

Most Valuable Lesson



My first 'Street Retreat' started on Palm Sunday, 2006. This was a spiritual experience where me and the other 11 pilgrims sought God in the faces, voices and shared experiences of the unhoused. There is something about the stress of being on the streets for 4 days and 3 nights with no money, no food, and no phone, that jumpstarts the senses. Not knowing where to sleep or use the restroom reorders the day's priorities. More than any other single step along my amazing journey toward understanding

social justice, that experience in downtown Austin changed me forever. By the end, I was haggard from sleep deprivation and longed for a hot shower and clean clothes. All the busyness of my insulated, suburban life was dull in my thinking; while the immediate—that which was right in front of me in the moment, burned with an intense and exquisite saturation.

As I look back and juxtapose my before-street-retreat self with my after-street-retreat self, a stark contrast comes into focus. By comparison my old life seems myopic, shallow, pollyanna. I was a regular churchgoer with a positive self-image. I was polite, trustworthy, and kind. I didn't just think I would be in heaven someday I thought I'd be the greeter, or perhaps something even more important. I lived a prideful, if not oblivious, American life of self-absorption. I was not bad, but I wasn't fully alive, and certainly not fully aware of the suffering of others.

Then I was exposed, out on the streets with nothing to buffet me from those living the traumas of homelessness. I experienced something altogether unfamiliar on that street retreat: the best way I can describe it is to say it felt like pressure—something between being overwhelmed and all-out panic. It was constant. My body was on high alert. I knew that the only way to get through it was to let go and embrace the uncertainty. I had to surrender my aversion to risk and my need to control. I might have only been a few miles away from my comfortable north

Austin subdivision, but it might as well have been on another planet. I was scared.

Mother Theresa referred to the poor as “Jesus, in a most distressing disguise.” I think she was right. And as such, my identity as a Christian was compelling me to be open to the challenge of seeing the homeless this way. But for me, this experience defined what ‘out-of-my-comfort-zone’ really means. All my good upbringing, the life skills I had acquired and mastered, and all the clever platitudes I had ever internalized offered nothing practical when face-to-face with crowds of others who for the most part, didn’t conform to cultural standards of decorum or hygiene. In that moment I could feel my nerves firing, spurring me to leap into action and engage full-FIX IT mode. “There has to be something I can do to solve this!?!” But what I learned is, no, I cannot solve this. No one can. Further, I learned that I wasn’t called to fix it. I was called to witness it. To simply be there, in the suffering and be present, and hold the tension between the immediate needs of those before me, and my own neurosis, and inadequacy to do a damn thing about it.

There’s a story in Matthew 25-“When did I see you hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison, and minister to your needs? And the King replies, whenever you did it for the least of my brothers you did it for me.” Occasionally, on this retreat I connected

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deeply with someone living on the streets. Our rapport would blossom as we encountered each other, free of projections and judgements, and our hearts would syncopate. Those were the mountaintop moments. In those moments of connection I got a rush of joy and hope and inspiration. I wanted to sing out “In this moment everything is right with the world!” These sparks of friendship and unity had qualities of the eternal, and I thought, ‘I want to feel like this all the time!’ That brought a question to my mind that I subsequently reflected on well beyond my four days on the streets: how are these mountaintop moments different from what I normally do/feel/experience? Teasing out that answer led me someplace I didn’t want to go.

My thinking prior to the Street Retreat was that I had limited means and could not possibly help everyone who asked. “I already give to our church, and they give to humanitarian causes. Plus, on occasion we give to other worthy charities. If those homeless people wanted something from me, they needed to go to the agencies and organizations that my contributions fund. And if they didn’t, that’s on them.” This system of thinking was logical. I suspect many hardworking Americans feel similarly. It was a rule, and that rule made me feel safe and good about myself. It prevented me from being overwhelmed and allowed me to continue to think of myself as a ‘good Christian.’ No one could argue with it or say I was wrong. It was natural, and easy

as a snap or a daydream.

But maybe it was a daydream. There was something unfinished about this rule. While it is defensible to say I gave at the office, something was calling me to dig deeper; to look inside and see what was behind the rule. The more I tested it for truth the more I recognized its veneer. When I was finally able to pull back the cosmetic outer shell and reduce it to simplest terms I felt a sting, like a nerve ending being exposed. This tape that played in the back of my mind, the rule that kept me safe and insulated from harm, could be summed up in these three words...‘ignore those people.’ Not exactly the battle cry of the practicing Catholic I professed to be. In fact, it really bothered me. My self image was that of a stalwart disciple, not a poser. But that was exactly what I felt like. Long ago I had internalized this rule, but in this moment I was seeing myself without the filtering layer of my own self-deception.

In one sense I really couldn’t complain—it had served its purpose. Ignoring those people solved my problem, simple as that. I must have operated under that rule from my earliest memories. If I saw a need, I may feel compelled to help in some way. So, I would simply, most times unconsciously, choose not to see. As much of a blow as this awareness was to my fragile identity, resolving it posed an even bigger problem. How was I going to reconcile ignoring those people with the core belief I

held from the text in Matthew 25? I was stuck. I either needed to forget this moral exploration and go back to believing it is okay to ignore 'the poor', or I had to replace that rule with something else. I knew instantly that going back was not an option. But I also didn't have a clue about how to re-record a tape that loops through my subconscious? It all felt very complex. As a result, I languished for what seemed a long, long time.

