

I was restless yesterday, Friday 24, 2020, partly because it is the day on which I have volunteered at the St. Francis Center for 21 plus years. When the Pandemic swept into Denver the staff at SFC told us that all volunteers over 60 years of age should stay at home. I miss the action, the “guests” as we call our homeless visitors. I also miss the staff and other volunteers. The Friday volunteers miss each other so much we organized a Zoom conversation for 11:45 today. I could not get connected so I was deprived of interaction in two different ways.

I walked from our loft in Brooks Tower to see the clock-thermometer by Rock Bottom at Curtis and 16th. It showed me a cool 60 degrees at 2:02 p.m. I had walked over to our main drag via Arapahoe so I could check on the people “in the rough,” i.e., what the Brits call homeless people, in Skyline Park. I saw a group down on the grassy section and an older man with a long white beard stretched out asleep on three metal chairs, his bulky bag of possessions at hand.

It reminded me of one of the many services we provide at St. Francis Center. We store several hundred large plastic bags for our guests. We give them a large bag and a space on the shelves in the large storage room. They can put as much as possible in the bag, but it must be wired shut with their name tag and ID number. One day a man presented himself to put his bag back on the shelf. I walked with him to make sure he got it in the right place. As we walked toward the exit he said “I just took out some things for the donation basket. . . I have got so many possessions.”

Standing there at 16th and Curtis, seven blocks from the St. Francis Center at 2323 Curtis, I experienced one of the biggest changes on the streets of Denver during the shutdown: No Mall Ride, no free 16th Street Bus rides from the Capitol area of downtown Denver to a block from the Union Station. My wife Laini and I used it a lot during the “old normal” times. We frequently rode it to our church, Trinity United Methodist Church. We got off at Tremont to walk a couple of blocks to the church.

The city is not alive in the same sense without the circulation of humans in Mall buses. At busy hours many riders have to stand, holding on to poles, listening to and watching the shoppers, business executives, and of course the folks in rough clothes. The Mall Ride is perhaps the main means of locomotion for homeless people, save walking. It is free. It saves a few steps. Lately as I watch the many city buses drive down 15th Street, I rarely see any riders. These are the buses in which riders have to pay for their seats, they are now empty.

I went back home via Arapahoe so I could check on the Men’s Room in Skyline Park. While crossing Arapahoe on 16th, I stopped as I saw a white woman walking the opposite direction with her denim pants rolled up to the knee, showing the tattoos on her lower leg and her bare feet. I stopped. She said something to me as I saw the shoes in her hands. A car with a green light had to stop to let me get out of the intersection.

The restroom door was locked. Seeing two men in light blue uniforms I asked

“Why is the Men’s room locked?”

“The Virus.”

“Where can homeless men find a restroom?”

“The Porta Potties,” he answered, gesturing with his head in the direction behind the building.

I walked around and found them. This was a better answer than I recently got, a “place on twentieth.”