

We can do better caring for our Mama Carries

By MARY SHARON MOORE

For The Register-Guard

Chances are good you've never met Carrie. But then again, maybe you have. Maybe you have seen the profoundly sad face, the discolored skin, the washed-out eyes. Maybe you have come close to her exhaustion.

Maybe you have touched her leathery hand. I have.

I am walking downtown in the noon hour on a Sunday. I feel full of the joy of eucharist. My backpack is full of another kind of holy bread — fresh baked bannock, neatly sliced into peanut butter sandwiches.

In the block ahead, on East 12th Avenue in front of the White Bird Clinic, I see a woman sitting on the pavement, her back resting against a white picket fence.

I approach. She stares straight ahead. I position myself in front of her, fix my eyes on her eyes and pull the earbuds from my ears.

"How are you doing today?" I ask.

She turns her face away from me and snorts some dismissive reply.

I look at her with love, my heart aching at the broken humanity before me. "How are you doing today?" I ask again, gently.

She looks at me from the corner of her eye, understanding, perhaps, that I mean what I am asking, and that I am not going away.

"I baked some bread this morning," I say, "and I have some whole wheat sandwiches with fresh-ground peanut butter in my backpack."



David Strahan

Carrie Lucinda Miller, 58, recently was found dead on the steps of the White Bird Clinic in Eugene.

She was so not expecting this conversation.

"Would you like a sandwich?" I ask hopefully.

Well, OK. Yes.

I reach toward her with the promised sandwich. She reaches up her arm to receive. And in this instant, we notice the beautiful and unexpected.

"Well, looky there," she says. She points to her left wrist, then to my right wrist — her left wrist, with six copper filigree bracelets; my right wrist,

with six silver filigree bracelets.

"Hey, we're sisters," she says.

"My name is Maria," I say. "My name is Carrie," she says.

Sisters, indeed. My heart breaks open with joy. I think hers does, too.

And now today I read, on the front page of my newspaper, above the fold, an article about Carrie's unexpected death.

On the front porch of the White Bird Clinic, in near-freezing winter temps. Carrie. Gone.

"She needed shelter ... and

we failed her," the quote reads above a photo of "Mama Carrie," beloved within my town's homeless community.

"Legalize survival," a hand-painted sign reads above her tent in the Whoville homeless camp photo.

Someone who knew Carrie and the complex burden of sorrow that she bore says to the reporter, "She needed shelter. She needed basic shelter, and we failed her."

We failed her. Did I fail Carrie? No, this person who knew Carrie says we failed her. Not big government. Not labyrinthine systems. We — we — failed her.

My people failed humanity in one of its most fragile and exposed forms. My people failed the test, at least in this one tragic, scarred and uniquely beloved expression of humanity.

Is there something I could have done to shelter my sister from the storm of homelessness and raw-edged vulnerability?

I want to say no. But I know that the answer, also, in some way is yes.

I advocated, but I could have advocated more. I could have pressed harder into local circles of power and influence.

The important thing is this: There are more Carries in my town. There may be Carries in your town, too.

Maybe we can be ready at all times, or at least at some times, to share a sandwich, a little time, a little real presence.

And maybe we can press our compassion, our sense of human decency, and our common humanity a little further into the halls of power, enter the conversation, or begin it if we must. Press a little harder, knowing that our as-yet undiscovered kin have precious little voice beyond yours, beyond mine.

Mary Sharon Moore of Eugene writes and speaks nationwide on the nature of God's calling in our times. This column was originally posted in the blog "Noticing Things" (marysharonmoore.com).