


A Light in the Dark

On a cold winter's night in Sydney, people gather to remember those who lost their lives living on the streets.

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St Mary's casts an eerie gothic shadow over Cathedral Square, where around 80 people have gathered on the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, for the Sydney Homeless Memorial Service. It's so dark that even our small battery-powered candles do little to illuminate the crowd of community members, volunteers and people who have known homelessness.

We are here on the lands of the Gadigal people to remember those who have died on the streets or in the shelters of our city over the past year. For many this will be their only commemoration.

"Today we remember those who have passed," says advocate Talie Star, herself a survivor of homelessness, and one of many speakers who take to the podium. "They were resilient, strong and powerful, honouring who they were as best they could. They didn't always live a perfect life, but they did everything they needed to survive. You did not fail; we failed you. It should not have been this way."

She reads out a litany of names, which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised refer to those who have died, without the dignity of a proper memorial. "Hugh Lucas, Roy Smoother, Robert Jordan, Allen White, Ella Brown, Paul Toomey..." she says, a kind of quiet song into the night.

Tonight is also a reminder of the deplorable homelessness crisis across the country, where more than 116,000 people are without a home every night. Yet this bleak situation is punctuated by hope, like a candle on the night of the winter solstice.

Talie speaks of the trauma of being homeless and, with devastating clarity, about the challenges of sleeping rough. "The people who have the least are the most generous and the most kind-hearted," she says. "Yet we fail to understand the reality

of the challenges people go through. Where will you sleep? Where will you go? Are you going to be hurt?"

She speaks of the homeless in our city as a kind of mirror, showing us our collective deficiency in finding solutions. "It's heartbreaking that people in this day and age, in a first-world country, live like this. The homeless show us who we are [as a society] and who we need to be."

As a member of a needs assessment panel for Homelessness NSW, Talie is acutely aware of the difficulty people experiencing homelessness face when trying to access vital support.

"We're honouring the dead today, but we need to remember the living as well. It's the living who are so important, as well as those who have died. Being on the high-needs panel has shown me that so many people fall through the cracks. Some people don't fit the box," she says.

In 2020, some 424 people died while sleeping rough in Australia. This number, an estimate determined by the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness and the University of Western Australia last year, is the first national measure of its kind. There are no national systems in place to acknowledge the deaths of people who are homeless. Tonight is an attempt to mark and memorialise the plight of those who die without a home to call their own.

Organised by End Street Sleeping Collaboration, the memorial service highlights the need to shelter those on the streets, especially in the cold winter months when deaths spike, and in light of the sobering fact that rough sleepers have a reduced life expectancy of up to 30 years.

For Patricia Thomas, grief care managing consultant at Catholic Cemeteries and Crematoria,

the lonely death of any person on the streets is an unacceptable affront to human dignity.

"The death of every human being unmourned diminishes us," she says. "I see flickers of lights in parks, under benches...in darkness. Our lights tonight will mark the lives of those, who in places unknown, died unmourned. Today they will be known and will be remembered."

Yet there are so many who go unremembered, whose names remain unknown to us. They were old and young, of all gender and sexual orientations; they were mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. Their passing went largely unnoticed.

The lighting and swaying of our candles in the cool night air is accompanied by a rousing performance of 'You Raise Me Up', by the Honeybees Choir. They are a collection of volunteers, themselves survivors of homelessness.

With their booming, somewhat discordant voices, they may not be the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, but they offer something far greater: the joy of community amid hardship. Among the choir is Wazza, known to all who live on or serve in these streets. With his huge white beard and piercing blue eyes, he is a sure source of comfort for all who meet him.

"Singing is good for the soul and is a way of healing people," he tells me, recalling the impact his singing had on a man in palliative care. "I took his attention away from his illness for half an hour, and for me, that's what it's all about."

Mary Stephanie, a woman who once slept rough, takes to the stage to read from the Bible, Matthew 25: "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink," her voice reverberating through the night.

We hear a final blessing from Uniting Church minister Rev Danielle Hemsworth-Smith. I speak to her about why memorials like this matter, and whether they make any practical difference in people's circumstances.

"The significance of this memorial is that people are remembered and not forgotten. Everyone here had a name, friends, a family," she says, affirming one of the recurring themes of the night, that homelessness is an issue that has little to do with the fault of its survivors and much to do with a broken system.

"The fault of this crisis lies both with the state and everyday people. It's important that we make support more accessible, with less red tape and less stigma," she says.

As tonight is the winter solstice, I ask her what this might mean for the gathering and she responds with a profound notion: "The longest night of the year for me has spiritual significance, reminding us that God is in the darkness, that He is not lost." ■

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