

For Harry: Confronting poverty isn't about what you're handing out; it's about who you're letting in

by Peter Hough

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ALTON - When Harry drowned three weeks ago, I drove to Saint Anthony's emergency room hoping against hope that I would walk in and see him smiling at me. But he was already gone. A quick check of the computer screen, something about just coming on shift, and an attempt at an explanation: "Maybe he was here, bu



t he's gone now."

We're agnostic about people who are experiencing poverty. We don't know them, we don't know their lives, and we don't know what they face. Those who live at some distance from polite society often die without notice. Maybe they were here, but they're gone now. We don't know. We never really did.

Harry wasn't just a poor kid who drowned at the Alton Marina. He was a curious and adventurous kid who became a cherished member of our church. He was more than what he lacked, more than the exclusion he faced, and more than the shame he felt in the eyes of his neighbors. As Father Greg Boyle has written, we should stand in awe at what the poor have to carry, not in judgment at how they carry it. Harry was more. He felt more deeply than he could express, his words desperately trying to keep up with all he was thinking. The frustration of not being heard weighed on him, along with the burden of not always being welcomed.

In the tragedy of Harry's death there's the tragic irony that he drowned within sight of a pool. The Alton Marina has a pool built into the floating docks, closed off from the world behind metal gates. It was proudly shown to the Small Business Revolution cast and crew when they were here, a glittering gem in an exclusive space in Alton. The problem, of course, is that by definition something can't be exclusive unless someone is excluded. Alton's riverfront is designated as common space for the whole community to use and enjoy. The marina itself was funded by a bond the city passed, which we are still paying off. But the pool built is not open to all. The point is not to cast blame on the Marina, but to show how Harry's story participates in and symbolizes the larger narrative of exclusion that many of our friends experiencing poverty face.

Bryan Stevenson, the author of *Just Mercy*, says, "The opposite of poverty isn't wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice." Poverty isn't as simple as lacking material goods, so it can't be solved simply by giving people stuff. It's also the obstacles our friends face that become impediments to their full flourishing as people and their full belonging in our community.

Confronting poverty isn't about what you're handing out; it's about who you're letting in. The old adage about giving someone a fish versus teaching them to fish is quaint but sorely limited. Teaching someone to fish is more effective help long term, unless of course the lake has a metal fence around it that gives access only to the wealthiest members of the community. In that case, teaching someone to fish is a cruel waste of their time and the worst kind of lying promise.

The fact is we settle for handouts because teaching and mentoring require costly personal involvement, and working for equitable access threatens to turn our values upside down. Handouts can be gathered here and sent there. Mentoring can be done there and then we race back home. Inclusion means we make room for those who are stuck over there to come here. Inclusion means those who are drowning unseen in the murky waters of poverty are welcomed into our common space as equals.

Harry's death is still hard to talk about. There's no lesson to learn that will somehow soften the tragedy or resolve the grief. But if we're willing to see it, we have the opportunity to get a better glimpse not only of who he was, but of who we are as a community. We have the opportunity to answer the call to become a more inclusive community. Who will you let in? Who is welcome in your neighborhood, in your organization, at your table? Where are people being excluded and what will you do to break down barriers and invite them in?