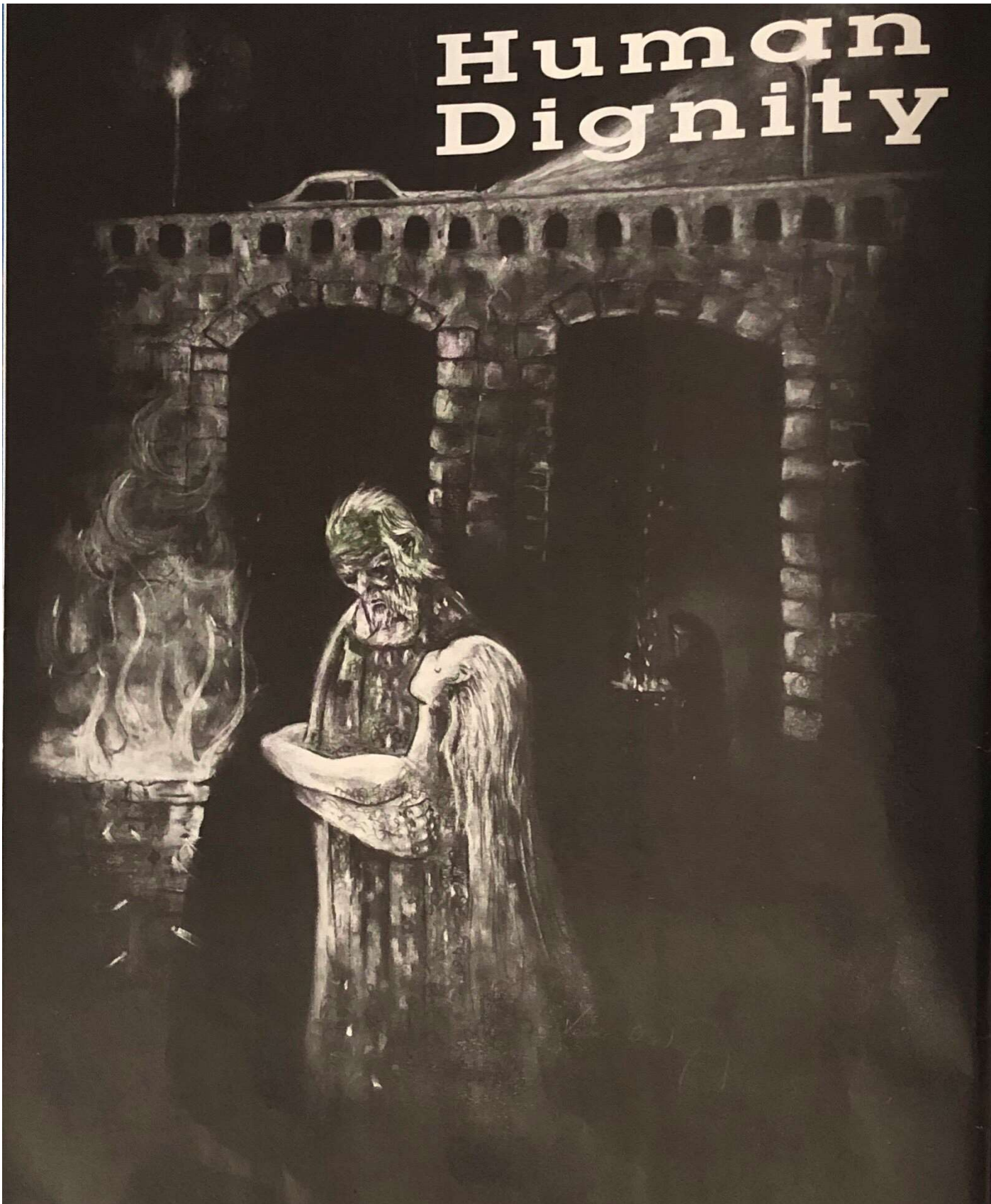


Human Dignity



An Inalienable Right!

An interview with Valerie Harper
by Rev. Patrick J. Harbula

I remember feeling completely energized walking away from the Valerie interview. She was so unpretentious and natural in relating to myself and Wendy Byle of our staff. This fireball person put on her makeup, answered about a dozen phone calls, gave us an inspiring dynamic interview and made us feel totally welcome, all at the same time. We came to interview her about the tremendous efforts she shares with the world, and yet she made us feel like the special ones. It is refreshing to experience such deep compassion devoid of pretension. It was also interesting to meet someone involved in humanitarian service, who is metaphysical and yet does not consider herself to be "New Age." She is the reminder to me that our evolution is marked by the ideals of a new age (or any archetypical idea) becoming more of the norm and less of a "movement." I invite you to absorb the compassion, sincerity and truth of Valerie Harper.



