

# **From the Zendo to the Streets:**

## **A study of street chaplaincy**

By Jackie Hider

In fulfillment of the thesis requirement for the  
Upaya Zen Center/Institute  
Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program

January 2013

## **Abstract**

The work of a chaplain is to offer pastoral and spiritual care in non-religious settings. The street chaplain works in a community and the people that he/she works with come from all parts of that community. This paper examines the work of street chaplains who work in the homeless community.

The thesis posits that Buddhist chaplains can experience and practice basic teachings of Buddhism by spending time in the homeless community. It also explores the possibility that Buddhist teachings have something to contribute to street chaplaincy.

The thesis is developed through an exploration of four street chaplaincy organizations and addresses the following questions: How does a person become a street chaplain? What does a street chaplain do, and what lessons can we, as chaplains, learn from working in the homeless community?

## Table of Contents

<b>I.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
	a) Thesis and Context	4
	b) Methodology	8
	c) Overview of Paper	10
<b>II.</b>	<b>Definitions and Descriptions of Four Street Chaplaincy Organizations</b>	<b>11</b>
	a) What do all the titles mean?	11
	b) Faithful Fools	14
	c) San Francisco Night Ministry	15
	d) Jana Drakka Community Services/Zenkei Sangha	16
	e) Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy	18
<b>III.</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>19</b>
	a) Paths to Street Chaplaincy	19
	b) What do the Street Chaplains do?	27
	1) Bridging the Gap	27
	2) Building Healthy Life-Affirming Communities	31
	3) Companionship	36
	4) Attending to Mental Health and Substance Abuse Issues	41
	5) Working With Harm Reduction	43
	6) Working “Between the Cracks”	45
	c) Lessons from the Streets	48
<b>IV.</b>	<b>The Journey Between the Zendo and the Streets</b>	<b>52</b>
	a) What can Buddhist chaplains learn from the homeless community?	52
	b) What does a Buddhist chaplain bring to the homeless community?	59
<b>V.</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>66</b>
	<b>References</b>	<b>69</b>

# **I. Introduction**

## **a) Thesis and Context**

After several trips working with street chaplains/ministers, I believe that spending time in the homeless community\* offers many deep and profound opportunities to know oneself, to experience compassion, community, impermanence and interconnectedness, and to practice not-knowing, bearing witness, and loving action. I believe that we can learn a lot about chaplaincy by spending time in the homeless community. I also believe that as Buddhist chaplains we have something to contribute to street chaplaincy.

I started my journey with the homeless community in 2010 after I had been accepted into the Chaplaincy Program at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I wanted to get some experience working in situations that were new to me and that I thought would challenge me. I volunteered with the Dharma Bums, a group in downtown San Diego that provides classes in Buddhism and several outreach programs. I participated for about five months in their food redistribution program. In this program, we collected donations of bagels and muffins from local bakeries, pre-prepared food from a farmers' market, and salad greens from a local organic farm, put it all into boxes and walked to the places in downtown San Diego where people who live in the homeless community congregate. I had never interacted with anybody in this community and was nervous. What I received was gratitude, warmth, and many "God Bless You" offerings. I was surprised by everything.

My second contact with the homeless community came as I was volunteering with the San Diego Veterans for Peace. I joined them as they handed out sleeping bags, stuff sacks, and ponchos to people sleeping on the streets. Whereas the Dharma Bums did not really interact with people, the veterans spent a lot of time talking and listening to people's stories. We would wake people up who were sleeping on cardboard and covered with as little as a light jacket and give them a sleeping bag. We helped people move out of the rain. We gave sleeping bags to anybody who needed one, but when we talked to homeless veterans, the interaction was personal and overflowing with connection and compassion. The vets were brothers whether they were giving or receiving a sleeping bag. The first night I worked with Jan, a vet from the Vietnam War, and what I was taken by was his friendly, relaxed, and non-judgmental concern. He simply asked, "How are you doing? What do you need?" It was like he was talking with someone over a backyard fence. I went out with the Veterans for Peace six times and learned about families who live on the streets. I learned that some people on the streets are very articulate about their circumstances. I learned the importance of the question, "What do you need?" I learned that there were not many bathrooms around. I started to learn how to listen.

