

Tuesday Mornings

I am an American. I was raised in California, went to college. I am not rich by American standards. I didn't get a tax rebate last year. But by almost any other standard on most of our planet, I would be considered wealthy.

Every Tuesday when I am able, I volunteer at The Open Door Community to help serve breakfast to the poor, the homeless, the disenfranchised of our city. I do not romanticize this. I am a very lucky man. I was born white and male. Every night I sleep in a warm bed. Police do not hassle me. I eat what I want.

As I walk to The Open Door around 5:45 AM, I remember when my wife and daughter Leslie and I visited Nepal a couple of years ago. You can't "visit" Nepal unless you are prosperous. Another reminder.

In a little village near Katmandu we walked through a street, goats, dogs, chickens, filth everywhere, the children were lively, dancing in the muck. I thought, "If children aren't abused or starving or sick, they will find a way to celebrate life." And I also thought, "the miracle of accidental birth." My accidental birth.

Here is what happens every Tuesday morning. I walk around to the front of 910 Ponce de Leon Street. I love the Southern pronunciation. I am quite sure the Spanish explorer of Florida, the discoverer of the fabled "fountain of youth" would turn over in his grave. "Ponce de Lee-on," it is pronounced. Lee-on with the accent on the first syllable.

Jack is handing out tickets. He has been out in the yard since just after five o'clock and he comes from a northern suburb of Atlanta.

Our hospitality home here at 910 can only accommodate around 120 people in a morning. I wave to several guys. There are almost no women. I am the father of three grown women. Where are the homeless women, I wonder?

I see George.

"Hey...how's it going, George?"

"Uhhhh," George responds. I know him well enough by now to know he needs breakfast to get warmed up, so he's not saying much. I assume this grunt means, "Ok, how's it goin' with you?"

“I’m not sure, it’s pretty early, but I’m doing the best I can. Thanks for asking,” I say back.

Another grunt. I assume this means, “See you later.”

Ezra, a resident of the Open Door, has already made coffee for the folks gathering in the front yard. Donna, a Tuesday regular volunteer, has come here very early to make grits (pronounced gree-its, accent on the first syllable), sausages and eggs. Ralph keeps the coffee fresh for the volunteers. Donna supervises the kitchen for the next two hours.

I help set up the tables, six places, six tables, thirty-six place settings. Coffee, water and orange juice. Turkey sausages, boiled eggs, gree-its with cheese. Plenty of bread, peanut butter, jelly and butter, anyone can make sandwiches to take with them. Orange slices.

Coming in the front door, Elizabeth hands out orange juice. Barbara gives everyone a vitamin. Nan hands out a bowl of sausage and eggs, everyone with a big welcome. I am the designated door person today. That means that I am privileged to hang out with folks, call out numbers sequentially, the ones Jack gave out earlier in the cold, wet morning, The temperature hovers in the mid thirties, it rained all night torrentially. Servers wait on tables, replenishing bread, grits, coffee, water. Stanley and Winston have volunteered from the yard to help in the kitchen. Stanley tells me that one of our regular guests, a young man I know, has just died of AIDS.

I will never again think about the weather in exactly the same way. When it rains all night, I know that most of the people we serve the next morning will be wet, soaking wet through and through. There will be a run on the sock and glove area in the “sorting room,” which is part lounge area with magazines, the morning paper and part clothing and medicine supply. When it is cold, I wake up in my warm bed and remember that there are people in our city freezing, sleeping on benches, clothing and perhaps a blanket their only possessions. Hassled by police in this freezing weather for no reason except they have no home. Our neglected brothers and sisters in this richest of all nations on earth. How Christian is that, I ask myself?

Before serving breakfast, we always sit in our circle, chairs drawn back, Chad or Ed or Loren preparing a scriptural interpretation or meditation. For months, Luke 2 has been the subject. The coming of Jesus. The history of Jews in that

time. The oppressive Roman Empire. The angels. Whoa, I think...what a strange and occasional part angels play in Scripture. Loren is telling us about Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem from their home in Nazareth. The Emperor Augustus Caesar, proclaimed a god by none other than himself, has decreed everyone go to the place of their birth to be counted in the census. The Homeland Security Act of his time, the empire needs money.

Mary is denied access to an inn. Jesus is born in a stable, an animal barn, placed in a trough, animal excrement everywhere, filthy....awful. Shepherds are tipped off by angels...those occasional divine messengers.. about the great event. They go to the birthplace and worship. Loren is very expressive. Shepherds are the lowest of the low, distrusted, considered robbers of neighboring grasslands. Our gussied up crèches at Christmas don't begin to tell the reality of the ugly story of Jesus' birth....and the splendor of Jesus' birth.

Barbara, a regular volunteer and sometimes resident, raises her hand. Loren pauses. "Why did the angels choose the shepherds to give the news?" Barbara asks. This is such an astoundingly good question, our mouths open. Does God tell the underclass things nobility aren't told? Barbara always asks good questions.

We will discuss these things at our own breakfast after we have served our homeless guests, but now is time for prayer requests. For Murphy Davis, a bone marrow donor. A young man needing help. Personal health concerns, a mother in trouble, someone leaving the community. A safe trip. Someone about to be executed on death row. All our breakfast brothers and sisters in the yard. We pray. Ed springs up, does a little dance to everyone's amusement including his own.

Finally we are ready. I open the front door. "Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Open Door Community. Please enjoy your breakfast, take advantage of our sorting room for clothing, medicine and may God bless this meal." Or something to that effect. Slowly numbers are called out, our guests come in, have breakfast, have the opportunity to get some clean clothing, check to see if their mail might have arrived. Lunches tomorrow and showers.

A young Hispanic woman comes in with her seven year old child. He is sick and she doesn't speak any English. Chad and Loren in Spanglish figure it out. Chad takes her to a neighborhood doctor, then drives her and her son to St. Joseph's Hospital. It is a very good morning so far.

One hundred and twenty friends of the Open Door Community have had their meal, taken their clothing and medications, and head for the streets again for another day. We volunteers and residents have our breakfast now, pray for the generosity of our meal, our abundance, probably for our good fortune for having the Community, for our homes, for our lives. For our friends from the street.

I leave after our meal. George stops me as I walk down the alley on the way home.

“I think you should tell your sister not to sing country music,” he tells me.

I have to think about this. Of course. My name is Don, Donny Osmond has a twin sister, Marie. George is reminding me that he knows my name, but there is a little quiz attached to the privilege. Marie should be singing pop, he tells me. George is an expert in TV and pop trivia and, amazingly, knows more about native American tribes in the Eastern United States than anyone I have ever met.

As I walk I am praying to protect our guests of the morning. I am praying for myself and my family. I am praying for our heartless affluent country that has abandoned its poor, its sick, its elderly. I give thanks for the Open Door Community.

I am imagining Jesus smiling this morning. As far as I can tell, Jesus smiles every Tuesday morning, rain or shine