I am honored by the opportunity to speak to you this evening, but am daunted by the task of addressing such a challenging topic to such an audience as this.

I start from the premise that the fact that thousands of men, women, and children in this community – and millions throughout the United States – are homeless is an abomination, a disgrace.

This plague of human deprivation is not caused by the personal failures of those who suffer. It is caused by failures of government, of society, of all of us.

It is tempting but inaccurate to say that homelessness is caused by mental illness, alcoholism, or drug abuse. Everyone in this room has a family member or a friend who is mentally ill, alcoholic, or a drug abuser – and is not homeless.

The people who are homeless – disproportionately people of color, women, people with disabilities, veterans, and children – are homeless because they are poor, their families are poor (and therefore cannot help them very much), and we have allowed housing to be a commodity – part of the private, speculative, for-profit market – rather than what we declared it to be in 1948: a human right. We are ignoring our commitment – embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – that it is every person’s birthright to have a safe, comforting, secure, welcoming, soul-satisfying home to which to retreat, in which to find peace, from which to go forth into the world.

Everyone here has worked to alleviate or end homelessness. Some have been doing it, along with the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, for 25 years. Some have been doing it for longer than that, going back to 1980, when homelessness became a major national problem – because of cuts in subsidized housing programs and income support programs. Some here have

*William F. Harvey Professor of Law, 2011 Chancellor’s Professor, and John S. Grimes Fellow. This is based on the notes I had made in advance of the talk and my recollection of what in fact I said.

*I had intended here to refer to the brilliant, amazingly effective work of Mitch Snyder, Mary Ellen Hombs, and their colleagues at CCNV – the Community for Creative Non-Violence – but inexplicably did not. See Victoria Rader, Signal Through The Flames: Mitch Snyder and America’s Homeless (Sheed & Ward 1986).
been working with federal and local agencies, some with nonprofit organizations, others doing *pro bono* work – but what we’ve done hasn’t been enough. We need to work harder – to double, re-double, re-triple, re-quadruple what we’ve done. Someone said that continuing to do the same thing and expecting a different result is a sign of insanity. We need to think through and do different things in order to end homelessness.

I want to suggest five things we might do:

First, read Peter Singer’s book, *The Life You Can Save.*² It’s short – only 176 pages. The topic of the book, and its subtitle, is “Acting Now to End World Poverty,” but of course it’s relevant also to ending poverty and homelessness in the United States. Professor Singer’s famous thesis is that if any of us were walking by a pond and saw a child drowning in the pond, each of us would go into the water to save the child – even if that meant that our shoes and clothing would be damaged. His point is that each of us can save not one but many children, and we must do so.

Second, follow Peter Singer’s admonition that “it may not be possible to consider ourselves to be living a morally good life unless we give a great deal more than most of us would think it realistic to expect” people to give.³ We all should give more money – to the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless and to other organizations that are doing effective work to end homelessness and poverty.

Third, act effectively to advance the public agenda to end homelessness. Support every effort to increase the amount of subsidized housing that is available, to make subsidized housing an *entitlement*, and to improve and expand income support programs. Act to advance inclusionary zoning, jobs programs, living wage campaigns, workers’ rights.⁴

Some people here are public officials: you all need to protect, expand, and implement these programs. And those of us who are not public officials must use our voices and our votes to insist that public officials consistently take effective action to end homelessness.


³Id. at xiii-xiv. He addresses this point particularly to those of us who purchase bottled water, Starbucks coffee, Whole Foods groceries, et cetera.

⁴After I made these remarks, the Obama Administration proposed its budget for FY 2013, which contains terrible reductions in programs essential to ending homelessness and poverty. One of the most outrageous is a proposal to increase minimum rents paid by public housing tenants to $75 per month – even for people who have no income at all. I hope that everyone who is concerned with these issues will subscribe to email notices from the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, the National Low Income Housing Coalition, and, of course, the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, and follow through on the action alerts that these organizations send. Let your elected and appointed officials know that you support humane programs and will use your vote and your voice to insist upon them.
Fourth, educate and inform others. The Clinic will give each of us a DVD and a list of suggestions about how to bring others into this battle. Talk to family members, colleagues at work, people at your place of worship. Educate them about the causes of homelessness and the necessity of acting to end it.

Fifth, and finally, let us take a lesson from what ended slavery: an absolute determination – a promise we make to one another – that homelessness is inhumane and unacceptable, and we will end it – in the District of Columbia, the United State, and the world.\(^5\)

Thank you very much.

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