

We human beings are the bearers of the sacred - each of us carries the image of the Divine with us into this world - and when we strike out at the poor and try to drive them from the streets of our city, when we call them names and represent them to ourselves as less than human, when we cite and arrest them by the tens of thousands for merely trying to exist, when we send police instead of caregivers, when we enact and enforce policies that serve only to punish and harass the innocent victims of our neglect, we drive the sacred from our city as well, and this is something we simply can't afford to do. The spiritual impoverishment we live in is great enough already.

(Rabbi Alan Lew)

December 6, 2007 / St. Nicholas Day / 2nd Day of Hanukkah

Dear Friends and Fellow Seekers:

I am proud to call Alan Lew a friend. He is a person of soulfulness, eloquence and deep faith. When he was younger, Alan strayed from his Jewish roots but found his "way home" via Buddhist meditation practices. (God continuing to "write straight with crooked lines"?) He and I serve together on the Board of Religious Witness With Homeless People here in the City of St. Francis. It's an advocacy group started by a remarkable woman – Sister Bernie Galvin. Already on the "far side" of her 70s, Bernie is supposed to be retired, but instead labors passionately, gathering priests, ministers, rabbis, nuns, monks and other people of faith and conscience to speak out on behalf of our poor and homeless neighbors. More than one San Francisco politician has had his feathers ruffled from tangling with this tough nun. (The current Mayor – a product of Catholic schools - has ignored repeated requests to meet with her during his four years in office.)

Alan's words (above) are part of an opinion piece in the Sunday, Dec. 2nd SF Chronicle, in response to a renewed city policy of criminalizing homelessness. (In just over 3 years we've spent close to \$8 million issuing citations for urinating, defecating and sleeping in public to folks who have no access to bathrooms or housing.) It seems, sadly, to be part of a prolonged campaign of *economic cleansing* on the part of many political, corporate and media 'leaders' in this town.

Given that climate, why am I not more frustrated and depressed in this First Week of Advent? Because so many people, including many of you, continue to be "bearers of the sacred", pushing back the menacing darkness with the light of your caring. Indulge me as I celebrate some of these.

This is my 10th year at St. Anthony's. The cold weather that arrived this week – after a blessedly prolonged 'Indian summer' – reminds me of my first winter here. The week before Christmas was the coldest in the Bay Area's recorded history – snow on the surrounding hilltops and relentless, hard-driving rain that was dangerously close to becoming ice and snow. (Yes, I know, this sounds ridiculous to you who live in harsher winter climes, but when it comes to weather, all is relative.) One morning, after an exceptionally stormy night, riding the bus through Chinatown to work, I was troubled as I tried to imagine how difficult the night must have been for homeless folks. I got off the bus at Market Street, and walked toward St. Anthony's. On the corner were three men I'd just begun to get to know. They were all Vietnam War vets and had been homeless for years. As I approached them I blurted out, "Oh guys, last night must have been awful!" And without a moment's hesitation, one of them cheerfully replied, "Aw, Fitz, it washed the piss smells off the pavement!" That is a memory I will take with me, someday, into eternity. And ever since that morning, whenever I hear or read the

beginning of the Sermon On The Mount – “Blessed are the poor” – I also hear in my mind and heart, “Aw, Fitz ...”

Going home, late one night this past year, I noticed a familiar face getting on my bus. It was one of our guests/clients who, as often, was quite drunk. Sitting in the rear, I raised my newspaper to cover my face, hoping he wouldn't notice me. But he headed straight to where I was seated, and spotting me, began talking at a volume that must have penetrated even the iPod ear plugs of the yuppies on board. His loud, slurred monologue concluded with this ringing endorsement: “You know why I love St. Anthony's? You people always treat me like a gentleman, even when I'm not acting like one!”

Every weekday we host a large group of high school students (from one of our 20 “partner” schools) who spend the day with us, learning about poverty and homelessness, serving about 2,600 meals to our guests and sitting with them to share food and conversation. One day this year the group was from St. Ignatius College Prep, the city's prestigious Jesuit high school. One of their parent-chaperones had taken off work for the day. When he sat down for lunch and struck up a conversation with the man across the table, he realized, with a mixture of shock and dismay, that the impoverished man was one of his own classmates from that same school. He later described it as a “life-changing moment”. (And soon thereafter, the philanthropic foundation at which he serves as the CEO, gave St. Anthony's a 7-figure donation for our capital campaign.)

Right across Jones St. from St. Anthony's is the Islamic Society of San Francisco. The 3rd floor of their building is their mosque. During the holy month of Ramadan we let them use our kitchen to prepare the meal which ends each day of fasting. And today, on the feast day of St. Nicholas (who was a bishop in what is now Turkey), they purchased and prepared and served a lavish spread of food for our annual staff holiday party. (In 1219, in the midst of the Fifth Crusade, St. Francis stowed away on a ship, and traveled to North Africa to try to stop the Crusades. He crossed into Muslim territory and got himself arrested on the presumption of being a spy. The Muslims found him fascinating. The Sultan of Egypt, Malik al-Kamil, professed amazement at meeting a Christian who was also a person of peace and goodwill and let him tour the historical sites in the Holy Land, which were off-limits to Christians. To this day, many of these sites are maintained by Franciscans. The only gift Francis accepted from his Moslem friends was a prayer horn, which he sounded at the beginning of his sermons for the rest of his life. He gave specific orders that while Muslim areas were targets for evangelization, no Franciscan had any reason ever to speak ill of Mohammed or the Koran.)

Death claimed several of my “blessed-are-the-poor” friends this year. One was C'rolle, whom I've written about before – the recovering Heroin addict who refused pain killers following her mastectomy, so determined was she to *not* put herself at risk of returning to her addictive behaviors. Another was Darwin, who'd been our houseguest at Andre House/Oakland. He was a Navy Seal in Vietnam and was one of the funniest, most clever and charming people I've ever met. But his addiction, and our nation's neglect, were stronger than all that. After all these years he is finally at peace.

My siblings and I are returning home to Chicago/Park Ridge for the holidays this year. Our younger brother, Dan, is very ill with Pulmonary Fibrosis and it seems like the right time for a family reunion. I hope and pray that your own Christmas, Hanukkah and Solstice gatherings are filled with joy and warmth. Remember what Rabbi Lew wrote: **we are the bearers of the sacred**. May we scatter darkness with our light!

with love, Fitz