

**Plenty of Beds, Not Enough Houses
A Holiday Paradox**

We're in the period among the holidays.
A special space for many
when the hopes and dreams of children rise
in the air
like steam drifting up from a still pond at dawn.
Not special for everyone though.

It's mid morning, my nervous energy is
getting the best of me. I head downstairs
to find Jeff and Susan and check in on our shelter situation.
Overflow, Turning Point, Marlboro, Shadows, post-detox,
transitional, supportive housing, Shelter plus
care, Sober Housing.
Pathways, Scattered Sites, Medway House, Sage
Winhaven for families.
We've got a great system, staffed with dedicated,
compassionate and competent staff.
You'd think we've got the situation under
control, especially for homeless individuals.
We don't.

Jeff hands me the statistical sheet for the Overflow.
31, 29, 27, 31, 30, 28, 31
"31" "Thanksgiving evening we had
31 guests at the Overflow?"
Jeff nods.
"What about Turning Point?"
"Full, with a waiting list." Everywhere else is too.
We're having trouble moving folks thru our continuum.
Three years ago the overflow averaged 8-12 people a night.
Now we'll be lucky to stay under 40 when the real cold hits.
"Can we put more beds in there?" I ask Susan.
Already over the 25 bed capacity. Jeff and Susan
Discuss how to squeeze more beds into the space.

I head back upstairs; too frustrated to focus
I pick up the newspaper. Several headlines glare back at me.

FRONT PAGE Economists Questions Whether
Fed Can Keep Unprecedented
Economic Prosperity Going
Wonder what the 31st guest
who wandered into the overflow Thanksgiving
eve thought about that?

BUSINESS SECTION CMGI CEO Weatherall Clears
 \$193 Million in Compensation Last Year
 The guy claims not to have really made that much

REAL ESTATE Home of Week: Beautiful
 Contemporary 5BR in Wayland on
 1.5 acres. 1.2m - Hurry
 Won't last long.

It's one thing to read about facts and stats about
the rapidly increasing gap between wealth and poverty.
It's another to be confronted with the physical
reality on a daily basis.
I pick up the phone to check in with Margaret
over at The Turning Point.
Her message is clear and direct.
"Jim, our guests need you to create more housing."
How did things get this way?

I grew up during the Cold War
Two superpowers circling each other
like schoolyard toughs
with a ring of watchers simultaneously
attracted and repelled
A-Bomb, H-Bomb, Neutron Bomb, fall-out shelters
all encoded in our dreams
This is the price we pay for freedom
to maintain an American Way of Life
I was told
That time is no more
Now I want to know
What do I tell my children?
that people sleeping under bridges
in cardboard boxes down dank alleyways
on cots, dormitory style in harshly illuminated
cavernous rooms
families stuffed into motels or
quasi institution settings
is the price we pay
to maintain our American Way of Life
and do these images invade their dreams

It's time to take a walk
Pull my baseball hat low on my forehead
down the stairs again,
head down

open the door and am immediately greeted
by cold damp air
the sky full of moisture
spitting snow
it's grey

Jim Cuddy
December, 2000