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Wednesday marks 25th anniversary of International Day for the Eradication of Poverty

Monica Clark | Oct. 17, 2012

Wednesday marks the 25th anniversary of International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, established in Paris in 1987 by Fr. Joseph Wresinski and his Fourth World Movement [1].

Wresinski, who died two years later, had declared that "wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure these rights be respected is our solemn duty."

In 1992, the day was officially recognized by the United Nations.

At Wednesday's celebration in a UN chamber, Jay Fernandez, a formerly homeless senior now living in Oakland, Calif., will read his poem about the devastating consequences of poverty.

A tall man with a resonant voice, Fernandez, 61, lived on the streets of San Francisco for many years after severe depression led to the loss of his counseling job in a social service agency and a subsequent downward spiral to economic destitution and emotional isolation.

Five years ago, he walked into the Winter Shelter for homeless seniors at St. Mary's Center in Oakland and began a slow journey of healing. He participated in the center's counseling and other social services, moved into transitional housing and now has an apartment of his own.

Through it all, he wrote poetry, meditations on poverty and the power of care and community in regaining equilibrium and engagement.

His recovery is just what Wresinski had in mind when he developed the Fourth World Movement on the conviction that a partnership between people in poverty and those of other backgrounds can create experiences and policies that overcome the exclusion and injustice of persistent poverty.

Only a few people will be able to witness Fernandez's proclamation Wednesday. But his words deserve to resound far beyond New York City into the hearts of us all.

A REAL POEM

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In this sooty-soup

grit-gray rain

I need to share

let it all go

and tell you about a real poem

a poem

made of flesh and blood

with far seeing eyes

and a deep

and powerful grace

His name was Juan Gonzalez

Juan Gonzalez

I met him in the line waiting for a bowl of soup and piece of bread

and soon

within weeks

we were inseparable

He became a brother to me

where he walked I walked

where he ate I ate

where he slept I slept

when I was sick, he nursed me.

when he was sick, I nursed him.

Sometimes

we even slept under the same blanket.

At times,

he reminded me of St. Francis

because he loved pigeons too.

Called them

his little brothers.

Then, just when I was beginning to see

that this man

- who walked around with the words of Jesus in his pocket -

could teach me something real

what we expect but never talk about

happened:

One December night

he fell asleep on a bench in Old Man's Park

and never woke up again.

His beautiful heart just stopped.

The streets had worked him too hard for too long

and now he was done.

So remember:

his name was Juan Gonzalez

and he died on a bench

in Old Man's Park.

Not because he was a drunk, demented or insane.

Not because he has on heroin or crack.

Not because he did not want to live.

The truth is simple: he wanted

what we all want-

to love and be loved in the peace of his own God.

And something more-

to be useful

to be useful.

Yes, the truth is simple:

he died because and

only because

like me

maybe like you

he was poor

gritty gray poor

and except for Sister Mary and her few sisters, here and there.

Tell me

who gives a damn about the poor anymore?

Stand or kneel

beg or cry

We're on our own

No one knew that better or deeper than my brother Juan Gonzalez

and if he was here

right now

he would say this:

Let us not be stereotyped

Let us not be marginalized, cast aside

Let us not be victimized

Let us not be shamed into silence.

Whatever your name is

I am you

whatever language or culture you were born into

I am you

whatever racial group you belong to

I am you

whether you are man or woman

I am you

whatever faith you hold on to

I am you

whether you're in prison in New York City

Or a detention camp in the fields of Nebraska

I am you

whether you're sleeping on a square of cardboard in Oakland

or under a grid in Philadelphia

I am you

I'm in every living pulsating cell

that hungers for justice

and the right to love.

I am you.

I am you.

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Links:
[1] http://www.4thworldmovement.org/