

The room in the firehouse

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue



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I went to a meeting with a friend yesterday. It was early in the morning at our town's firehouse. The firemen have lent a room to this meeting for 30 years. My friend was rattled and defensive. It was the first time my friend had been to such a meeting. We sat in a quiet corner. Most people sat against the walls, but a few sat at a table in the center of the room. There were women and men of all ages. The young man next to me fidgeted the entire 90 minutes of the meeting except when it was his turn to speak. A woman across from us knitted a brilliant red scarf furiously the whole meeting, stopping only when it was her turn to speak.

People took turns speaking. There was no particular order. A slight man in a baseball cap spoke first. He was wry and funny about the hash he had made of his life. Most of the people who spoke were wry and funny. One man's voice shook when he spoke, and the man next to him reached over and put his gnarled hand on his shoulder.

Even though many of the speakers were wry and funny, their stories were not. Their stories were awful. Wives walking out the door with children, and police cars and police vans and police officers and court judges and probation officers, and broken teeth and bones, and having to camp in city parks, and companions who froze to death in alleys, and waking up in strange rooms with strange people, and your own children quietly locking the door when they saw it was you on the front porch, and security officers escorting you off the premises as you walked along with all the stuff that had been in your office cubicle now crammed into a big cardboard box, and

walking out of meetings like this because meetings like this were for losers, not for you, and you didn't need this vaguely religious holding-hands crap, and then sitting by the door so you could leave when it got to be too much, and then later taking a seat all the way inside, and maybe someday you will even sit at the table, although sitting at the table means you have to be savagely honest with yourself and everyone else about what you cannot do without help, and being that kind of desperately honest is unbelievably awfully hard.

But I sat in a quiet corner of the firehouse yesterday and listened as one person after another *was* that searingly honest, *did* speak openly and ruefully about what one man called the delicious disaster, and I was so moved I could not speak for some moments after the meeting ended.

My friend was not moved at all and strode out of the meeting, glad it was over and dismissive of those poor people. I wish my friend was not dismissive of *those poor people*. It seems to me that those poor people are the wealthiest people I ever saw in honest humility. It seems to me they are battling ferociously to turn horror into some small shivering peace and maybe even someday somehow a shy stagger of joy. It seems to me that they are great because they know they are not, healthy because they know they are ill, admirable because they know they are not admirable at all by all the measures of *the real world*, as another man called the world outside the room in the firehouse.

There was something great in that room. There is something great in all the thousands of rooms like it in America, the millions of rooms like it around the world. I don't have a good word for that great thing, but I saw it, staggering like a new foal, from where I sat silently in the corner. My friend didn't see it, and my friend may never reach for it, and there's nothing I can do to make that happen.

Part of the great thing that happens in those rooms, perhaps, is that no one can open that window for anyone else, though everyone can applaud when someone does reach for that crack of light, shyly, shaking a little. I heard that applause several times yesterday morning in the firehouse, and it sounded like the most wonderful painful music to me.