

Bearing Witness - Street Retreat

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Last summer a friend asked me for help. Will was raising money for a unique experience called a "Street Retreat", which entailed spending 3 days and nights on the streets of London with no possessions other than clothes. I was struck by how intense it sounded (and also curious as to why one would embark on such an adventure). I was happy to donate \$20, and afterwards he pointed me to the [Zen Peacemakers](#), a group which facilitated retreats like this around the world.

A few days later I was walking home from dinner when a homeless man suddenly jumped in front of me and shouted "**Spare some change?!**" My immediate reaction was disgust and annoyance. The man reeked of alcohol and was directly blocking my path; I swiftly side-stepped him to continue on my way. As a resident of San Francisco, this kind of experience was unfortunately all too common. But as I neared home I remembered my friend Will; I wondered how he would have responded to this man.

That next morning, I had a profound meditation experience. While I was sitting, the image of the homeless man floated into my mind, and suddenly I saw him not as middle-aged and drunk, but as a young vulnerable child. I pictured the child on a playground during recess, playing tag with other children, with hopes and dreams for his future. In that moment I recognized, perhaps for the first time, that he was actually a human being. It feels ridiculous to admit, but I realized I had buffered myself from feeling empathy for him (and every other homeless person I saw). Why? Because once I saw him as a living breathing human being, it broke my heart.

I imagined if I saw a friend of mine, a co-worker, or (God forbid) a family member, slumped over in some alleyway...without hesitation I would rush to their help, offering whatever was needed. But here I was passing by people needing help every day, people who were clearly suffering deeply and often *crying out to me for help*, but whom I had been conditioned to ignore. I wept for about an hour.

In the weeks that followed, the United States experienced tragedy in the form of violence and hatred. Mass killings, attacks against unarmed black men, shootings of police officers...many conditions contributed toward a collective upswell of fear. This fear was then magnified within the political arena, which I experienced as divisive and extremely polarizing. It seemed that every time I saw a news headline, things in the United States had somehow become less united. I felt despair and helplessness.

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In these dark places I find it helpful to gently bring my attention to those who have deeply inspired me: Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Thich Nhat Hanh... They all faced tremendous oppression in their lives but somehow found a way not just to "get through it" but to transform suffering and inspire countless others along the way. With their presence in my heart I asked myself "*What can I do?*" and while there was a lot of not-knowing, I knew I could take refuge in my mindfulness practice, teachers, and friends on the path. I knew I could soften my heart and cultivate self-compassion. I knew I could take small, but meaningful, steps to transform suffering in myself, and by extension, the world.

When I looked deeply, I perceived a root cause of our collective suffering to be our tendency to turn those different from us into a vilified "other." Whether it be white vs. black, liberal vs. conservative, Christian vs. Muslim, or poor vs. wealthy, lines in the sand were being drawn all around. Thich Nhat Hanh has a saying: *Understanding is Love*. When we understand someone, love naturally arises. This love is not romantic, and it does not even mean we need to like the person; it means that we see we are 'in it together,' and that had we grown up in their shoes, and had their parents, and their friends, and their life circumstances...we would probably act the same way.

It seemed clear to me then that one step I could take would be to nourish my capacity for love by trying to widen my understanding of the experience of others. As a college-educated white heterosexual male from a two-parent family, I knew I had many privileges which shaped what I thought of the world and other people. Where could I find an opportunity to increase understanding of those different from me? An obvious answer emerged: do a Street Retreat.

Once I committed to doing the retreat, my main concern was asking friends for money.

The retreat was structured so that prior to your time on the street you needed to first "beg" for \$500 from friends and family. The money went to social service organizations that support people who actually live on the street, and asking friends ensured we engaged with our community in trying to explain what we were doing.

I had never before asked for money from anyone other than my parents. The thought of asking for money from friends made me cringe. I feared people not responding; I feared people's indifference or even disapproval of my plans. At its core, I feared rejection.

When I sat with this fear, I noticed that as soon as I investigated it, it weakened. I would imagine a close friend not responding to my email. Feelings of disappointment would arise, and then I would ask myself the following: *Let's say they don't respond. What's more likely...they are feeling overwhelmed by email OR they don't care about you?* I've had many experiences where I wouldn't hear from a friend for a long time, and then one day I would receive an outpouring: they've been struggling; they've stopped communication with many people; they think about me frequently; they're sorry if they've let me down.

When I was ready, I sent an email to friends asking for support. In 2 days I received over \$500. On day 3, one of my friends from my childhood donated \$499 and explained how inspired he

was by the retreat. I was totally blown away. In total, I received over \$1,500 from over 40 individuals.

