



## Urban Plunge

by Sarah Bruce

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On November 1, 2008, forty C.S. Lewis Fellows and staff participated in an “Urban Plunge” in Washington, D.C. Our hosts, through Christian Student Missions, designed a day of urban immersion to help participants better understand poverty and homelessness. For the Fellows, it was an extension of a monthly study on “Loving God and Neighbor” and an opportunity to broaden their definition of neighbor to include “the least of these.” For me, as the organizer, it was an opportunity to combine my latent passion for inner-city ministry with my love of the Fellows program—my own chance to link knowing with doing.

My first “Urban Plunge” experience occurred in 2007 as a Fellow. We spent our morning in manual labor and our afternoon engaged in conversations with homeless people in D.C. parks. It was here that God reminded me how to see people as He sees them, to put names to nameless faces, and to love them as He does. I spent time with Joe and James. My team interacted with Irene and Mike and Juan and Pete. We did not have food or money to offer them. Our gift to them was time and a chance for them to tell their stories. Their gift to us was the opportunity to hear about their lives and to interact with those who are dear to the heart of God.

This second plunge began much like my first one. We spent the morning preparing meals, cleaning, and doing yard work at various ministry sites around the city. At lunch, Larry, a formerly homeless man who met Jesus through a feeding program, shared his vision for our work that day. He was so thankful that we had come. He said so over and over. He wanted us to realize that Christians had begun a chain of kindness in the city long ago. Our job was to continue adding to that chain, one link at a time.

In the afternoon, we were sent out in small groups to meet homeless men and women. Not surprisingly, our group was nervous. Most of us felt ill equipped, uninformed, and unsure of what would happen next. We were being sent to seek out and engage with the very people that most of us are conditioned to avoid. Fearing for our safety or overwhelmed by the complexity of the issue, we disengage. But disengagement was not an option this time. It was our job to figure out public transportation and find people to talk with. I joked that I would be patrolling all area Starbucks to ensure accountability. Lattes could wait. There were people whom the Lord had arranged for us to meet. Larry’s words to us rang true. “You won’t be able to do everything you want to do today, but you can do something. Leave the rest to Jesus.”

My group of six got off the bus and broke into pairs. We smiled when we discovered that two of the women in the group worked nearby. They were familiar with the park and were already thinking ahead. Could they come back, perhaps meeting over lunch, and develop a more ongoing interaction with the people there? What we thought was a random assignment was clearly God’s design. We prayed for the Spirit to go before us, and to speak through us.

When the day was done and the feedback was gathered, the individual stories were bountiful. The impact on the Fellows was significant. Some felt a clear call of the Lord to continue taking personal “plunges” on their own. One group organized a coat drive, and returned within the month to distribute them. Another



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pair made a connection between a Nigerian pastor they knew and a lonely, discouraged woman on a park bench. She was not homeless but was struggling with why God had brought her from Nigeria to this new country only to face so much hardship. Through this new relationship, she has found the beginnings of community and secured a better place to live—a divine appointment and another link in Larry's chain.

Another Fellow experienced a more private epiphany. She shared that she had always been terribly afraid of the homeless. She feared for her safety and that of her children and went to great lengths to avoid them. The Lord had changed her mind over the course of a few hours. She now saw them as people. Throughout the group, the Lord was opening eyes, altering thinking, and transforming lives.

I realize that most of us have not been called to full-time urban ministry. We don't pretend to know how to fix the problems in the city. Their complexity is mind-numbing. We have more questions than answers. Depending on our life stage, we may not even have time to offer. And what about money? It's easy to toss a few coins in a cup, but what if our funds fuel an addiction and make the circumstances worse? In this context, what is the real value of the Urban Plunge? Should we continue to take our busy Fellows to D.C. for the day? Some initial answers came to me the Monday after the plunge. It was a culmination of all of the reading, thinking, planning, and discussing that I have done on the subject. Let me share the story with you.

After rich experiences, I need quiet processing, but on that Monday I also needed to make a grocery list, do my Bible study for Thursday's meeting, and prepare for a parenting class that I was teaching. Perhaps I could accomplish at least a few of these tasks at my favorite Monday morning "office"—a coffee shop. The twenty or so miles west on Route 7 where I now sat seemed quite a distance from my D.C. experience of two days earlier—until I met Jerry.

He was sleeping in one of the comfy upholstered chairs in Starbucks. Initially nameless, he did not have the telltale pile of belongings with him, but I guessed that he was probably homeless from his dirty, layered clothes, his scruffy beard, his winter hat, and his weathered hands folded across his lap.