Encountering the poor, the people I had long been afraid of, is what caused my hypocrisy to surface. I knew 'ignoring those people' wasn't the answer, but what was? I wasn't prepared to leave my job and enter a full-time ministry. I have a wife and responsibilities. As a result I continued to suffer the incongruence for years. I was not thinking about it all the time, but it popped up with regularity, like a shadowy reminder of my flawed humanity. And each time I would feel an urgency to fix it. It felt like a splinter in my mind. I wanted it gone.

One day I was visiting with a dear friend, Alan Graham, founder and CEO of Mobile Loaves & Fishes. He said something that allowed the last tumbler of the combination to fall into place. "The dollar you give the homeless guy is not the gift, it's the conduit to the gift. The gift is just acknowledging them as another human being."

“Whoa,” I thought. “The dollar isn’t the gift...” I was struck hard by this idea. I felt an excitement but was not sure why exactly, like discovering something rare and important but not knowing how to value it. I had to ruminate on the concept to unpack its treasure. I wondered if it was true. If it was, and if the dollar is not the gift, then the amount I give is inconsequential, I reasoned. I could give only one dollar and it would serve as well as \$100 as a conduit for the real gift. And as they pulled that buck from my hand, I could look them in the eye and smile, offer encouragement, ask their name, offer to pray—offer my very self. If I only gave one dollar, I could probably give out a lot of them and not change my lifestyle at all. I could still contribute to our church and other charities. These thoughts reduced my fear and anxiety. As I became aware of the calm, peace, and joy I felt at the possibility of implementing this idea the dots seemed to connect themselves in my mind. Was this obscure comment from Alan the lynchpin for the new rule I have been agonizing over?

Suddenly it was clear. I had to connect an openness to give with an openness to receive. I needed a reasonable budget, otherwise I would be conflicted—bargaining and battling with my ego. I knew my inner voice would tell me I was enabling ‘these beggars’; that they would use that money for drugs and alcohol; that one dollar would become ten and then two-hundred and the

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requests wouldn't stop until I had depleted my kid's college savings; that they would never get a job if I gave them a handout—like my gift was doing more harm than withholding the gift would do. I saw all these familiar voices in that moment for what they were—manifestations of my own fear and greed. But now, on the precipice of evolution, I stepped out of the abyss with the makings of a solid plan.

I set a budget of \$30 per month to keep in my car. When I got to the end of the month, I would replenish with 30 fresh dollars. If I gave away all \$30 before the end of the month, I would not feel compelled to give more. I would simply offer a smile and say I would catch them next time. I remember my relief at finally having a working draft. It energized me. The pressure of the thorn in my mind was gone! I was going to have a new rule. I couldn't wait to get started and see if Alan was right.

At the end of that first month, I still had about 1/3 of the money left over. I replenished with thirty more dollars and then felt an increased urgency to give. I was falling behind! This is their money, not mine, I reasoned. I would hold it for them until I saw them at a street corner. I would give freely and with a generous spirit, but always just a dollar. I would wish them well and mean it. In the process I learned the names of many. I shared about Community First! Village and gave helpful advice on how to apply so they could possibly start the process to get off the

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streets. I was making friends, and my interactions were characterized by smiles, and laughs, and warm greetings...the way friends interact.

Alan had been right. The men and women I met were hungry for connection and the simple affirmation of being alive. They weren't trying not to work; they were trying not to be invisible. As my experiment matured, I stopped getting 30 ones per month and started putting all my ones in the car. I was able to let go and get out of my head. My ego no longer had the leverage over me it once had. I had new information that led to new beliefs, that led to new actions. And it felt really good.

It makes me think of the flow of goods like a river. When I am fortunate to receive a flow of value, I am entrusted to steward it to flow through me in a responsible way. I am not meant to dam the flow, but channel it, to make life better because I lived.

That is how this experiment started. I had a new rule...realigned with my desire to share and my system for sharing. It made me wonder where else I have subconscious rules that are not in sync with my convictions. Last year I read WHITE FRAGILITY and had a similar shock at the realization that there is a system of racism that I have been tacitly participating in all my life (as referenced in the earlier chapter, "If One Could Die of Embarrassment, I'd

be Dead.”) I didn’t want to believe it, but the book’s many examples of implicit bias opened my eyes. As the evidence stacked up, I was again compelled to confront an ugly truth in myself: I had contributed to a good ole boy subculture that perpetuated racist ideals. I could have argued that the author was wrong, but I was convinced she wasn’t. As a result I have decided to become a student again. I am learning about the history of those who have suffered injustice, and I am learning how I can reframe my rules to better support inclusive and life-affirming policies.

My big take-away from all this is that I have learned how my behavior is driven by beliefs, conscious and subconscious, and how as my beliefs evolve, I can more effectively shape my behavior to be in line with my highest ideals and principals. This is one of the most valuable lessons of my life—being open to considering maybe, just maybe, I could be wrong, and then being willing to humble myself and take time to discern what new rule I am being called to write. This is the hard stuff of living in the burn of an intense and exquisite saturation, but this stuff changes the world.

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