

# From Skid Row to the Simon Community

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EVEN TO-DAY, a large number of homeless men and women derive little or no benefit from the Welfare State; what is more, they are not happy wanderers or beatnik philosophers, but live outside society because they have no choice. How much choice they had in their downward path is open to discussion, but once they reach the bottom it is almost impossible to climb out again unaided.

It is difficult to find an appropriate label that fits them all—misfits, social casualties? Bryan Breed, who has written the most recent book about them<sup>1</sup> calls them "the men outside". They have little in common except that, after finding themselves in a situation with which they could not cope, they have lost all the props, such as family, friends, status, belongings, which help most of us to remain respectable. Often it is the removal of one main prop, coupled with personality difficulties, that precipitates the collapse. With Charlie Smith, described by Tony Parker in *The Unknown Citizen*,<sup>2</sup> the prop had been the Army. A reception centre worker

describes a vagrant who had been an electrical engineer until his marriage broke up<sup>3</sup>. Many are disorientated on discharge from prison or mental hospital. Some are expatriates and, of course, a high proportion have found a substitute prop in drink, including crude spirits which, it has been said, keeps them alive until it kills them. Life histories of 51 Skid Row alcoholics have been described by Edwards and co-workers<sup>4</sup>.

It is difficult to estimate the number of "misfits". There must be a considerable number among the 26,884 men and 1,905 women in various types of hostel on the night of the survey made by the N.A.B. (as it then was) in 1965, and especially among the 13,500 who sleep rough or use reception centres from time to time<sup>5</sup>. The number which the survey found sleeping rough on the night of 6th December, 1965, was 920 men and 45 women; the Simon Community, however, considers<sup>6</sup> that this is certainly a considerable underestimate: who can imagine that only two men slept rough in Liverpool, for example, as reported in

the survey, or only six in Glasgow?

Why do they stay "outside", when the N.A.B. survey showed that 5,000 beds in hostels were unoccupied on the night of the survey? Firstly, of course, the vacancies are not evenly distributed over the country; and any one hostel is likely to have vacancies at some times, but to be obliged to turn applicants away at others. Three hundred and forty out of 567 hostels said that they sometimes had to turn people away. More important, most hostels limit the categories of people whom they will accept—in other words some are barred. Among the classes barred from various hostels in the survey are alcoholics, the mentally handicapped, homosexuals, enuretics, epileptics, the dirty, the lice-infested. Nine hostels barred Irishmen and two, Englishmen. Only 76 out of 444 establishments for men said they barred no one. One participant observer had difficulty in being accepted without identification papers<sup>7</sup>.

This is not a criticism of the achievement of existing hostels. Many were established specifically to help a particular type of individual, such as ex-prisoners; and even among these there is a limit to the number of problems which one hostel can tackle. Merfyn Turner, in planning Norman House, found that "The more attention I gave to the negative aspect of selection for the scheme I had prepared for homeless offenders, the longer grew the list of

unsuitable people"<sup>8</sup>. Even the Simon Community has been confronted with this problem, as will be mentioned below.

The reasons why a man does not go to a hostel (or other welfare agency), even if he knows he would be admitted, are more complex. He may simply be ashamed to present himself in his dirty and perhaps drunken condition. Edwards suggests that, having reached Skid Row, he has probably made a new, although pathological, adjustment to life<sup>4</sup>, and does not want to be helped. This attitude, which sometimes seems perverse to the would-be helper, has been sympathetically described by Keith-Lucas<sup>9</sup>, as being grounded in fear of facing life outside his familiar though unpleasant rut, and lack of faith in his ability to improve or indeed in the helper's ability to improve him.

It should also not be overlooked that life in a hostel can seem very empty and lacking in incentive. In other words, while a man may fear that a rehabilitative hostel will make too many demands on him, a common lodging house will make too few. The N.A.B. survey found 17,140 men (64 per cent) in hostels for over 100 men, of whom 10,095 (37 per cent) were in hostels for over 300. The Reception Centre in Camberwell can accommodate some 900 men, of whom an average of 34 per cent have some history of mental instability,

20 per cent are alcoholics, a few are drug addicts and most of the rest "casuals", who do not even stay long enough for their problems to be discovered<sup>10</sup>. What treatment or support is possible under these conditions? The fact that a few are re-settled in normal life reflects credit on the small staff, but the average common lodging house is described by Turner<sup>8</sup> as offering no encouragement for the present or hope for the future.

The Simon Community offers friendship to men and women in such circumstances, although it does not impose "rehabilitation" on them or attempt to measure its "success" rate. (It believes, however, that if a research worker did so, the results would not be disappointing.) The house in Kentish Town, London, was the first Simon house, and was started three years ago. It is named St. Joseph's. Other houses have followed, in Liverpool, Glasgow and Exeter, and the headquarters, serving also as training centre and country retreat, is in Crundale, near Canterbury. All are family-sized houses, for a normal maximum of 12 men and women, run by two or three Simon workers (with sometimes one or two trainees, students on attachment, etc.). Two facts which distinguish the Simon Community from most others in this field are that the workers are all volunteers, and that, as a

cardinal principle, there is no limit to the number of times a man will be re-accepted after breaking down.

St. Joseph's, the prototype, is a terraced house with six rooms, kitchen, shower baths and basement, in a shopping-cum-residential street. It presents an initial impression of confusion, with second-hand clothing being stored in the hall, for the fund-raising gift shop a few doors away. There is one bedroom for women and two for elderly or infirm men; the remaining males sleep in the lounge, which is also the dining room, and there is an office, where two Simon workers sleep on the floor. Food consists largely of vegetables picked up off the ground in Covent Garden, day-old bread begged from bakers, food given by local supporters, and so on. As little as possible is bought.