A week before the retreat, it started to dawn on me that this might actually be quite challenging. I looked at the forecast for the week and saw a steady decline in temperature; at night it would dip below 40 Fahrenheit (~4 Celsius). Although we would be sleeping outside, we were instructed to not bring a sleeping bag, just old clothes. I wondered why I chose to sign up for a retreat in December. Then we had a series of rainy, windy days, when it was miserable to even step outside. As I thought about the retreat, a steady stream of voices started whispering worst-case scenarios: *What if I get hypothermia and can't continue? What if it really hurts my back to sleep on the ground?? What if I catch some disease from people on the street?!?* Fear is a response to perceived threat, and nothing is more fearsome for most than the thought of death, and of things that could expedite it. Up until that point I had been soothing such fears by repeating to myself in a mantra-like manner: *I'm good, there's nothing to worry about. Just relax.* The tricky part is that these words, when coming from a place of deep knowing, can be quite wise. However, when coming from a place of insecurity and fear (like they were in that moment), they can subtly undermine my strong feelings by not fully allowing them to be seen. Over time, this undermining can turn my practice into just a sedative, far removed from its potential to wake me up. But it gets worse. When the threat is actually real (like physical danger) and I have been suppressing feelings, they inevitably find a way to bubble up and express themselves in my body and mind, often in destructive ways.

Then I thought about backing out: *Maybe I could join for just the first day, and then sometime in the night I would slip away and walk back to my apartment. Yeah, that way I could get a taste of the experience but not be in any danger!...But wait, what would I say to all my friends who donated and were waiting to hear about my 3 days on retreat?* The thought of emailing many of my closest friends to tell them I chickened out the first night made me even more distressed. Up there with the fear of death is the fear of public humiliation!

My mind continued to whirl with a spiraling urgency of problem-solving thoughts. In the past I would have followed these thoughts, hoping they would resolve the issue, but I've learned from experience that when I'm emotionally triggered, fight-or-flight mechanisms hijack my rational mind and thinking becomes very muddled.

I then tried the practice of deliberately moving my attention away from thinking and into my body, following sensations of breathing with as much attention as I could muster. Usually with this practice, my body begins to calm and my thinking becomes less frantic, scattered and ruminative.

Following my breathing was helpful, but the energy remained very intense. I realized that I needed to ask for help. I called a physician I trust and asked him about all the health risks to be aware of, admitting my fears and asking for his professional opinion. I then did research and purchased thermal underwear, wool socks and a thick jacket. After taking these steps I felt much more confident. Of course if I were actually in imminent danger there would be no shame

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in aborting my plans for the retreat, but now I felt a clearer understanding of what to be aware of and where that line might be.

The day before the retreat I prepared my Mala (pictured above), which is a beaded necklace containing the names of all the people who donated. It was a beautiful process; as I wrote each person's name I pictured them in my mind's eye, said their name out loud, put my hand on my heart, and smiled.

The morning of the retreat, it was pouring rain. One of my friends used the word "biblical" to describe the weather report he saw for San Francisco that day. It was a fitting way to begin such a journey.

I was fortunate to have two friends joining me on the retreat, and they arrived that morning at my apartment. We enjoyed a pumpkin pancake feast and shared with one another about how we were feeling and our intentions for the retreat. Upon sharing, we realized that we held some common fears and anxiety about the experience. Knowing I wasn't the only one with concern made me feel lighter in my body; once I acknowledged this, it was easier to feel the excitement that was also present. We knew that we would be there for each other throughout the retreat, and this made us all smile.

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When it was time to go, we put on our rain ponchos and headed out. We had been given an address: Grace Cathedral; and a time: Thursday at 3pm. We knew the retreat ended Sunday at noon. Everything in the middle was unknown...

When we arrived at the church, we were greeted by the facilitator and our street cohort. There were 9 of us in total. We found a dry spot to stand and the facilitator conducted an orientation. One of the first things we learned was that being in a group virtually eliminated safety concerns. The likelihood of someone trying to attack a group of 9 is pretty low. Community offered much more than physical safety, though; it also provided emotional and spiritual safety. Knowing that we were in it together, and that we had opportunities for scheduled sharings (called "Council") helped tremendously in allowing us to be more comfortable with whatever we were experiencing.

We then headed out together into the street for the first time. Amidst the rain, the evening was transitioning from light into dark, and as we passed people I felt like we had begun some grand adventure.

