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Acts of Giving



by Lori Teresa Yearwood

The Blanket

Now, from the comfort of my own apartment, I wish I could find the woman with the blue blanket. I would tell her how her single, quiet gesture became a part of the foundation upon which I finally stood, steadied myself—and walked out of my homelessness.

But I can't even recall what she looked like. At the time, I was frozen in my trauma, in constant fear of a transient man who stalked and assaulted me, and I was afraid to actually look at anyone.

There is something, though, I can do: I can share the tremendous impact of a person's effort to reach past the great divide between "us" and "them" to help someone who clearly needs it.

It was March of 2015, about 18 months into my life on the streets. I had stopped talking because I no longer believed anyone cared what I had to say. I was lying on a metal bench in a tiny, well-manicured park of an upper-crust neighborhood in Salt Lake City called The Avenues. It had been an exceptionally cold winter and I was shivering and inexpressibly tired.

Across the street, a car stopped, and a woman got out of it and opened its trunk. She pulled out a royal blue blanket with white trim, tucked it under her arm, and walked up to me.

"You look cold," she said when she arrived at my side. "Would you like this?"

I nodded.

She flung the soft blanket over me and its delicious warmth descended into my body. She carefully wrapped the material around my feet and shoulders, as if I were her precious child. The blanket was freshly laundered and smelled like bubblegum detergent.

For an hour or two, I stopped bracing against everyone and everything and let myself fall asleep in the center of a public park in the middle of the day, in the seemingly never-ending lostness that was my homelessness.

More than half a million people live on the streets or in homeless shelters in this country, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Multitudes more live on the brink of collapse; a 2018 survey by the Federal Reserve found that 40 percent of Americans couldn't have covered a \$400 emergency the year before without selling something or going into debt. Thirty-eight million households are severely burdened by housing costs, Harvard's Joint Center for Housing reported, so that they have little income left to pay for food, healthcare, or other basic necessities.

Who will help the multitudes? Charitable giving in the country declined by 1.7 percent last year. The entire problem seems too vast and too traumatizing for society to face.

Yet my own story of recovery was built on the support of a surprising succession of individuals, who extended themselves personally to give me what I most needed, when I most needed it. They were acquaintances or total strangers, people who sensed the extraordinary value in something they could share with someone else.



A Gift—With No Ties

Iva Dundas and I were acquaintances before my collapse, when I owned a horse ranch in Oregon and ran a company selling specialty low-sugar, low-starch horse treats. Dundas, a filmmaker, writer, and natural horsekeeper, was a loyal customer with a Halflinger pony, Bella.

In 2013, she read my company newsletter about how my house had burned down and I had lost everything, save for my animals and the clothes on my back. Then she read another newsletter about how my mother had died of cancer and I moved into the home of a local customer.

“Then you just disappeared, and no one knew where you were,” she said.

In late June of 2016, I suddenly appeared on Facebook, where I posted a story about having been homeless. It was not a graceful reappearance. I was traumatized and broke, and when I wrote those first few initial posts, I asked people to help me: Could they please send money for things like eyeglasses and contacts—which despite severe astigmatism and near-sightedness, I hadn’t worn since the beginning of the homelessness? I also created an ad listing my professional abilities and asked if anyone knew of a place—anywhere in the country—where I could stay in a work exchange. Two friends sent \$100 each, another sent \$45 and one of my nieces sent \$25. It was all helpful, and humbling.

I had always been a working professional, proud of my middle-class background and my career. Now I was reckoning with the loss of my family and my animals, and trying to figure out how to rebuild my life all at once.

“Call me anytime,” Dundas told me, sending me her phone number, and we began to talk.

Meanwhile, in a mad scramble to recreate what had so completely fallen apart, I answered an email from a couple in Kansas who were also previous customers, albeit only occasional ones. They offered to fly me to their ranch and talk about starting my horse treat company again, only this time as a partnership between the three of us. The meeting was a disaster—the man screamed at me for leaving a candy bar on a desk—and I called Dundas from my bedroom in their house, crying.

“I don’t know everything that has happened to you, but the more I learn about the continued trauma of it all, the more I see how obvious it is to me that you need a break,” Dundas said.

She PayPal-ed me \$500, to help ensure that I had taxi fare to get home from the airport, as well as a financial cushion for necessary next steps: Perhaps clothes to interview in, or money to put down on a used car, or...

“I’m sorry I didn’t see this need sooner,” she said.

I used the money to pay for an Uber to the halfway house where I was living, and then to open my first bank account in nearly three years.

I remember looking online at the money in the account, and knowing that someone cared about my welfare, someone I had never even met.

“The only thing I ask in return is that you write,” Dundas said.

Later, Dundas would tell me that at the time she gave me the \$500, she had \$1,000 in her own bank account, and that though she lives on a four-acre ranch in Waimea, HI, she worries a lot about money—“Almost as if I have a reptilian brain fear of becoming destitute”—and how, if she is not extremely careful, she could become homeless herself.

