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PEOPLE WITH NOTHING
TO PROVE:
LIVING AMONG THE POOR

I write this book so that the reader will have a
better understanding of the poor.

One morning I went to the hotel room of Stewart, a thirty-five-year-old man who suffers from cerebral palsy, which has disabled an arm and a leg and his sight.

Stewart has lived in single-room occupancy hotels (SROs) since he left home in his twenties. His is a grungy looking room, needing a paint job. It has a small bathroom, a bed, a set of drawers for his clothes, and a tiny half-kitchen. The door leads out to the long and gloomy second-floor hallway of a four-story building. The window looks out onto a bleak inner court.

I had come to help him get ready for a doctor's appointment, and he talked as I helped him undress and get into the shower.

"I have this dumb disease, in this stupid body," he slowly told me, "which I hate."

The smallest tasks of this young man's daily life are the tortured efforts of time and concentration: unbuttoning a shirt, drinking a cup of coffee, unlocking a door, crossing a street. As I helped him dry off and dress, we chatted about our lives and our families.

"How many brothers do you have, Garibaldi?" he asked, using his nickname for me. "Are you married? What did you have for breakfast?"

"Two brothers, Studebaker," I replied, using my name for him, "and a sister. No, I am not married, and I didn't eat breakfast."

His speech reflects longings and deprivations in his life. He told me of his twin: "He looks like me, but he is normal."

Stewart has an unaffected candor. As a matter of fact, he has no idea what it means to be pretentious. What you see is what you get. If he is happy, it is all there; if he is sad, one has no doubt.

That is often the way for people with no power, no money, no exterior beauty. They have nothing to prove. And so Stewart is non-threatening. He crashes through my defenses. He brings out what is good, whole, and deep down in me: the ability to love tenderly, speak truthfully, receive openly, and face gently my own weaknesses.

■ ■ ■

On my way to work every day, I walk down Third Street in Portland, in a section of the city called Old Town, through a scene played out in the poor areas of every large city in the United States: the unemployed looking for work; drug dealers furtively hawking their heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamines; residents from the many SROs moving in and out of their buildings; burned-out alcoholics coming off or beginning another day of panhandling and drinking and misery; addicts engaging in the endless hunt for another fix; lines of people waiting to get food or clothes or shel-

ter; the occasional nervous and fatigued prostitute wandering by; individuals talking incoherently to themselves; staff persons from a variety of agencies going about their work; alert police slowly surveying the streets on foot, on bikes, in cars.

All this activity takes place in an area comprising low-income SROs, a Salvation Army facility that feeds and houses the poor, a couple of rescue missions that also run drug rehab programs, storefront operations that come and go depending on money and interest, vacant buildings retained by speculators waiting for the economic boom to swallow Old Town, dark and dreary taverns, city-run shelters, parking lots that are full in the day and empty at night, a nonprofit restaurant that serves the needy of Old Town, a women's drop-in center, Outreach Ministry, a strip joint, an adult bookstore, and a community police station. Creeping into all of this, as Portland's economic prosperity asserts itself, are upscale coffee shops, some high-priced restaurants and mom-and-pop grocery stores, and SROs that are being converted into condos.

I live in the middle of it all in a room in the Downtown Chapel of St. Vincent de Paul Church. I wear several hats in terms of my ministry: working part-time for Outreach Ministry in Burnside (OMB), a money-management and personal care agency; assisting the Macdonald Center, a social outreach arm of the chapel, with SRO work; ministering to inmates at the county justice center; and hanging out on the streets.

On occasion I come across a young flutist in the downtown commercial area of Portland. He is an Ichabod Crane of a man, wiry and fragile, and looks as if he is made of broomsticks and baling wire. He is usually wearing baggy pants and a raggedy sweatshirt. His full head of hair flies in a dozen different directions, especially on a windy day. There is a beat-up old hat at his feet containing a few coins from appreciative fans. His entire self is absorbed in the furious tooting on his cheap wooden instrument.

Coming closer, one hears a strange thing: he's playing nonsense notes. No melody. No organized rhythm. The listener experiences incomprehensible music and the mysterious force that propels those flying fingers. The musician never seems to stop, lost in and driven by the inner power of some mysterious melody. He looks straight ahead, apparently oblivious to gawkers like me.

I linger for a few minutes whenever I see him. Inevitably I have created an imaginary scenario between us in which I approach Mr. Flutist and point out the obvious: "Excuse me, sir, are you aware that your music is not making any sense?"

He drops the flute from his lips, eyes me, and says, with a hint of exasperation, "So what? I'm crazy. But, man, I've got to play my song. I mean, don't you?"

This book is about my song. It is not all the music in me, but there is a lot of it here. It is a song primarily about the people with whom I have lived and worked over the past several years as part of my mission on the streets as a priest in the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. I have changed most of their names, but their stories, their compelling stories, I could never change. I have tried to express how they have broken me open and helped me to understand my own heart, and how they have led me closer to the song of hope for all human beings, which is in the heart of God.

I write this book so that the reader will have a better understanding of the poor. I write it, too, to keep out in front of me a fundamental chord in my song: that the church, when it becomes poor and internalizes the suffering of the poor, understands compassion and the demands of justice. The just and compassionate church becomes the incarnation of the heart and song of Christ.

loving the unloved of society

"I realize that God brought me into this world, blessed with skills and talents. The only thing that makes sense to me is to use them in the service of the poor. It is at their feet that I find myself."

for almost ten years, Gary Smith, S.J., lived and worked among the poor of Portland, Oregon. With this memoir, he invites us to walk with him and meet some of the abandoned, overlooked, and forgotten members of our society with whom he has shared his life. Just as Smith found a deeper, truer understanding of himself and of the heart of God through his work, these people and their stories stand to transform us.

"Although its subject matter is bleak, the book is not. Smith has found love amid the despair. His book is touching, at times hopeful, and the kind of book that is hard to put down, that fascinates, horrifies, and rivets one's attention."

—BOOKLIST

"Smith takes us where we would rather not go, the heart of the poor, the lonely, and the abandoned. In true Ignatian fashion, he finds God there. An unforgettable experience for those who have the courage to walk with him."

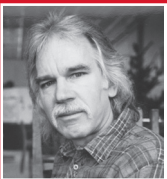
—MCHAEL L. COOK, S.J.

Professor of theology
Gonzaga University

"Smith performs modern-day miracles of compassion, and his book sets a new standard for writing about the rich faith of those who are materially poor. His stirring prose and utter honesty will change the hearts and minds of many readers."

—GERALD T. COBB, S.J.

Chair, department of English
Seattle University



Gary Smith, S.J., a Jesuit priest of the Oregon province, has lived among and ministered to the poor since 1969. He recently spent eight years living and working in the Old Town section of Portland and is currently working with the Jesuit Refugee Service.



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