

What I Know >> Words of Wisdom, Random Thoughts and Advice

by Phil Altmeyer, Executive Director of Union Gospel Mission Ministries

Every man, every woman, is worth understanding. If you look at a newly minted 2009 penny, and place it side by side with a 1978 penny you just found under the backseat of your car, you will probably be drawn to the shiny one, but which one has more value? In my 23 years of ministry to the homeless, I've learned that under the debris of brokenness and addiction, everyone bears the image of God. The worn penny has the same value as the shiny one, and exposed to the unconditional love of God, broken lives can be restored.

I am the man I am in large part due to the influences of other people in my life. My father was a man who exuded love and acceptance. My mother was a prayer warrior. Together, they were formidable in their passion for the poor and hurting. For most of my childhood, I remember coming to the Mission on a monthly basis to do the chapel service. Later, after I had left for college, both my parents gave up their enjoyable careers and my dad became the Mission's director. By example, they taught me that we do not exist merely for ourselves. We exist to impact the lives of other people. Along that journey, however, we need the care and loving kindness of others. For 28 years, I have been blessed and encouraged by the support of my wife, Caryl. The stability and love she provides for me and our four children makes it possible to spend my life in service to others.

I have my dream job. Every day I get to participate in a work that is dear to the heart of God. Every day I witness the miracle of heart change. And every day, I am surrounded by a small army of people – staff, volunteers, board members, investors – who share the same vision, passion and dedication for helping the poor. We

know God loves people like Earl. An alcoholic, Earl lost his job, walked away from his family and spent 25 years drunk and homeless, traveling from one city to another. But God took hold of Earl's life while he was staying at the Union Gospel Mission, and he began to do the hard work of change. His son, meanwhile, had been faithfully carrying Earl's picture in his wallet all those years, longing to reconnect with his dad. When Earl went to meet him at the airport, he had to hold up a sign with his name so his son would know who he was, and in his son's embrace, he was overcome by the love and forgiveness he received. Every day, in big and small ways, I see lives transformed and families restored.

Homelessness can happen to anyone. My father had five sons, and he used to say, "Any of these homeless men could've been one of my boys." I carry that perspective with me. We can all be wounded. We can all make bad choices. Over the years, I have seen men with whom I went to grade school, high school and college walk through the doors of the Mission needing help. Successful businessmen, professionals, children from good, solid families, college graduates – no one is immune.

While I believe it is vital to healthy relationships, listening does not come naturally to me. I'm committed to improving, but I'm constantly reminded of how far I have to go. One vivid memory goes back to my college days. I was working as a bus driver and right off the bat, I was handed one of the worst routes with the most troubled kids. The procedure for dealing with behavioral problems involved writing up three slips of paper. Well, I thought that was ridiculous, and I argued with the bus supervisor about it. In the

middle of our conversation, he stood up, slammed his fist on the desk and said, "We've been talking for half an hour, and the whole time you haven't been listening to one word I've said. You've just been thinking of what you're going to argue." I've never forgotten that, but honestly, I still struggle with slowing down enough to listen. By nature, I want to fix things. That's my bent, but listening opens windows into people's lives and often allows them to design their own plans for change.

Forgiveness is the most powerful gift a person can give or receive. Over and over, I've seen forgiveness release people from bondage and facilitate healing. Eddie and his wife, Kim, are a great example. Eddie chose meth and the party life over Kim and their four children, but when Eddie started to turn his life around in the Mission's recovery program, Kim forgave him and patiently allowed him the time to work on his addiction while she held the family together. Today, two years later, Eddie is clean and sober, their family is reunited, and Kim says she has the husband she always knew he could be.

I am extremely blessed to have grown up and lived in the Inland Northwest. Growing up on a small farm south of Spokane and attending Freeman schools, I had the opportunity to participate in a variety of sports; I never felt like I was just a number, and I learned the value of hard work. This is a community that values faith and family. It is also a community that cares for its poor. Because of Spokane's generosity and compassion, we are able to provide first-rate facilities for the homeless and care for the poor in a manner consistent with their position as children of God. ■

