

1 Foreword

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Thomas King (2003) reminds us that “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2). Stories provide the structure through which actions and words are given meaning and value judgments are assigned; they act as our interpretive filters. Many stories are not of our own making, but rather are told about us by others. This is especially true of communities and individuals who experience social marginalization and oppression. It is other people, those with greater power and access to resources, who are the authors of the stories that come to dominate. Often – but not always – it is with good intention, and yet routinely those in power tell and retell stories without fully understanding the people and the lives that populate these stories. People with lived experience of homelessness encounter the stories others tell about them on a daily basis. Often within these stories, the portrayal of ‘the homeless’ as a monolithic category comprised

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of persons all sharing common and largely unalterable traits— lazy, addicted, criminal—serves to undermine their humanity, as well as construct divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them.’

Across a number of domains—services, policy, research—persons with lived experience of homelessness have insisted upon meaningful engagement and participation, the recognition of the expertise that they bring, and the replacement of the stale stock of stories created by others about them with their own stories. The genesis for this volume of first-person narratives can be traced to precisely this form of political engagement and provocation of thought.

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), formerly the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN), was formed with the goal to enhance the impact of research on solving the homelessness crisis in Canada. It seeks to move research into action, and uses multiple strategies to achieve this. It supports networking activities that facilitate the sharing of research and expertise, identifies promising practices and approaches, generates new research questions and engages in public education.

While an Inclusion Working Group existed as a spoke in the COH’s governance wheel from the beginning, in evaluating its work over the first two years of progress, those involved identified a gap in meaningful involvement of people with lived experience. To address this, a decision was made early in 2011 to expand the membership of the Inclusion Working Group to reflect a broad diversity of identities and experiences of homelessness as well as to ensure at least half of the members of the group had such experiences. A call went out all over for new members. As detailed in the call, the role of the Inclusion Working Group is to assist:

...the CHRN [now the COH] in its strategy to promote the voices of people with lived experience in CHRN initiatives. This group will achieve this goal by working to ensure people with lived experience belong, are engaged, and are connected to the goals and objectives of the CHRN.

While the group was charged with the development of inclusionary principles and practices for the CHRN [COH], it was also tasked with identifying specific ideas and proposals for new activities.

Over the course of meetings in May and October of 2011, the Inclusion Working Group identified the need for new stories to be told by those with lived experiences of homelessness, and the idea for this book was hatched. Planning over the winter and spring for the book led to the preparation of a proposal, the granting of ethics approval for the project, and ultimately the circulation of an invitation to potential contributors. In June of 2012, a “Call for Stories About Experiences of Being Homeless—Homeless is Only a Piece of my Puzzle: Implications for Policy and Practice” was shared widely on various list serves, through personal contacts, and via multiple networks.

The Call for Stories reflected the Inclusion Working Group’s view that homelessness does not define the story’s narrator, but rather is “only a piece of my puzzle.” The Call also reflected the Inclusion Working Group’s view that personal stories are political; embedded within are significant lessons relevant to policy makers, front line service providers and researchers:

Have you ever experienced homelessness? Would you like to create change by sharing some of your story? Would you like to tell people who make decisions, people who provide services to you and others who have experienced homelessness about what is and is not working? For instance, what is it about the current housing and support system that makes it hard for you to get off the street? If so, this book project, sponsored by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network, is for you!”

Interested storytellers were asked to submit a short outline or summary of 200 words about the topic the author wanted to address, the media (text, poetry or photography), and the central messages for policy makers, service providers and researchers. Submissions were received from August through October, and the selections made in November of 2012. An honorarium of \$500 was provided to each of the selected contributors in recognition of their contributions to the collection.

Each of the storytellers was matched with a member of the Inclusion Working Group. Their role was to responsively and flexibly provide support to aid in the completion of the submission. How each ‘team’ worked was to be determined entirely by the storyteller. Over the next few months, drafts of the submissions were completed in advance of a workshop that took place at York University on February 25, 2013. The February workshop—a gathering of almost all of the storytellers and the Inclusion Working Group—was an incredible day of sharing and learning. While the morning was spent with each team working on particular contributions, the afternoon was centred upon a facilitated discussion of the many ‘lessons’ for policy makers, service providers and researchers that emerged from the personal stories. It was also an opportunity to explore the similarities and contrasts between the stories—to both recognize oneself in someone else’s story and to understand the multiple pathways into and out of homelessness.

Through the afternoon discussion, we began to organize elements of each story into clusters. The idea was not to produce a grand overarching narrative or master story line, but to illuminate the diversity of experiences clustered around perceptions, causes and solutions. Indeed, if there was one single and pronounced thread from the afternoon conversation, it was the need to reject and displace the commonplace, dichotomous, ‘black and white,’ ‘us and them’ thinking that places people in boxes or categories and keeps them there.

The authors’ stories reveal the pervasiveness within dominant discourse of rigid and demeaning stereotypes about those who experience homelessness,

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of Aboriginal peoples, of women, of those with disabilities and of racialized peoples. Not only do these harmful preconceptions inform policy and practice responses, they can also become internalized. But the stories told in this volume also reveal that other labels and categories—of

‘mother’ or ‘father,’ for example—can be affirming, and possess potentially powerful healing properties.

The stories, read together, make clear that the causes of homelessness are

multiple, varied, intertwined and often hidden. Abuse and violence in one's family of origin is common, as told in stories of Derek, Joe and Sean. Both Launa Sue's and Sean's experiences highlight a culture in which workers are treated as disposable and their labour is exploited, while the story of Anonymous reveals the destruction of workplace cultures, such as policing, that insist workers 'man it up'. Colonization and multigenerational trauma play a significant role in the stories of Joe, Rose and Derek. Ryan writes about failures in hospital discharge planning and of shelters to accommodate people with serious injuries; while Richard emphasizes the need for housing availability after incarceration. Stasha's story speaks to the danger of binary thinking, especially when it comes to classifying people as 'homeless.' All of these themes are also found in Cheryl's poems, which are interspersed throughout the stories that follow. What all of these stories show are the pervasive and epic failures of state systems such as child welfare and social assistance. They also make clear that the experiences that shape pathways into homelessness are often violent and traumatic.

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Unsurprisingly, the emergent theme in relation to solutions was the insistence that there is no 'one size fits all.' While there is no 'one size fits all' solution, the personal narratives offer key elements of a framework in which individualized pathways out of homelessness can be crafted. Among these elements is the need for us to understand that healing from trauma is essential. This involves:

- paying attention to the multiple ways in which healing can be sabotaged,
- recognizing the central importance of a relationship with someone who genuinely cares whether you live or die,
- appreciating that becoming housed is a process, not an event,
- prioritizing safety as essential to the process.

The stereotyping and stigma that figure so predominantly in the dominant accounts of homelessness must be consciously and vigorously challenged. We also learn from the stories in this book that 'expertise'

lives in each of us; for example, peers have an equally important role to play in the process of healing and housing as ‘professionals.’ Lastly, and most importantly, the stories teach us that without hope there is no future. They urgently challenge us to understand how hope is nourished, and how or why it is all too often extinguished.

References

King, T. (2003). *The Truth About Stories*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.