MM: I understand you're involved in the serious issue of the homeless in this country, Valerie. Why do you think that homelessness is so wide-spread at this time?

Valerie: No other Federal program has been cut in the past eight years as deeply or to such a major ill effect as housing. The budget authority for all Federal housing has been cut 77% since 1980 from \$32 billion to \$7.5 billion. Recently, Bush has been talking about reducing it further to \$6.5 billion at a time when the budget for the Stealth bomber is \$70 billion. \$25 billion would be the budgetary outlay for 50 Stealth bombers. Each one is half a billion. Right? But the poor people of the country aren't worth it. It's really incredible.

Amazingly enough, in 1949, it was a conservative Republican, Senator Taft of Ohio, who authored the bill to provide safe, decent, affordable housing. It's not a Democratic issue; it's not a bleeding hearts liberal issue. Affordable housing has been a very controversial issue all along, but at that time, the bill was pushed through. The feeling was that if people live on a fixed income or are working for a minimum wage, it is their right to have a place that they can afford.

Some families are paying 70% of their income on rent. 70%! You cannot get ahead; if anything hits you, you're in the street.

According to recent polls, most Americans support our

efforts to end homelessness and restore trust in the Federal housing program, even if this means higher taxes. In other words, Americans, when asked the proper questions, "If you knew the money was going for affordable housing, would you be willing to pay more taxes?" 80% answered "Yes."



To quote Mitch Snyder, coordinator of the March for the Homeless in Washington, D.C., "The support is defused, unfocused, like sunlight. It could be compared to using a magnifying glass to focus sunlight enabling it to burn more intensely, in a way that it otherwise can't. So, also, must progressive Americans serve as a prism through which the sympathies of our nation can flow, be focused and directed."

The reason for the controversy in '49 was that the politicians realized what kind of commitment it was. It's like committing to highways. There is

no law that the Federal government should provide highways. But that's what is done. It's done because it's right. Private industry isn't going to do it. Donald Trump is not going into the low-income housing business. He is one of the people who buy old buildings, especially in New York City and completely remodels them. It's nice to have old buildings fixed up, but in the process, people that were living at \$300

One fire, one eviction, an illness or car accident and they are out on the street!

a month rent suddenly are informed that their unit rents for \$1000, \$1200, \$1500, \$2000 and beyond. This is great for the person who has refurbished the building; he gets quadruple, quintuple his income. They're not evil people; they're just business people. It is the government who must insure that there are rentable, affordable places.

During the last eight years, it's almost as if they've been sniffing around looking for cuts. "Where can we take some money? Why not the low-income people? They don't pay for the campaigns. Let's do them."

There is a lovely black woman working here in town who is paying \$115 a week. She has three kids and is on her own. She has a six year old (my daughter's age), and two little

ones. She said, "We had a terrible rat problem, so my son brought home a cat." She's paying \$115 a week for rats! When he brought a cat home, the landlord said "No animals" So she said, "We're living with animals! The smell of the cat keeps them away. Please!" But the landlord wouldn't go for it.

It's a constant struggle. There are families getting \$260 from Welfare monthly, and their rent is \$420. When they go to pick up their check, either the office is closed, or if open, they are told: "You don't have the right form." It's almost a conspiracy.

One fire, one eviction, an illness or a car accident, and they are out! It's like pushing the rock up the hill with a stick. The scarcity of affordable apartments drives the price up, and what you have is poor people paying high prices for substandard housing with holes in the floor and exposed wiring.

The bitter reality is that enough units just don't exist. In California alone we are short 500,000 units, maybe as many as 800,000. There are people with money in their hands for rent but there just aren't enough affordable units available. A lot of housing is being knocked down each year. Thousands of units, hundreds of thousands, are lost, and, at the same time, poverty is increasing.

Between the years 1977 and 1985, the rise in poverty was 20% and the decrease in affordable housing was 25%, an

increasing gap. I don't say that the administration in the past eight years or the Congress are evil. They're not our enemy, but they have had carte blanche in this system of a participatory government. We the citizens don't participate enough, we don't vote or get out there, even for such a basic issue as housing, an issue vital to the fabric of society. The senators who are with us have said point blank to Mitch, "You've got to make us do it. You have to show us out there in the real world what the voters want." Because as bad as the cuts may be, Washington has the incredible facility to turn on a dime.



Did you see the pay raise that was passed for Congressmen and members of the House of Representatives? The poor people, those living on minimum wage, need a pay raise! When Ralph Nader and five picketers were out by that bus and those pictures hit the stands showing

Congressmen and their families going away for a \$2,000 weekend per family, America responded: "The minimum wage is not raised and you are voting yourselves thousands of dollars."