I took a seat at an open table on the other side of the shop and spent the next half hour looking up Scripture verses about Jesus' humanity. Like any well-trained mom, I was multi-tasking—studying while monitoring the man in the chair. The author of Hebrews was emphasizing the idea that Jesus was one of us, that he took on human flesh to be "one of the

brethren" so that He could identify with us and defeat sin and death on our behalf. Meanwhile, the man in the comfy chair had gotten up and gone outside, out of sight. I felt a prompting to talk to him but pushed the thought aside. I don't like to initiate conversations with strangers. What would I say anyway? I needed to get my work done.

Another series of thoughts consumed the last one: "What about the Plunge? Was that just a field trip for you? What did you advise the Fellows when they asked you the same question? How could you lead that two days ago and ignore this man today? Haven't you learned anything?" The Spirit was relentless.

I stood up. He was back, just outside the door at one of the small round tables. I walked out too and approached him. "I saw you in Starbucks and wondered if I could buy you some breakfast." "Why?" he said. My stomach lurched. This was always the hardest part. "Well," I said, "I've just spent the weekend in D.C. talking to people in the parks. They were on my mind, and when I saw you, I thought you might be hungry. I'd love to hear your story if you have a few minutes."

"Well, okay then," he said. We had not yet exchanged names, but we walked together to the convenience store next door. I chose a yogurt and stood waiting while he made his selections. He seemed timid at first, filling a cup with hot chocolate. I encouraged him to pick whatever he wanted and suggested a warm egg sandwich. After a few minutes (food selection cannot be rushed, as my 13 year-old reminds me), he chose a sandwich. We went together to the cash register, where the cashier looked a bit perplexed. "These three things, please," I said.

My companion walked out while I paid, and I found him sitting on the sidewalk just outside the door. "Do you mind if I eat with you?" I asked. "Nope," he said. "Do you mind sitting here?" He pointed to a spot on the concrete. "I'd be happy to," I said. As I joined him on the sidewalk, I introduced myself and asked what had brought him here that morning. He then shared his name and said that he was on his way to see his parents, who were elderly and living in Winchester. He had come from D.C. and was walking.

Jerry was very reflective and open. The conversation flowed easily now. He told me how he used to wait tables until alcoholism and a broken heart had joined forces. He actually wasn't sure how he had ended up where he was now. He still had hopes and dreams but didn't know how to make them happen. It was hard to pick yourself up, and he didn't want to expect others to do it for him.

Sometimes I listened quietly, eating my yogurt as he talked. Sometimes I shared a thought or a verse that came to mind. I asked about his church background and about the higher power that he said had helped him to be sober for some time now. What was the difference between this higher power and God? Perhaps hope wasn't something that we could generate on our own, but it was a gift. Sometimes I needed other people to remind me of that gift, if I couldn't find it on my own. I shared the hope of the gospel with Jerry and encouraged him to seek God, who promises to be found by us when we cry out to Him. I prayed for Jerry, for safe travels, for his time with his parents, and for hope. After about 20 minutes, I told him that I had to go. It was time to meet my husband. I was at this coffee shop regularly and hoped that I would see him if he passed that way again.

I have prayed regularly for Jerry ever since, although I have not seen him since that first encounter. What blessings come with obedience! My heart is full of gratitude and sadness alike—full of what Jesus has done on the cross and His great love for both me and for Jerry and sadness for the brokenness. I also pray for the people who observed the unusual interaction on the sidewalk that morning, including the cashier at the convenience store who came outside to say, "You are doing good." I replied that I was just enjoying a few minutes with a new friend. "It's getting cold out here," the cashier said, in halting English. "We need to take care of him." The cashier spoke of Jerry as if he wasn't there, but the expression on his face told me that he would not soon forget the exchange.

The Urban Plunge was an eye-opening day, but we must choose to keep our eyes open. The poor in spirit and circumstance are always around us. My middle-class, suburban life is not as separate from them as I once thought. The Lord has stepped in and opened my

eyes. He tells us in Scripture that we become responsible for what we know. Doing must follow knowing. Sometimes, we witness the added blessing of seeing the impact of our "doing" on those who are watching us. Perhaps through us, their eyes will be opened.

Since that day, I continue to ask the Lord to remind me of His great love for people, no matter where they live or what their circumstances. I pray that as you read this article, you will ask Him who or what He wants you to see today. Who are the "least of these" in your life? May the Father give us His heart for them and use us to do His work in their lives.

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