are in the public eye, for example, downtown transit areas and street corners, plaza park benches, or shopping arcades. However, these areas are considered off limits for a homeless person like yourself. Local government and business owners hire fulltime employees to make sure that you move on, go someplace else, and don't hang out here. Go where? They don't care, anyplace but here.

There is no OK place for you to be. You might as well not exist.

To the extent the reader can emotionally understand and identify with this state of being, or better said, non-being, then surely you will appreciate the meaning of Friendship Park – a life support for homeless people and a lightning rod for some of the city's NIMBYS.

The arched sign over the main entrance to the park says it all: "Welcome To Friendship Park." Can you imagine the relief a homeless person feels when he/she comes upon a sign that says, "Welcome"?

Friendship Park is approximately an acre in size, completely fenced, and fully staffed. It opens every weekday at 7 a.m., but people begin gathering at the front gates underneath the welcome sign as early as 5:30 a.m. One reason they are early is because at first light, the city's anti-camping law enforcement officers begin their daily downtown and river assignments, rousting homeless people and moving them on. Where? I don't care! Someplace else, not here!

By 7 a.m., several hundred people are huddled together waiting for the gates to swing open. Many need to use the spacious restrooms (all tile, clean, fully stocked, and graffiti-free); others want to get their name on the daily shower list; others need to check their belongings into day storage; others want to be first in line for the coffee breakfast program that begins in 15 minutes; others want to find and reserve a table in one of the four large weatherproof gazebos to set up shop for the morning game of cards or chess with their regular opponents; others want to get an early reservation number for the hot meal that begins at 11:30; others want to sign up for triage with the public health nurse so they can see the doctor when the clinic opens at 9 a.m.; some want to find a park bench on the far side of the park, away from the hubbub of activity, so they can sleep for a few hours; others want to sign up for an

appointment with the housing counselor; others need to get in line to use one of the free telephones; others head to the fully stocked library, housed in the warehouse immediately adjacent to the park, which will have multiple copies of the daily newspapers and a wide variety of up-to-date magazines; and others want to find exactly the right spot in the assigned storage area for their shopping cart or bicycle.

Yes, survival services galore, but also choices to be made, appointments to be kept when your name is called on the public address system, and even more important, being able to talk to an interested staff member who knows you, knows your name, and is interested in your well-being.

For a homeless person living in the state capital of California, Friendship Park is the OK place to be.