Much to my delight, there is a wealth of free food in San Francisco; you just need to know where to look. When we arrived at our first meal stop the facilitator advised us to not sit together, but to sit with strangers and see what arose. We were in a building downtown and I sat facing the door, so I could see who showed up that evening. The soup kitchen was a cast of characters! All types of people from different nationalities, genders, and ages came and went. A tiny elderly Asian woman hobbled over and sat down across from me. Her hands moved slowly as she picked up her bread. I found myself imagining how she got here. Earlier that week, my dad sent me a poignant first-person story about a Vietnamese family who came to the US as refugees during the Vietnam War. Their struggle was beyond my comprehension; after fleeing their country in desperation, many boats were ransacked en route. Women were kidnapped and abused, children perished, and the survivors struggled to make sense of it all as they waited and waited in refugee camps. I didn't know this woman's particular story, but I could imagine the possibility of her coming to the US as a young, frightened girl looking for a new life. In the middle of my thinking, we caught eyes and she smiled at me, almost as if she knew what I was imagining and she wanted to reassure me that she was okay. Her look cut through my thoughts and I felt tears welling up. She reached down and offered me her apple. I nodded and reached both hands out to accept her offering; tears began trickling down my face. After a few more minutes together, she got up to leave, smiled at me and walked away.

When dinner was finished, our next consideration was where to sleep. While there were shelters, we didn't want to take beds from people who really needed them, so we opted to sleep outside. I'm a light sleeper, typically wearing earplugs and an eye mask each night to bed, so I knew this part was going to be challenging. After searching for about an hour, we found a partially covered spot around the block from San Francisco City Hall. The spot was near a main intersection and was well lit, so we felt safe enough. My mattress at home is quite soft, so lying on a thin layer of cardboard was also an adjustment. After everyone got settled and said goodnight I followed my breathing for as long as I could, hoping to fall asleep in the process. No such luck. I sat up and spent most of the night just looking out at the people passing by: a well-dressed couple walking home from the opera, a young woman with a heroin needle in her right hand, an old man moving very slowly. I also spent hours looking at individual beads on the Mala necklace, holding each bead for a few minutes and thinking of memories associated with the person. I smiled a lot.

The next day we were offered the opportunity to beg for money. I thought it was something we would be doing a lot on the streets, but, to my amazement, we were able to get all our basic needs met without exchanging money. The facilitator said that it could be a rich experience to try and beg, so I took him up on the offer. A group of us walked into the shopping district of downtown San Francisco. It was the week before Christmas so things were bustling. I found a spot to stand near a shopping mall entrance, took off my hat to use as a receptacle, and tried to make eye contact with people to ask for money. Within seconds I began feeling uncomfortable. Some people saw me out of the corner of their eye and immediately looked away, hastening their speed. Others frowned when they saw me. But most people walked right by without paying me the slightest attention. The emotional energy I felt was one of being unwelcome; like the kid in middle school that no one wants to dance with. I then tried to stop people to ask them for

money, but could not bring myself to do it; the words got caught in my throat. I felt embarrassed, and after a few minutes I decided to leave, literally with my hat in hand.

I shared about my experience with others in my retreat group, and some people had similar stories. It was again comforting to know I wasn't the only one. I then thought about how, for people who actually do live on the street, this experience was likely commonplace. *How would I view the world if most people avoided me when I tried to interact with them? How easy would it be to internalize their judgment and see myself as weak, pathetic, useless?* After holding space for how crummy I felt, I then clearly saw that I didn't want to go through the world contributing to others' suffering in this way. The sadness I felt began transforming, and resolve arose to look at others with eyes of compassion. Not pity, not "I know what would help you," but compassion. The willingness to see that others suffer deeply, to know our suffering as intimately related, and then to do the only thing that makes any sense: offer love.

The following morning, there was an opportunity to put this resolve into action. We were walking together to breakfast, when out of the corner of my eye I spotted a large black man coming towards me, holding one arm straight out with his fist clenched. My instant reaction was to look at his face, and I saw a vacant, glassy expression with a pout-like frown. I felt my arm extend out and my head leaned into his chest to embrace him. He stopped. I heard a familiar voice behind me say, "*Ohh, that's what he wanted.*" Apparently this man had been walking up to the others in the group with his arm out and no one knew what he wanted. I actually didn't have the thought, "This man needs a hug," but somehow my body knew what to do. The man started talking so we all stopped and listened. He was talking quickly and was hard to follow, saying something about wanting to escape this planet and needing a fish tank. While his words weren't coherent, as he spoke I think we all heard the underlying emotion: despair.

We had many interactions with people like him, people who had something important they wanted to share, but if you wrote down their words it would be hard to comprehend. I sensed the important part was connecting to the feeling, being as present as one could be, and genuinely wishing the person well. The retreat facilitator led by example and listened to the man wholeheartedly, and then asked him a few questions to try and understand more. After a while we said goodbye and departed.

