

# Cynthia J. Dahlin: The Poetry Class for Homeless Women at N Street Village Shelter

Good Morning! It has been a while since I have preached, and this is the first time Julia has been able to be present to hear me give a sermon. So we decided to ask to use her music today to make it a family day – how did you all like the HB-Woodlawn Chorale?

This year I have not been here very often. I traveled this year to Australia, Quebec, Williamsburg, Costa Rica, New York, Cambodia, Thailand and Disney World, and finally, Maine, to drop Christo off for college last weekend. I have had a couple of Friday to Sunday overnight flights to California for family occasions and to visit Ron's father since the death of his mother last fall. Most of my travels have been on weekends, so they affected my attendance here at Seekers. However, last weekend, after Christo said goodbye on Saturday night and said he did not need to see us again Sunday, I had a bit of shopping time in Freeport, where many of the shops are moose-themed, and I found a button that caught my eye, and ended up helping me pull together my thoughts. It was a quote from J. R. R. Tolkien, which said, "Not all who wander are lost." I realized that I needed to summarize my year for you – to let you all know that while I have indeed been absent a lot, my ties here and my constant experience of God in my life have anchored me.

The effects of my wanderings has been to bring me to a place of call where I feel I am listening to **how** God wants me to **be**, rather than to **do** a certain thing, and to be even more open to the many paths of finding God, even though I am firmly

committed to my own way. I want to tell you a little about a couple of the key experiences of this year, and then will move to reading some of the poems produced by the women I work with at [N Street Village Shelter](#), at Thomas Circle in Washington, DC.

My first big “walkabout” this year was a two-week trip back to Australia with Ron. He was on business, and while I had many dinners at attend with him in the evenings, I left my schedule open in the daytime, when he would be at meetings, to revisit WomensSpace, where I had worked five years ago with women in the sex industry who are heroin addicted. It took a lot of will and self-control to do this – our family went to visit now two years ago, and every meal was filled with visiting old friends, and I had not been able to connect the small bits of time I had with the hours of Baptist Inner City Ministries – which is now renamed “[HopeStreet](#).” Therefore, I landed in Sydney, and picked up the phone.

The next morning, I got off the train at St. John’s station in Kings Park, the Central Park of Sydney, and met Sandra at 9:30 am, sharp. Sandra is a former dancer and writer, so she chose to meet in a cosmopolitan outdoor café, where we could talk – and she could smoke. She is the one person I have never minded sitting with while she smokes – she is so artistic, and seems to need something to wave around to punctuate her ideas. Our meeting was electric. She was now working in a gambling counseling project she had begun just as I was leaving Sydney, and finding it rewarding, but even harder than working with addicted prostitutes. She was extremely grateful for the financial support Seekers had given – we were the largest international gift HopeStreet had ever had – and they had looked us up on the internet, and felt like we were indeed part of Christ’s family looking out for their work, and giving

it importance – blessing it.

She was grateful for someone who knew her and knew what the work was like asking so many questions – what was it like to work with men after so many years of dealing with women? How did she deal with all the romantic crushes based on transference, but which still had to be dealt with? How did she keep up structures to keep her safe? Lastly, how was the whole organization doing after a leadership shake-up due to the sexual harassment of our dear colleague? She wanted support for a project which she had gained a mere \$100 to start to rent an empty room for two nights, but thought was off-beat enough and Seekers might see the value. It was called “Gatherings,” a project to help street people create performance art. Sandra gave me these photos of the one past performance that included a prostitute, a homeless man, a transgender person. There were five creative people involved, and she wanted to continue to find ways to allow the poor and homeless to create art, and thereby opening their souls to their own possibilities, and perhaps allowing themselves to begin to change their lives. I changed the designation on the Seekers check I had brought with me from “WomensSpace” to “Gatherings,” and left a personal check to support the gambling project. It was already 1:00pm, and the waiters were tired of us going on and on at that table.

Sandra reconnected me with WomensSpace, where I worked the next day, and gave me the address to find Tracey, the woman who had been forced out while pursuing her sexual harassment charges. I can only briefly summarize the emotional impact of these meetings. The women at WomensSpace greeted me, and treated me like a revered elder. They were now using the master’s thesis I wrote as a training manual and asked questions about “the part in chapter 3.” When I went to find

Tracey, she ran across the room, and sobbed in my arms for several minutes before we found a place to sit down for a long visit. I could tell that having someone who knew her struggle work to find her and come to tell her how courageous she had been was important – and I had not even really known why I needed to go.

I guess what I am trying to convey is that this whole visit was a new way for me of following God intuitively, and finding out that I do not always have knowledge of what my role in God's plan is. My role had gone on in Australia after I left there, and there are probably effects of my actions here, good and bad, which I will never fathom. Since Julia and other children are with us, I will skip the parts of my trip in which Sandra took me out from 10 to 3 am to see the bars, the shooting galleries and the other businesses involved in the sex industry. While it was exciting to do this, I did see that a whole segment of society remains invisible to most of us, and part of that invisibility is pain of excommunication from us.

