

The Wrong Door

2007

My office at Loaves & Fishes is little more than an enlarged closet but thankfully it has a fixed window that faces north. I say thankfully only because it would be too claustrophobic for me without one. The view is old-city urban industrial: four lanes of high speed, one-way traffic careening into downtown along with two light rail tracks, one going outbound, the other inbound. At least 40,000 cars pass this way each weekday. My window is tinted in such a manner that I can see out, but it is difficult to see in. Still, the light that comes in is a welcome relief.

Facing this speeding traffic is a newly remodeled two-story concrete block building which Loaves purchased and remodeled to house its legal clinic, the jail visitation program, and my office. The second floor is still unusable and will remain so until more funds are raised for its renovation. These office-type uses do not require a special use permit from the city, which explains why some of the other homeless programs were not assigned to this location.

The front door – the side of the building facing the traffic – is kept locked; it is a staff-only entrance. The guests of Loaves & Fishes are being trained to use the south side entrance because it is more oriented to the main complex and lends itself to better monitoring. Out of necessity, not by choice, I have become an integral part of this “training program”. When an unknowledgeable person comes to the incorrect entrance – the north side – and knocks on the locked door, my office is the only one available to respond. I do so.

By now the emerging training problem should be more obvious to you. With 40,000 cars passing by the building and viewing the five foot diameter-sized logo on the side of the building announcing, “Loaves & Fishes” a percentage will surely conclude that my entrance door is THE entry into the Loaves & Fishes complex. Today a person with food to donate knocked, a person with clothes to donate knocked, a DHL delivery person knocked, a person new in town in need of and locking for a hot shower knocked, a person with a light rail citation and no money knocked, a person who could only speak jabber knocked, and so my day went.

But my newly-found training assignment is not the point of this story, it is about the person who knocked yesterday. “I have to tell you,” she swallowed, “my daughter is a run-a-way, and I was told I might find her at Loaves & Fishes next to a woodpile in Friendship Park. Can you help me?”

Put a dagger in my heart!

I have raised many daughters, I cannot even conceive of knocking on a stranger’s door, swallowing, and beginning the conversation with, “I have to tell you . . .” This kind of encounter has happened to me before at Loaves & Fishes, but now after a retirement absence of several years, I was stunned and deeply saddened for this mother and her run-a-way daughter, neither of whom I will ever meet again. Yet, I was proud that Loaves & Fishes exists, that I exist, that I was able to open this locked wrong door and listen to these heart-piercing words spoken by this mother.

Oh, that every run-a-way daughter, and every searching mother, would have their own Loaves & Fishes, and their own wrong door on which to knock.