The retreat ended at noon on Sunday. That morning, we were woken up early by the police. I heard a voice through a loudspeaker: "*Okay, rise and shine, you guys gotta move.*" He was speaking to 50 or so people scattered around us. I took it this was a periodic occurrence, as the police didn't seem to be rushing us, and everyone around me calmly started collecting their belongings. I noticed a young man standing on the corner near us. He had curly hair and was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. It was about 45° Fahrenheit; hardly T-shirt weather. As our group had just finished our last night on the street, I thought of offering him the blanket I had been using; it was a thick, blue polyester blanket that I bought for my first-ever mindfulness retreat many years prior. It felt emotionally significant to give this away and so I happily walked over to him, but when I got near I saw that his eyes were bloodshot red and he looked on edge. Something was wrong. I quickly handed him the blanket and walked away. As our group left for

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breakfast I noticed him following us and talking to other members of our group. I noticed myself feeling uneasy and wishing he would stay behind. It was partly my fear of what he was experiencing and partly my sleep deprivation that had me feeling low on capacity. We ended up standing in line for a while that morning waiting for breakfast, and he stayed with us, talking extensively with my friend Peter. I was grateful for Peter and our group for having capacity to listen and be with this man. I was also a bit disappointed in myself for not having enough space for him.

Days later I would find out that this young man, Jerrod, asked Peter if he could join our group because Jerrod said he felt safe with us. Jerrod admitted to Peter that he was addicted to crack, and said that being with us ensured he wouldn't take another hit, at least for the minutes we were together. Peter also told me afterwards that he himself was inspired to welcome Jerrod in because of how Peter witnessed me interacting with the man who wanted a hug the day before. Peter said the interactions with Jerrod were a highlight of his entire retreat. When Peter told me all this I laughed aloud; I had been admiring Peter's actions and being hard on myself, and Peter's actions were inspired by me! Interconnection at its finest.

We ended the retreat back where we started: Grace Cathedral. It was a glorious sun-drenched day, and we all expressed our gratitude for each other. After many hugging meditations I began to make my way back home. I had a few items of clothing to donate, and as fortune would have it, less than a block into my walk I spotted a young white man sitting on the ground, wearing shorts. I figured he might want some clothing. He was muttering to himself and playing with small rocks. I asked, *"Excuse me sir, would you like some clothes?"* He looked up at me with a scowl and exclaimed, *"F*** no I don't want that crap!"* I, in turn, had an unexpected reaction. I heard his words but didn't take them personally. Instead, they kind of floated through me. I understood he was upset, but I knew it wasn't at me. I also noticed there was a stark absence of a 'victim/hero story' in my mind. I didn't think *What's that guy's problem? I'm trying to help!* or even, *Oh that poor sap...* but just, *Hmm, he seems upset. I hope he finds peace.* All of these reactions happened within a couple seconds, and then I just nodded, smiled, and continued walking on my way. About 20 seconds later, I heard a distant shout: **"Hey!!"** I turned around. He yelled, **"What's your name?!"** I smiled and walked back to him. He told me his stuff was stolen the previous night and he was pissed. He still didn't want my clothes. He went on with an extended monologue about something I had a hard time following. I listened as best I could. After about 5 minutes he just stopped talking. Then he looked me in the eye and handed me one of his rocks. I smiled.

When I got home that afternoon I showered, ate a big meal and slept for 15 hours. I had purposely cleared my entire calendar the following week, with no work and no social obligations. Being an introvert, I wanted to minimize needing to interact with anybody. So it was to my great surprise that on Monday afternoon, I actually had the desire to go *back into the streets* and interact with people. I was astonished; it was the last thing I would have expected I would want to do. But I found myself thinking of all the people I met on the street, all the spontaneous interactions that warmed my heart, and I knew that they were available to me simply by walking outside. It was a free adventure that brought me joy and didn't hurt anybody; what more could

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one ask for? That week I walked everywhere I needed to go, and interacted with everyone with whom I caught eyes. Because they were strangers, there was no “*How have you been?*” and associated stories of the past; it was simply “*How are you right now?*” pointing towards the deepening of our present moment experience. It felt liberating.

In the weeks that followed the retreat, I had numerous conversations with friends who were eager to know what the experience was like. When I shared that it was positive, I felt them breathe a sigh of relief, almost as if to say, “*Whew, you made it!*” Some admitted that they were concerned for me, and I could feel their care and desire for me to be well. Others said they were really inspired and wanted to engage more with seeing poverty and homelessness in their own lives. By exposing myself to living on the street, even for three days, I knew that many people had been affected, in small and not-so-small ways. Will's actions inspired me to do a retreat, and maybe I inspired somebody else. While I don't think we ever know the full impact of our actions, I do believe that if we open our heart and commit to bear witness with what arises, we transform ourselves...and thus, gradually but inexorably, we transform the world.