Not only did Congress admit, they were falling all over themselves. "We don't want it". "Did you want it?" "We can do without it". "I'm going to move in with someone". "I'm going to take room-mates". "My wife's got a job," and why? They wanted to stay in office. We don't realize fully what power we have within a participatory government.

Whole families are going on the street because they cannot make the rent. There is a reason for such domestic tragedies; it's the Government cuts. That's the message right now. Restore the budget. Period!

MM: When you come down to it, we could end the problem of homelessness and hunger?

Valerie: Absolutely!

MM: So the question is, "What does it take before we as a society are motivated to do something about it? What has inspired you to be so committed to ending these tragedies?"

Valerie: I took the est training in '74. It was a great breakthrough for me, and I got it! est altered the way I perceive the world. When you become responsible for yourself, the logical conclusion is, "I'm responsible for my neighborhood..." It's written throughout the Bible, "My brother's keeper." You don't have

to be bleeding heart about it, you just have to tell the truth.

The Hunger Project was founded in 1977 by John Denver, Dr. Robert Fuller (a professor from Overland University), and Werner Erhardt, the founder of the est Trainings. They had been studying hunger for some time, they had a plan all laid out. The purpose of the organization was to end the persistence of hunger on the planet by the turn of the Century. That was when I realized the depth of the problem. That's the first point.

And once you get it in your heart, there's no way to resist pursuing your goals when you know that people are starving to death globally at the rate of 41,000 a day. Most people are dying of chronic under-nutrition, not having enough food over a long period of time. They don't look starved, they just look poor. 90% of the hungry in this country fit into this category. When I first had to confront that fact, I became sad and grieved and was appalled about the situation.

The second point is: No one has to die of under-nutrition. There is sufficient food for all. Not only a sufficient amount of food, but an abundance.

The third point is: I am the answer. Just me. Bucky Fuller said, "The little individual can create context, can link the thought; feel the feeling; vision the vision? "When organizations do it, that's great power. But there's nothing more powerful than the alignment of the

individual, taking on the idea that, "I'm willing to have hunger end."

A lot of us feel that life happens to us, not that it's an act of creation. As Werner Erhardt says, "You can play from the table like in Vegas, or you can say, "I am cause in the matter. I am the source of whatever it is. The good, the bad, whatever my judgments are."

MM: So the bottom line comes down to taking responsibility, realizing that we have the power as individuals to make a difference.

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Valerie: Exactly. It's not even that we can make a difference, but that we make the difference. And our not showing up also makes a difference.

It was from the Hunger Project that Dennis Weaver and I got involved in telling people about hunger. Then Dennis and I and several others founded L.I.F.E. (Love Is Feeding Everyone), which was part of an expression of the Hunger Project. Its message is "Think Globally. Act Locally."

The best we can do is create a reality, the process follows. Content is formed by context. The Academy of

Sciences report in '77 said hunger can end on planet Earth in one generation. That's 20 years, by the late 1990s. The plan was to have people actively create it, not just to let it dribble along. The minute you change the context from, "People will always starve" to foreseeing the end of starvation in 20 years, you start making a difference. As bad as Ethiopia appeared, we did not have a famine in '88. There was a famine in '86 and '87, but one was averted in '88 by concerted action, by looking ahead and saying, "A famine's coming. What do we do?" People responded globally. We have become somewhat adept at handling famine due to natural causes. We are not as good at handling the question of under-nutrition in this country.

Chronic persistent hunger kills people in an alarming, but very silent way. Many death certificates for children under five years of age read, 'Death by measles, or a cold or influenza,' but the actual cause was hunger, measles or dehydration. It wasn't indicated whether or not the child had been given shots or whether or not their little bodies had been fed sufficiently to ward off parasites, which they probably drank in water. This is the way it is in much of the Third World. To a certain extent we are slowly closing in even in those places.

The more people realize that starvation is the distinction between life and death, the greater will be their genuine responses. People now realize

that famine can happen suddenly. We respond to these kind of tragedies with specific, emergency action.

The other condition of chronic under-nutrition can only be ended through education and people having the opportunity to improve their conditions. The planet produces enough food for everyone, but poor people cannot buy it. In the Third World there are people who have a little piece of land and credit. They may start up what's called a micro-business. People who live in a cooperative-minded village can decide, "Let's stop being close-minded, (having our own backyards and failing). Let's combine all the land into one big farm that we all own."

MM: With your tremendous activity, do you have a spiritual practice, or some way of drawing in energy?

Valerie: Such as?

MM: Meditation?