The Simon Community has derived many ideas from the "houses of hospitality" started by Dorothy Day in America during the 1930's<sup>11</sup>, including that of conducting its own "mission to the misfit" with its own newspaper, the *Simon Star*. Among the other influences on the Simon way of life is the Henderson Hospital where the Social Rehabilitation Unit, which pioneered group therapy, was established in 1947 to attempt to rehabilitate social casualties in

a therapeutic community. This influence is evident in the group meetings which all Simon houses stress: the daily meetings at breakfast, at which the day's chores, such as collecting food, are arranged (if there are no volunteers, the Simon workers do them); the weekly house meeting, at which various matters affecting individuals or the community are thrashed out; and the Simon workers' own meetings.

At one time, for example, difficulties were caused at St. Joseph's by a small number of crude spirit drinkers who had been taken in. When they were "steamed up" their aggressiveness placed new strains on a community which already had to contain a good deal of tension. It was at a house meeting that this problem was discussed. The house decided that even a community for misfits had to safeguard itself by excluding such disruptive influences; no meths. bottles could be allowed on the premises. The meths. drinkers are not rejected, however, one or two are allowed the use of a flat near St. Joseph's, and may enter the community when they are "dry", and the community makes a practical demonstration of its concern by running a shelter for crude spirit drinkers in a near-derelict house in Stepney, where they can find soup, warmth and, perhaps most important, acceptance.

Concern is demonstrated in other ways: "soup runs" are

organised to take soup and sandwiches to derelict houses, railway termini, and other places where the homeless sleep. A night's shelter in the basement is often provided for up to three men for whom there is no room in the community, and casual meals are similarly provided.

The border line between caring and cared-for is as unobtrusive as is practicable. In idealistic early days an attempt was made to disregard it, but this experiment brought the realization that the preservation of a permissive family requires considerable self-discipline: there must be two people in each community who are not misfits (or only slightly). It also pointed to the need for training Simon workers.

The majority of the 27 present Simon workers are in their early 20's, but a few are somewhat older; one or two have experience of conventional social work. They normally sign on for six months, a year or two years of voluntary service. Soon after arrival they go to the Community's headquarters, a farmhouse in Kent, for a three-week training course. Here, through lectures and seminars conducted by the Director, Anton Wallich-Clifford, and others, they learn the Simon philosophy, the history of the movement, and such practical details as keeping accounts and community records, recognizing the symptoms of alcoholism, and techniques of

conducting group meetings.

For the next three weeks the course continues with practical training at St. Joseph's, and from here, visits of observation are arranged to the Henderson Hospital, courts, prisons and other social agencies. Then, after a spell of work at St. Joseph's, the trainee is likely to be posted to any of the other communities, or to a new one being started. Postings are normally for at least three months, to ensure continuity; but such is the strain of working long hours in a small community with only one rest-day per week, that the principle of continuity has been modified by introducing a "change of environment" after every four weeks. This means a posting for one week to one of the other communities, which helps workers to keep in touch with each others' ideas, or to the farm, where they can rest and read and think. Every three months they have a week's holiday.

While in the Community they receive £1 0s. 0d. per week pocket money. This is less than the 26s. 6d. which the residents draw from the M.S.S., and in times of financial stringency the Simon workers have on occasion accepted reductions or postponements. They, like the residents, depend on donated second-hand clothes.

They are required to run the various Simon houses on the same lines, with breakfast meetings and weekly house meetings, doing the housework themselves when there

are no offers to help, keeping records and accounts. They also maintain contact with the M.S.S., which pays (by voucher) for many of the residents, and with the Companions of Simon, local citizens who help to provide funds and gifts in kind, and sometimes work part-time in the Community.

The M.S.S., and the Companions thus provide official backing and part-time voluntary help to support the work of the full-time Simon volunteers. The last link in the chain is the application of the principle which has been described as "the use of the products of a social problem in coping with the problem"<sup>12</sup>.

The atmosphere is very permissive. Authority has, of course, a place in social work, and the ordinary client may by an act of will be capable of "making an effort to stand on his own feet". But the social misfit cannot; he will stay "outside" if such to him impossible, demands are made on him. His first need is a long draught of care and affection. By degrees he may come to admit that he needs help, and to believe that he can be helped (thus far he can be concerned only with himself; appeals to loyalty or consideration for others would fall on deaf ears). But when he finds himself accepted just as he is, in a community/family, he may also find that he cares for their opinion of him, that he has something to contribute. Here the hand-to-mouth level of

existence, and extra activities such as the "soup runs", are useful, because they entail a considerable amount of work, especially in the collection and preparation of food; often a man who has done no regular work for years will find, perhaps to his own surprise, that he has put in a good eight-hour day. No overt pressure to work is applied by Simon workers, nor are men urged to look for jobs outside. It is accepted that some, after a respite in a Simon house, will be able to return to an ordinary occupation; others will come to realize that they need treatment (for alcoholism, mental illness, etc.); and others again will always need to live in a community of this kind.

The plan is to have specialized houses for alcoholics, long-term

residents, and other categories, and multi-purpose ones for initial reception. This pattern is in full harmony with the report of Lady Reading's working party on the place of voluntary service in after-care<sup>13</sup>, and with the stress placed in the Criminal Justice Bill 1966 on the need to provide an alternative to imprisonment for drunks. Indeed, the procession of "seven-day drunks" at Bow Street was a major reason for Mr. Wallich-Clifford's decision to leave the Probation Service and found the Simon Community. His eventual aim is a village, on the analogy of the children's village or the village for the mentally handicapped, and to judge by the way his plans of two or three years ago have taken shape, this does not seem impossible.

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