Then, while casually exploring the topic of homelessness, I came upon the topic of street chaplaincy, or street ministry and was intrigued. In May 2012, I attended a Wellness Gathering, a weekly event organized by the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy and led by Reverend Paul Gaffney, who is both a Christian and Buddhist chaplain. We met in a park close to downtown San Rafael, which is a short distance north of San

Francisco. When I arrived, there were about fifteen people scattered around the park. Reverend Paul was chatting with a few people, and after about ten minutes he moved to one end of the park. Most everyone moved to join him in a circle. More people kept arriving, and by the end of the gathering there was a group of about thirty people in attendance. A couple of people appeared intoxicated; one young man in a tattered shirt was crawling around picking bits of un-seeable stuff from the grass. Several had the unkempt appearance that I associate with people who sleep on the streets. There were also people who appeared to have just gotten off of work. It was a mixed group. Most of us were sitting in the circle; there were a few though that sat way outside the circle. One woman made it clear that she did not want anybody near her. There were squabbles over smoking and a couple of angry outbursts. There was some friendly chatting and many people were sitting quietly. The man next to me welcomed me. Reverend Paul started by leading us in a short “gathering together” ceremony. We passed around a smudge stick and then did a short silent meditation. Then, he passed around a feather and invited each of us to send a prayer out into the world. We concluded with a prayer of connection and caring for all beings. After a couple of announcements about a field trip to Green Gulch Farm, a local Zen Center, and about up-coming open-microphone summer dinners, Reverend Paul brought out a poem called, *Your Mother and My Mother* by Hafiz, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet. Here are the first three lines:

Fear is the cheapest room in the house  
I would like to see you living in better conditions,  
For your mother and my mother were friends.  
(Ladinsky, 1999)

We then had a deep and profound discussion about the poem. Paul had to simply ask, “What do you think Hafiz means here?” and the discussion carried itself. Most people

were participating. We talked about metaphorical meanings. One woman commented about the first three lines, saying that she felt the same way as Hafiz. The man sitting next to me said, “Injustice against one of us is injustice against all of us.” We even tried to figure out if it was translated from Farsi or Arabic. Reverend Paul commented that the Three Poisons, (greed, aversion, delusion) all come from a place of fear. Then, he said that we all have difficult emotions, and fear is one of the big ones. That is what makes us human. All humans feel all of these emotions. It is important for us to look at what we are practicing. We do not eliminate our fear; we get to know it. We can even welcome it. He opened a discussion about the difference between reacting and responding, and many people joined in. It was a full, rich and deep discussion.

I left this Wellness Gathering really excited, realizing that, for me, something important had happened. This gathering had disassembled my expectations. I decided that I wanted to know more about street chaplaincy.

\*Note –Some people object to the label “homeless.” I have heard the words “un-housed” and “housing challenged.” I have chosen the term “homeless community.” This includes people who are homeless and sleep on the streets, people who are living in shelters, people who live in transitional housing funded by the city of San Francisco, and people who live in Single Room Occupancy Hotels (SROs.) It also includes the people who serve the homeless community.

## **b) Methodology**

After having these early experiences with the homeless community, I did some research and found that there were three groups doing street chaplaincy work in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco: the Faithful Fools, the San Francisco Night Ministry, and Jana Drakka Community Services. These three were all within walking distance of each other, and from their online descriptions, had various activities that I could participate in. These groups will be more fully described in Part II and III of this paper.

In June 2012, I began the research of these three groups by spending seven days in the Tenderloin District. During this trip, I purposely did not have an agenda. My goal was to let the inquiry unfold and allow my thesis and questions to develop from what I was experiencing. I wanted to proceed from the Zen Peacemaker Tenets of Not-Knowing and Bearing Witness. During this time I participated in many activities with the Faithful Fools including a one-day street retreat and three group meetings. I attended a five-hour night walk and an afternoon at the Open Cathedral with the San Francisco Night Ministry. I was not able to meet with Jana Drakka because she was ill, but I participated in a meditation evening with a group of her students. During this trip, I also returned to San Rafael and attended another Wellness Gathering with the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy. In addition, I spent many hours walking around the Tenderloin talking to people in the homeless community. When I got home I used my pages of notes to develop a set of questions and to frame my thesis.

- What is Chaplaincy?
- What is Street Chaplaincy?
- What draws people to street chaplaincy?
- What does a street chaplain do?
- How does one get started in street chaplaincy?



- What does the homeless community have to teach us?
- What does Buddhism bring to street chaplaincy?

I returned to the Tenderloin in September, 2012 and spent five days conducting interviews with the following street chaplains.

- Reverend Kay Jorgensen, Unitarian Universalist Society, Co-Founder of the Faithful Fools
- Sister Carmen Barsody, Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, Co-Founder of the Faithful Fools
- Alex Darr – Outreach Minister of the Faithful Fools
- Rev. Lyle Beckman, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Night Minister with the San Francisco Night Ministry from 2007 – the present
- Rev. Thom Longino, United Church of Christ, Associate Night Minister with the San Francisco Night Ministry from 2008 – present.
- Junsei Jana Drakka, Head Student at San Francisco Zen Center, 2005, Practice Leader, 2007, Dharma heir of Zenkei Blanche Hartman, 2009, Founder of the Zenkei Sangha and Jana Drakka Community Services.
- Reverend Paul Gaffney, Christian Church - Disciple of Christ & Lay Ordained student in the Soto Zen Buddhist Tradition, Chaplain of the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy.