“A lot of middle-class people work hard for what they have and think: Why should they share it?” Dundas said. “It’s hard to know how to be, because we don’t have a culture that naturally shares. I don’t understand it.”



A Room

I met Paige Paulsen about six months into my emergence from the park bench. Like most previously homeless people, I was struggling to find a way to create something out of nothing. It was as if, on the last day on the park bench, the Universe had handed me a pair of knitting needles, but didn't give me any yarn. My challenge: To stitch something out of air.

I'd been living in a halfway house for harmed women coming off the streets and out of incarceration, but it shut down due to lack of funds, and I had nowhere I could afford to go. I was just beginning to write again and was working as a part-time cashier at a grocery for \$11 an hour.

Paulsen, an accounting professor at Salt Lake Community College, met me at a community gathering where people were invited to share five-minute snippets of their daily triumphs and struggles. After listening to mine, she asked her substantial circle of friends and family if they were willing to rent a room for a price I could pay—between \$300 and \$400 a month. No one wanted to.

By that point, Paulsen had been living alone for 15 years. Inviting a stranger to share her home was not at the top of her list of things she longed to do.

"It was evident that time was running out for you," Paulsen said. She prayed.

"Show me where I can serve," she said. Her answer: rent Lori a room. The challenge, Paulsen said, became "not to recoil from the guidance."

She had a small spare bedroom, which she had been using as her television room. Paulsen wanted to continue using it in that way, while I was living in it. I told her I needed to rent a space that felt like my own, that I needed a completely private place to heal; I had been living in the public eye for two years. Paulsen moved the television into her living room, building a \$1,500 mantel over her fireplace to accommodate it.

"Initially, I was like, 'I don't want to do this,'" she said. "I don't want to! Nooooo! Really? Do I have to?' And then I would hear: 'If there is heart room, there is house room.'"

On December 14th, 2017, I moved into Paulsen's home, under the agreement that I could live there for \$400 a month for a full year.

There were times when we fought over little things—she didn't appreciate how I left overripe bananas on her counter top. I didn't like how she played music early in the morning. We always worked it out, often laughing over our personal quirks and admitting we preferred control over compromise. My biggest fear was that she would kick me out when I spoke up. She assured me that wasn't going to happen, and it didn't.

“Service is often uncomfortable and rarely convenient,” Paulsen says now. “That is just how it is.”

She looks back on that year as “one of the biggest things I ever did.” I agree. I can see, now, what a great sacrifice she made for a stranger. And as a result of her sharing her home with me, I was able to stabilize every aspect of my life: I bought a used car, worked in earnest on my writing career, paid off old debts and saved enough money to move into my own apartment.



Some Basic Supplies

When I first moved into my new place, I had very few physical possessions: a couch, a chair, and a dresser that I had picked up for free from a church that helps homeless people get back on their feet, some funky lamps from a thrift store, my clothes, and my pet Betta, “Sky.”

By that time, I had left my cashiering job, and in addition to building up my career as a freelance journalist, was working as a part-time grant writer at Journey of Hope, the nonprofit that had given me my first home out of homelessness. A board member at Journey of Hope, Hande Togrul, texted me: “Is there anything you need? Please send a list.”

Togrul and I barely knew each other. But I knew a few things about her: She had grown up in Turkey with a servant—an *evlatlik*—whom her family adopted but who was forever treated as a child and therefore denied the benefits of a formal education and paid work. As a result, Togrul became passionate about feminist economics and earned her doctorate in the field from the University of Utah.

In retrospect, Togrul said, “I know I am privileged. I know I could have easily been in your shoes, and I have a deep understanding that I have to step up for others.”

Togrul and her husband live in a beautiful four-bedroom home in Salt Lake City. Throughout the years, the couple has housed and fed people in need for as long as a year at a time—for free. All of them had either been homeless or were on the brink of it. Togrul knew them personally, or knew someone who did. She says she doesn’t know how she

would feel about inviting someone in who had not been referred to her, as she is aware that many who are homeless suffer from trauma, mental disorders and self-medicating addiction.

Her experiences with the people she invited were sometimes challenging, she said. But in those relationships, she learned to speak up for herself and to say “No.” There was one particular instance when she had to tell a young woman that she couldn’t invite friends over during all hours of the night and day, for example. But all the people moved on successfully and nearly all the relationships became lifelong friendships.

Togrul said she would open her home again to another person in a heartbeat. Her husband, however, feels differently.

“He grew up very poor in a squatters’ village in southeast London,” Togrul said. “And he tells me now that it is his time to enjoy his sanctuary and he admits he is selfish.”

Not far down the street from where the Togruls live is a park where an old homeless woman spends her nights. Her skin is weathered with constant exposure to the elements. She looks as if she could be 100.

“When I see her, I ask her if she needs anything,” Togrul says. “She sleeps fucking outside, while we have a room here. I’m actually quite pissed off about it.”

