

San Francisco Street Retreat: A Christmas Story

Once upon a time four curious, somewhat fearful and very excited people decided to join the homeless population in San Francisco for three days and nights in the Christmas season.

Some people thought this idea was quite strange.

Some thought it heroic.

Some thought it disrespectful to the “real” homeless.

Some were inspired, others grateful.

In this, the darkest time of year, in which many world traditions from Pagan, to Christian to Jewish, to Hindu, to Kwanza and others celebrate the season of Light, we decided to live without money and only our clothes plus a light blanket to experience life on the streets. We had no illusion that we were really homeless, we were simply wanting to learn from living in this way.

The learning was and is profoundly moving. The essence can be described as meeting the generosity and oneness of life in very basic ways or great generosity and infinite kindness amidst the deprivations. Sharing cardboard with others, exchanging food at the missions, looking for something to give back when given something, this was the etiquette of the people living on the street that we met.

Some Discoveries:

- The street, both the ground itself and life on the street, is very hard.
- Dry cardboard is a life-saver for protection from the cold.
- Getting wet in pouring rain is uncomfortable.
- People on the street help each other.
- People love to give.
- Being really seen is more important than receiving material gifts.
- People deeply appreciate and long for being heard and valued.
- Giving and Receiving are a pair that create each other.
- One cannot distinguish who is giving and who is receiving.

This last point is most important to me and in a way sums up the whole experience. When receiving a cup of coffee or a dry pair of socks on wet days, one gives their gratitude. Humbly asking for help, gives the possibility of service and connection to the “giver”.

One night, after being awakened by two kind-hearted, twenty-something people who were distributing gift bags, I knew the great joy THEY were feeling in helping us. I am usually them, the person caring for others. True receiving requires an open-hearted humility, in some ways it is easier to say “I don’t need that, thank you”. I know this habitual response very well, there is an arrogance in “I do not need any help”. Receiving from them was a double gift - opening to their kindness while enjoying the material goods AND knowing that they were receiving the opportunity to touch that place in their hearts that wants to give. This is humanity at its best. We fulfill each other. We cannot separate the giver and the receiver. We are one.

I am also one with the young woman who cannot look at me as she goes into Starbucks for her latte, I am her too. Or the dapper man in his fine suit who fearfully averts my gaze as his body tightens, I know this in me as well. The angry, meth-addicted, ranting man turning over garbage cans is also me when I am consumed by my personal “hungry ghosts”. And then I meet the Street Ministry who have not missed a single night in fifty years of caring for homeless people, I see that they are me also.

I do not want to romanticize the experience. There is danger on the streets, one needs to be awake and aware. And yet, if one is paying attention there is much more kindness than danger. As one fellow retreatant said “I take days during a meditation retreat to get really present, connected and quiet, on the street it was almost instantaneous”.

When we told people that we were not really homeless but simply joining them for a few days to experience life on the streets they were so grateful that we were interested in knowing this directly. One woman, Mercedes who most called Mercy, said she felt so safe talking to us that “we were like a Christmas present” for her. When I gave her the candy cane that the street minister had given to me, tears welled up in her eyes. “I love candy canes and this is my first this year” she said. Then she gave us her wisdom about safe places to sleep.

Each person is doing their best given the ingredients of their life. We are all always cooking the meal called “our life”. Ingredients include mental capacity, life history, bodily condition, personality, possessions, everything. Before this experience I had unconsciously created a category called “homeless people” which allowed me to ignore the uniqueness of each

individual. After many personal conversations and encountering similar challenges, I experienced truly seeing each person's individuality come alive.

One more thing- the street itself is ALIVE. The ground, though covered in concrete radiates support. It says, "You are here. Stand on me, sleep on me, sit on me. I am here to confirm, validate and honor your presence." Sleeping on the street in a city, putting one's whole body on the ground, created a surprising sense of deep connection to the earth itself.

Once upon a time, amidst the holiday shoppers and decorations, a group of economically privileged people received the deep honor of being accepted into a community of individuals who live in very different circumstances. A truly remarkable Christmas present that I suspect will stay with me for the rest of my life.

WISHING YOU A JOYFUL, DEEPLY CONNECTED AND LOVE-FILLED SEASON OF LIGHT.