

- Letter By Phil Tompkins -

Dear Friends of our Homeless Neighbors,

I debated whether or not to send this short letter to you while we were on our short walk. My unconscious is debating the question while I try to choose the words to summarize our experience. It was about 4:30 today when I suggested to Laini that we get bundled up and take a walk around the block. She accepted the suggestion and off we went, out the front door of the Brooks Tower.

Our loft is on the second floor of BT, but is not literally in the tower. We have our own roof and are on the side of the forty storied structure. Our front window looks out on the Federal Reserve Bank that takes up a full block. People have been parking in the bank's lot, and I hope they are at the proper social distance as they count the money. We turned right out the front door on 15th Street. The snow flakes seem bigger when they are in your face, and our masked faces quickly became uncomfortably cold as we felt a slight breeze. As we got to the corner of 15th and Curtis there is a highly unusual grate. For some reason unknown to me, hot air comes up from below the ground; there is an iron grating about four feet high. The heat attracted a couple of people who were sitting on top of the grate, bathing in the hot air. What can we say or do?

We turned left on Curtis, headed toward the St. Francis Center eight blocks away. Way back in my early days as a volunteer there I used to walk to and from my six-hour days. From the front window of our loft we could see something going on at the intersection of Curtis and 16th Street, emergency lights, but nothing or nobody there now. The thermometer said it was 29 degrees and we felt it. We turned left on 16th and we could hear a man screaming in a deep voice from across the street. He seemed to be wrapped in a couple of blankets as he walked

in front of the Rock Bottom yelling “What the f*** . . . ?” And then came the “F” word again and again as a one word declaration. We were on the opposite side of the street, in front of the Federal Reserve Bank, and he slowed down and kept asking his question over and over in his angry, loud tones. I got an email from a woman who lives atop the Brooks Tower who read my recent Letter to the Editor in the Denver Post. She seemed to like it but wanted to know my understanding of mental illness as a cause of homelessness.

I wrote back that I had spent the summer of 1956 working as a young ward attendant at the Colorado State Mental Hospital in Pueblo. I spent five days a week with them, going from peaceful wards to those with the criminally insane and highly dangerous. Yes, I could recognize each type as I administered their medications in the morning. After I quit the whole country decided to do away with the mental hospitals. There was a supposition contained in that decision: We were supposed to open local facilities so that the inmates could be closer to home. That promise was never kept and I have long believed that it contributed to the increase in homeless people during my lifetime.

When we got to 16th and Arapahoe I noticed again that the U.S. flag atop the D & F Tower was still missing. Its absence of late is a kind of metaphor for me: A great deal is amiss in the U.S.A. Our flag is not flying as it should.

When we got to Arapahoe we turned left toward the mountains and our home. We were still on the bank side of the street, but we could look into Skyline Park, often the place for homeless sleepers. Yesterday when we made the same walk we saw two homeless men with a lot of gear, backpacks and other belongings. But we saw none today.

When we reached 15th Street we turned left, and when I unlocked the door with an electronic key we completed an almost perfect square. I

debated writing a note to friends with the highest ideals, people trying to help our homeless population. It is the day after Easter, a time of rebirth and renewal. I think I will send this and hope it is not offensive to people I respect and love,

Phil