NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

When God breaks into your house

Nicole Sotelo | Sep. 5, 2013 Young Voices

I never thought I would want to thank the person who burglarized my apartment building. This summer, I wish I had.

It was a Saturday morning, and I awoke to a neighbor's cry before the sun had fully risen. From the exchange outside my apartment, I could tell someone had broken into our building. I sprung from my bed, threw open the door and asked if my neighbor wanted me to call the police. He did, and I called.

As we waited for the police, I discovered the "burglar" was an elderly woman who was homeless and seeking shelter. During the night, she had tried to break into some apartments on my floor. Unsuccessful in finding a place to stay inside, she helped herself to some things from a common closet and decided to make her home on our roof -- until she was found, that is.

As she left the building, I invited her to stay, offering to work with the police to help her find a shelter. She refused.

On a weekend when Chicago was reeling from seven murders and 41 people were wounded in shootings, an apartment break-in was hardly a priority. By the time the police arrived, the woman had long left the building and vanished from sight.

The rest of the day, I felt rattled by the incident. As I calmed down, I realized I wasn't shaken by the break-in; I was left with a shaken sense of justice.

Despite my understanding of homelessness, this encounter left me shocked once again at the fact that in one of the richest countries in the world, we still haven't found a way to distribute resources to ensure all God's people have their basic needs met.

I also found myself shaken in faith. As a Christian, could I have been more creative in my response to assist this woman?

"The Son of Man has no place to rest his head" is a Scripture phrase I often find rattling around in my heart. Today, this daughter of God had no place, either.

That evening, I prayed the Our Father, arriving at the great challenge that Jesus asks of us: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

But what I had experienced was not your standard trespassing. The real crime is our broken social system that 2,000 years ago couldn't shelter the son of God and still can't shelter God's people. This is the real sin.

And so I prayed, instead, for our society and the safety of the elderly woman who, without knowing it, had deeply touched me that day.

Indeed, it wasn't a burglar who had trespassed that day. It was God who had broken into my heart.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates WomenHealing.com [1]. She is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School.]

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