So how do I connect all this to what I am doing in DC? Sandra and I had stayed connected especially concerning our work, and WomenSpace had enjoyed the N Street poetry book from last year – it was on the coffee table when I arrived, but I presume it was because I had called before I came. I have been reflecting a lot about the conclusion of my thesis about WomensSpace, and how it changed my thinking. I decided that the sacred part of my Australian ministry was not what we tried to do for the women: trying to find them housing, getting them better health care, going to the hospital with them when they gave birth or helping them deal with physical violence. The sacred act was keeping the space open, safe, and being present to them when they arrived – the sheer faithfulness of it. There were many

social workers and government “do-ers” they could turn to, although they did get more respect with a church representative with them, but someone to be with them and encourage them to show their true God-made selves, was the unique gift of WomensSpace. After 3 years at N Street Village, I realize that my constancy is a key part of my presence there. I get to know the women well; they know and trust me; women can hear about my classes, and then gain confidence and join in when they are ready; and, unbelievably – despite all the weekends I have missed here – I rarely miss a class at N Street. I try to time trips to make sure I am there as much as possible. I believe my goal is to affirm the inner lives and creativity of the women, and I want to share some of that creativity with you now. Most of the poems I have chosen appear in the first section of our volume, which is entitled: Me, My Life, My Body!

This is “Me!!” by Robin Remy.

## **Me!!**

*Robin Remy*

*Me (Mother)*

*Through my addiction I*

*Manage to be a Mother and only by the grace and mercy of God*

*I made sure of the essential things*

*In my sons’ lives in order for them*

*(1) to become men, and*

*(2) to be able to survive.*

*Me (Friend)*

*I’m a good listener.*

*I have very profound advice.*

*Always willing to share even my last.*

*I must have been a good friend,*

*Because my friends have been with me for the last 30-40 years.*

*Me (Robin)*

*I'm a giving person.*

*I'm a no-nonsense person.*

*I'm very strong with inner strength.*

*I have a lot more to give from my spirit and my soul.*

The next poem I will read is "I Feel Blue" by Toni Bell.

## ***I Feel Blue***

*Toni Bell*

*I feel blue. . . not like the bright pretty sky.*

*I feel blue like the dark blue sea.*

*There is a rumble in me,*

*Not a rumbling like a raggedy car,*

*But a rumble from a distant storm waiting to erupt*

*As soon as it arrives.*

*I yearn to blossom like a flower*

*When it blooms, releasing my*

*Petals and fragrance through all*

*My spiritual rooms.*

*I want to bloom away the gloom*

*That sometimes invades my soul.*

*I want to be free to be me.*

Next, I will read "My Life," by Janet Sharp.

# **My Life**

*Janet Sharp*

*My life always changes,  
New details to find out,  
Family secrets known and unknown,  
My temper to keep under control.*

*Find a way to hide from the world,  
Learn to listen more and talk less,  
Find a way to keep my mind active.*

*So much to do,  
So little time,  
Finding some balance in my life.*

*One of these days I'll find that balance.  
When, I don't know.*

Now I want to read a poem by Sheila White, which she wrote as a gift to me when I said I was afraid of what it would be like to go through menopause and deal with my body aging – more. She calls this “Menopause” and it began a period of real openness in the group in talking about their lives.

# **Menopause**

*Sheila White*

*Menopause has a special cause.  
It sets you free, free as a honey bee.  
It gives you power,  
Just like a budding flower.  
Because at any hour,  
Just like a spring shower,  
You can answer the call of your mate,  
Winter, spring, summer and fall,*

*Early and late,  
Just like a spring flow that pushes up through the earth  
For whatever it's worth.*

*And that's not all,  
Just like the aches and pains of winter,  
You are free of them all,  
Forever.  
Sweet menopause.*

Some of the openness is very important when the women talk about their lives and how they see God acting in their lives. This poem by Karen Bowman caused a major discussion on God among the women, who all affirmed Karen for seeing God even in the bad in life:

## ***Oh God, Thank You***

*Karen Bowman*

*For saving me when I did not know how to save myself.  
For rescuing me from the grip of crack, from the grip of a  
rapist.  
For jamming the gun that was placed at my head.  
For keeping me alert after the blow that was placed to my  
jaw.  
For protecting me on the nights I walked through alleys  
And abandoned houses looking for a place to sleep.  
For directing me to N Street Village and placing the right  
People in my life.  
For being on earth as you are in heaven.  
For loving me,  
Oh God, Thank You.*

I will close with a poem that reflects the truth in Psalm 14 in today's liturgy "you would confound the plans of the poor,



but the Lord is their refuge.” Andrea Hayfile, who lived in Logan Circle, and never did get a place in the shelter, so drifted away, wrote this beautiful verse, “Under an Azure Blue Sky.”

## ***Under an Azure Blue Sky***

*Andrea Hayfile*

*Under an azure blue sky  
That's so clear, not a cloud in sight  
I stand  
With the white sand hot beneath my feet  
Sand so fine, so soft, so clean  
And with the smell of the ocean  
All salty and sweet  
I think  
How there is such perfection in this  
Moment and I marvel at the beauty of this place.*

*But, as I listen to the crashing  
Sound of the waves as they  
Find their way to the stony shore  
That waits  
My spirit is not safe. I am uneasy  
As uneasy as the furious ocean waves  
And with the rise and fall of each  
Sound, I long for peace and  
I search my soul and pray  
That one day I will become as marvelous as this place. . .*

I have copies of the N St. Poetry Book to buy if you want one, but I want to note that the whole community supports N Street Village through support you give me, even when I forget to put in a budget request. People who work with homeless or addicted people take on some of the behavioral attributes, and you as a community have to deal with me being sharper, less soft,

sometimes a bit more controlling. As I deal with new groups of women coming in who can be challenging or threatening to one another, I sometimes come home a less gentle person. In Australia, volunteers like me had regular "supervision." Basically, we had therapy to notice and deal with this. Here, some of this may come to my family or my mission group. Nevertheless, I am grateful to you all for helping me to arrive prayerfully to listen some of these women into opening and knowing themselves. Most of the women whose poems you heard today had never written a poem, and had never written for fun. They found a lot of beauty inside, and I thank God for letting me share in it.