



# JEREMIAH'S STUTTER

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## THE CURANDERO

When José came to us only two weeks and a day before his death, he was frustrated and disgusted. Half paralyzed from a stroke, the effect of a terminal cancer, he was weary of being hospitalized. When we asked him what he would like during his stay at Mary House, José had but two requests: a picture of Our Lady, and a "gatito" (kitten).

José had come to live with us until he died, and he was determined to make up for the time he had spent in the hospital. As it happened, we received not one, but *three* kittens for José to enjoy, which is a story in itself. He demanded *barbecoa* and *horchata*, sampling from different taco restaurants until he got the taste he preferred. The kittens bounced around on his bed or snuggled together with José to sleep.

Three days before his death Arabella, our oldest cat, took vigil beside José, so we knew that he would not be roused again, and that Arabella (see p. 2) would stay with him until the end of his life. José died at Mary House over the Fourth of July weekend, 2004.

By the worldly standards of wealth, influence, power, and accomplishment, some would say that José was a failure. For José was unimportant: illiterate, an "illegal" alien, and a hard drinker. In fact, José's entire estate fit into a plastic freezer bag: a belt, a ring, and a watch. Although he had paid into Social Security here for thirty-seven years, José got no benefits at all because he had no papers.

At Mary House, however, we called him a healer, a *curandero*, for he transformed the life of a very important man. We had a guest then, we shall call him Ralph, who was a long-term guest receiving a year of chemotherapy for Hepatitis C. Ralph had borne my sins of resentment, anger, and impatience as he stormed through life, constantly reminding us that he was only here for himself and therefore exempt from any form of community life or cooperation. The kindest light I could shed on Ralph was that he was our ticket to heaven if we could learn to love him as Jesus loves him.

Ralph had resisted the simplest forms of kindness and to this day I do not know much about him. It was clear that he had a problem with older women and/or authority figures. When we informed our guests that a hospice guest would be arriving, Ralph was quick to point out that, even though he could speak Spanish, he would not be available to assist in translation -- or anything else.

As we struggled to rearrange some furniture with the help of other guests, I heard Ralph talking to José -- actually he had waked him. And so it went the rest of the afternoon and evening, with us doing the scurrying and Ralph feeding and talking to José.

At the end of the day, with José tucked into bed, Ralph sought me out. With tears in his eyes, he said he had never understood how important the work of Mary House is before that day. He wanted to help José as long as he was needed. Ralph, like the rest of us, found it incredible that a dying man would have absolutely no other place to go.

• So began Ralph's ministry to all of us at Mary House. Ralph became the recycling czar and assisted with a second hospice guest till he, too, died. We believe that our friend, José, was and is an instrument in healing a lot of fear and grief in a very lonely man.

Perhaps you, like Ralph, do not know what we really do at Mary House. Repeatedly we emphasize that **there is no other shelter available** to sick and dying homeless people. Mary House saved Ralph's life as surely as we provided a dignified passing for José; we Welcome the Stranger over 100 times a year.

Sometimes when I speak at churches about the Catholic Worker ministry, someone will ask how much we are paid. I am happy to report that no one is paid for their work at Mary House, and that we spend an average of \$400 on each guest who comes through our doors.

And where do we get this money? From our readers! **This is a ministry of the entire community of faith**, not just Catholics, or wealthy people, or very holy people.

I often think of how we could use a \$10 donation from 1000 people a month. (We discourage monthly gifts much over \$100.) We could pay off our House of Hospitality in two years and make a down payment on a second one. Several other potential Catholic Workers want to join in the Works of Mercy at Mary House, and housing for the working poor is scarcer than hen's teeth in Austin, so we would make housing available to both groups. The workers would save half their money in order to pay a deposit and some rent when they have enough savings. Today I am looking at a second house on a .75 acre lot, hoping that it or another like it will be available for purchase in the next year.

If it is the Lord leading us, the way will be cleared. I pray that your hearts be turned to our weary and suffering guests and that you, the reader will join us to "make a way in the desert" (*Isaiah*). -- Lynn Goodman-Strauss