Valerie: I took a few classes. I do some processes that I'm sure are similar. One is a process that I learned at est. When I am feeling angry, I quickly get by myself and sit in a chair, straight back is best, feet on the floor, palms open, and just experience the rage without acting it out. I always find myself laughing at the end. The rage is like some kind of red swirling thing with black streaks. It's really vile and terrible, but after a while I wonder what I was so mad about. I feel really silly. If I don't get silly, I feel so much better, and I can be calm. I feel that Werner

Erhardt, through the est method, developed a means of communicating Eastern philosophy to the Western mind.

These principles are relative to my career. When you are "really acting" it involves an actual digging down for the truth. Someone might say, "Well, it's not telling the truth. It's lying effectively." At one point I thought: It's lying convincingly, but I'm not sure that's the best way to look at it. I think... you can go into that transcended area of acting, where you really are your subject. Because we are all one. We are all each other.

MM: It's not lying, then.

Valerie: That's right. Saying that you're lying is the lie! Thank you. That's a discovery.

MM: With all your time spent on humanitarian efforts, what is the nature of professional aspirations?

Valerie: Oh, I have a new series.

MM: You do? Great!

Valerie: They're writing it now, for CBS. The series has been in the planning stages since last November. I was offered a wonderful deal after the court case.

MM: You received some bad press from that?

Valerie: Oh, terrible press.

MM: How do you respond to all the criticism?

Valerie: Oh, well, you have pain, but then you just keep saying it's not really true.

MM: What were they saying exactly?

Valerie: That I was difficult and all that. But, in many instances,

the press fell on a lot of deaf ears. However, for those people who want to read "negative" stories about actresses, it made good press. "Valerie Harper goes crazy on the stand. Oh, she's menopausal." Those guys who created the negative press were extremely sexist.

Some individuals swore oaths stating that my work was inferior and that the show suffered. These people really impugned my professional reputation, but on the stand they recanted their testimony.

MM: Did the media show the same interest in your triumph as they did in the accusations?

Valerie: Some, especially in this town. I won so unequivocally, the news of my victory was so widely touted that I really feel that my success had an impact. It was great to win.

MM: So you feel vindicated?

Valerie: Oh, very much so. That was September, and by November I had a deal for the series with CBS. This was wonderful because other people have been involved in similar lawsuits, which resulted in blacklisting for up to five, and even as many as ten years.

I was worried that the hunger response work I was doing might be besmirched by the court case. I was accused of being difficult and crazy. Here I was being sued, and people were saying, "She deserted the show."

What really happened is they fired me and told the press that I had quit. That was intolerable. But it's over now, and

you know the best part, the real victory, is the forgiveness. I really do forgive the two people that did the lion's share of the abuse and I still love them as I always have.

It's wonderful because being as public as I am, I had to make statements, and I don't want to lie. For instance, when people say, "Well, what's the next step?" I say, "Forgiveness." "What do you mean?" I reply, "I have to work on the bitterness." I can think of those guys really fondly for the fun times. We had some great laughs together, and whatever their fears or problems, I really feel compassion toward them. I was angry and upset, and felt so dumb. I felt that, at my age, how could I not see this coming? But, still, loved ones do terrible things to each other. I really had to do some work, so maybe that's what I do. I sit up and think, It's really not thinking, it's more like experiencing. So maybe I do more meditation than I realize.

Recently I've been working with some people from Werner Erhardt and Associates who developed a new training system that is quite expensive

and takes two weeks, from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon. What you have to do is make the impossible promise, a promise that is impossible to complete in your lifetime with 1043% willingness to go for it. You have to go beyond the person you are now to attempt the promise. The course is time-consuming, but I'm really thinking about taking it.

MM: That's one way people can approach the enormous issue of hunger and homelessness, by making a promise that extends them past the person that they presently are.

Valerie: That's right. You have to set interim goals, which is a wonderful process. You have to dismantle your identity because the part of you that makes the promise is not your ego. It's not Valerie Harper.

MM: It's like defining one's life purpose, which is really an ongoing process.

Valerie: Exactly. We realize that we always contend with historical identity. Piece by piece within the course, we look at our historical identity and dismantle it so that it doesn't have us. We have it.

Identity limits the size of the promise. We have to give up who we consider ourselves to be. It doesn't mean we turn into another person. It means that it is not important that we retain our identity.

MM: Do you have any advice for people who may read this and really want to do something to help the homeless situation?

Valerie: Yes I do. I think everybody that can should try to make the Hunger March in Washington on October 7. I would ask every reader, if you can't go, look into your heart and participate in the way you feel is appropriate. One way anyone can get involved is to send money to Housing Now.

To contribute to low income housing write: HOUSING NOW, 425 2nd Street, Washington D.C., 20003. For more information call (202) 347-2405

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