

HOMELESSNESS

PARKLIFE – by Sally Mann

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There was a time when hanging out in the park was the prerogative of those the band Blur described as “the park class”. Blur’s 1994 hit *Parklife* conjures up the secret life of city parks as a place to suspend social norms: public sunbathing, loud music, playing with dogs.

Another culture

During the Covid pandemic the UK was put into what Boris Johnson called “national hibernation” with one permissible hour of outdoor exercise. This altered the demographics of my local inner-city park. More were drawn to dabble in a bit of ‘parklife’. This presented those living in mainstream ‘accommodated’ lives with daily glimpses of another culture, one of street life.

Despite the incursion of a new demographic of home-workers, I noticed a regular ‘park class’ of street drinkers retained control of one space, occupying six benches around a memorial cenotaph in my local park.

Research project

After months of casual park observation, I began a small research project (I’m a Baptist minister and a Sociology lecturer). During lockdown I spent an afternoon a week listening to stories at the six benches.

The group represent a small subset of people experiencing homelessness in the UK. They often have complex needs, including problematic substance use and/or mental illness, alongside persistent or recurrent experiences of homelessness. Their visibility results in the public mistaking this form of homelessness as the whole picture, which is far from the case. I already knew many of my *parklife* participants from years of church connections and the charity *NewWay* which grew out of our congregation.

Findings

Here's what I learnt from a summer of chatting on benches:

Intentional and accidental **social interactions confer identity**. I witnessed many practices which contributed to the social invisibility of group: avoiding eye contact, hurrying by, steering clear. Were occasional displays of anti-social rowdiness a response to this? Perhaps the very act of gathering countered social invisibility? Exaggerated greetings and frequently shirtless chests could be seen as responses to ostracization.

Deviance works this way. Those cast out from mainstream society may amplify defiance, pushing them further to the margins. Welcome and acceptance come before transitional life change. Both sides need to allow the other in – crossing boundaries to listen to stories is a good place for those on the inside to begin.

Particular, familiar places are vital to 'belongingness'. One Covid initiative, 'Everyone In', saw 40,000 people affected by homelessness offered immediate temporary accommodation. Some individuals travelled across several boroughs to return to the same park every day. Being a known person in a familiar space is at the crux of what makes *parklife* compelling. Shared, familiar places have psychic content.

The six benches seemed to be providing something akin to 'home'. This explains why many participants spent some part of each day there, even when 'housed' elsewhere. Tenuous attachments and chaotic histories can make place of belonging more attractive. Places really matter.

We find ourselves in stories. Telling a good story is currency at the six benches. I heard many tales of victimisation, of battling 'the system'. I was struck by the personalisation of organisations and governmental departments – 'the social', 'the housing'. Often these narratives pitched the storyteller against a personified adversary, one bent on denigrating them. Encounters with statutory systems seemed to frame many of the life-stories I was told. Less expected were the frequent heroic narratives; stories of intervening in fights, getting people out of trouble, overcoming the odds – "See him? I saved his life!" We all use self-authoring narratives. However inaccurate, the way we cast ourselves in the stories we tell presents opportunities for future decisions

If we were heroes once, we might well be that again. Hopeful stories are transformative.

Transitioning from chaotic lives needs an invitation to a *better, more compelling* story. I listened to stories of those caught up in the crisis of homelessness and observed their marginalisation. But I also witnessed their communality in a site over which they managed to retain a level of control. There was conviviality, as well as the constant black-marketing transactions of goods and information.

I become convinced that many people fail to make the transition from street-sleeping because 'mainstream' society is lonelier, less liveable, and altogether less fun than *parklife*. In Blur's words, there is more "hand-in-hand" about parklife. To transition from it takes an invitation to better, stronger story to find ourselves in. Statutory intervention cannot achieve this alone. It takes community.

And perhaps this is where healthy Christian community comes in– could we be the story-rich places where people are invited in to become a known character and join a heroic mission to transform the neighbourhood, all within a grand narrative of resurrection?

I believe I see this in the work of grassroots projects like NewDay in my own community – long-term, non-judgemental, radically hospitable and conferring new identities... they are rare and beautiful and what we need more of.

Dr Sally Mann has a PhD in Philosophy and Theology and lectures in Sociology. She is a minister at Bonny Downs Baptist Church where she is the 4th of 5 generations of her family to stay put and serve in that East-End community. Her full research findings are published in the European Journal of Homelessness