When Togrul had asked what I needed, I sent her a short list of things I needed in my new apartment—a bed and a coffee table would be great, I told her. Togrul immediately shared a group post on the phone as well as on Facebook, asking her friends if anyone had those items. I ended up receiving different, but equally appreciated, things: brand new metal trash cans with lids, sharp kitchen knives, an emergency flashlight, a handmade pottery bowl, candles, and luxury bath soap.



A Housewarming Party

Just as I was moving, I got a friend request on Facebook from Helen Berggren. She had read an in-depth story that I wrote for the *Washington Post* about my journey into and out of homelessness, and even though we had never met in person, we had both been reporters at the *Miami Herald*.

“You have done something extraordinary,” she told me. “I think you should be rewarded.”

She wanted to throw a virtual housewarming party, she said. She would invite all her friends and maybe I could, too. We could both post about it on Facebook in a GoFundMe campaign and people could contribute, she suggested.

I told her that the word “rewarded” didn’t sit well with me; I felt ashamed of it—as if becoming homeless were a thing to feel bad about, but coming out of it made me somehow good again. Berggren thanked me for my honesty and said that was not how she meant it; she simply thought what I had done was spectacular.

“But this is for YOU,” she said. “So we are going to do this the way you want.”

Working my way out of homelessness had been the hardest thing I had ever done and I did not want to be in the position of asking anyone for anything ever again; I was still embarrassed, I told her, about how far I had fallen. She said she understood. Then she went privately to her friends and family members and singlehandedly raised more than \$2,600 for my official housewarming party.

“It wasn’t a charity thing, it was truly a celebration,” Berggren told me.

Next, the Miami resident, a self avowed bargain shopper who visits her local thrift store, The Red White and Blue almost every day, shopped online with me to find the perfect bargains my new home. I would tell her about my decorating style—country-girl bohemian—and she would send me links to products she thought I would like.

“This is about your style,” Berggren continually told me. “I want you to be thrilled.”

We found a white shower curtain with three-dimensional flowers from Target, a chocolate brown reading lamp from Walmart, a queen-sized, super-soft bed at JC Penney, and even an ornate brass bed frame from Ashley Furniture.

Then, for nearly two months, I received all kinds of deliveries, sometimes accompanied by handwritten notes from people all around the country.

Berggren told me that when she was a child, she had endured severe bullying, at school as well as in her family, and sometimes, she can see in others the piece of her that remains the underdog.

“There are so many people rooting for you,” Berggren continually tells me. “You have no idea how much people want you to succeed.”



A Backpack

Looking back on my emergence from the depths of a collapse that few completely escape, I realize with increasing clarity how far other people had to step out of their psychological, physical, and cultural safety zones to help me.

The woman with the blue blanket had no way of knowing that I wasn't an addict; that I wasn't going to lurch out at her and hurt her. The woman in Hawaii had no idea what I would do with the \$500 she sent me. She could only hope. My housemate got a good vibe from me, but to bring someone into your home without knowing them—that is a risk.

The stereotype of homeless people is that we are crazy or that we are drug addicts—or both. Even if that is true, does that mean we are unreachable? Sometimes it appears that way.

I was homeless for another year after the woman draped that blue blanket over me. Yet her kindness was part of the emotional shoring that gave me the strength and faith to eventually rejoin mainstream society.

So was the woman who saw me as she hiked on the outskirts of a wilderness trail in Salt Lake City. I was on a slatted park bench there, the last place I ever lived as a homeless woman. I was packing my toiletries and clothes into a tiny surfer's backpack and a plastic garbage bag, when she stepped off her path to talk to me.

"Excuse me," she said softly. "Would you like a larger backpack—would that be helpful?"

I nodded.

"Then I will bring it to you tomorrow morning," she said.

I doubted I would ever see her again; when you are homeless, you are homeless because any and all safety nets have broken from beneath you and you stop trusting. People say all kinds of things.

Still, I thought about how a bigger bag would make my life so much easier. I wouldn't have to walk the streets with a garbage bag slung over my shoulder, worrying that its contents would poke holes in the plastic and then tumble onto the street.

A thought flashed through my mind that night as I lay on the bench beneath the stars: *Maybe my need for a bigger backpack is a metaphor for how I need a bigger life.*

The next morning, the woman showed up, just as she said she would. This time, when she stepped off her trail, she was holding a big, black canvas backpack.

"Here you go," she said, handing it to me

It was in perfect condition, with roomy pouches and working zippers. Backpacks are a sought after commodity in homelessness—people constantly steal them—and I didn't have a normal sized one.

"Thank you," I whispered.

Someone had thought about me and then followed through on her word. The woman smiled shyly and hiked back onto her trail. I threw my garbage bag in a park trash can, put my belongings into my new-to-me backpack, slipped it over my shoulders and walked the two miles into town.

It was the first day I would begin asking organizations and churches for help, And while there were quite a few other occurrences that pointed me toward my new life, it was the last day of my homelessness.



Lori Teresa Yearwood. Photo: Cass Studios of Salt Lake City

Lori Teresa Yearwood's work can be found at loriyearwood.com