(Rev. Gaffney from the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy was on sabbatical and not available for a comprehensive interview for this project. I was able to have a short informal interview with him in May 2012, and we had a couple of short conversations when I visited the two Wellness Gatherings. I gathered most of the information I present in this paper from the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy's website.

<http://www.homelesschaplaincy.org/who.html>)

Each interview was one hour to one and a half hours long and guided by the following four questions.

- How did you get involved with street chaplaincy?
- What do you do as a street chaplain?
- How have you changed as a result of working in the homeless community?
- What does the homeless community have to teach us?

During this second visit to the Tenderloin, I also attended four meditation groups led by Jana Drakka and a Hepatitis C support group where she provides mindfulness training. In addition, I participated in a second night walk with the Night Ministers. I also accessed the websites of all of the above plus two additional sites that were recommended to me and contributed valuable insight into street ministry.

- Ecclesia Ministries Common Cathedral and The Rev. Dr. Deborah Little, <http://www.ecclesia-ministries.org/ecclesia.html>
- The Mental Health Chaplaincy and Chaplain Craig Rennnebohm, <http://www.mentalhealthchaplain.org/index.htm>

**c) Overview of Paper**

In Part II, I begin the development of the thesis with a short description of the job of a chaplain and of a street chaplain. In addition, in this section, I introduce the four groups I worked with. Part III provides detailed information of my findings. In Part IV, using a Buddhist chaplaincy perspective, I examine ideas around what the homeless community has to teach us and what a Buddhist chaplain can bring to the homeless community. In the conclusion, I offer suggestions of how to get involved.

## **II. Definitions and Descriptions of Four Street Chaplaincy Organizations**

Part II starts with an explanation of terms and a brief description of the difference between the job of a clergy member and the job of a chaplain. Then, I describe each of the four groups I worked with, the Faithful Fools, the San Francisco Night Ministry, Jana Drakka Community Services/ Zenkei Sangha, and the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy.

### **a) What do all the titles mean?**

The street chaplains I worked with refer to themselves as ministers, pastors and/or chaplains. Jana Drakka sometimes calls herself a monk-on-the-streets and is an ordained Zen priest. In this section I would like to clarify what the different titles mean.

The title of minister generally refers to a member of the clergy, which means that the person who holds this title has been ordained in a particular faith tradition, has had formal training in that faith tradition, and is in a position of formal religious leadership. The titles of priest and/or pastor generally have the same meaning. Ministers usually work in a religious institution with people who have similar religious beliefs and practices. They are given their authority by a congregation or an ecclesiastical body, and they do their work in a place that is considered religious.

A chaplain is trained in a specific faith tradition, receives a lay ordination, and works in community-based settings that are non-religious such as hospitals, prisons, workplaces,

and military facilities. Chaplains are given authority by the institutions that employ them in addition to the ecclesiastical body that endorses them. For example, a chaplain trained in a particular Protestant tradition and working in a police department, gets his/her authority from the police department as well as from the tradition he/she studied and was ordained into.

The street chaplains I worked with and interviewed come from several faith traditions and do not work in a specific institution. They work in a community, and the people that they work with come from all parts of that community. I will describe in detail what they do in Part III of this paper. They are non-profit organizations and are responsible to the rules and regulations that a non-profit designation implies.

There are differences in the kind of work that clergy and chaplains are expected to do and whom they work with. Most of the time people come to see a clergy member with the specific intention of receiving a teaching, a blessing, or advice. Members of the clergy are expected to teach from their faith traditions, and generally most of the people they minister to come from the same faith tradition. Clergy members are often the primary leaders for the religious institutions they are a part of.

The chaplain's job is to be present and available to the people in the institution or place where he/she is working, no matter what his/her faith traditions are. He/she usually functions as a calming presence, is a supportive listener, and gives practical and/or spiritual advice when it is asked for. This means, in practical terms, the hospital chaplain goes to visit a room where someone is waiting for surgery; a fire department chaplain is

present when a fire has devastated an apartment building. A military chaplain walks with a group of soldiers who have just used their weapons. A street chaplain comforts the elderly man who lives in a single-room-occupancy-hotel (SRO) and is lonely and offers a family who is living in a car the phone number of shelters that will accept children.

The chaplain does not impose his/her religious beliefs and often is not even known by his/her faith tradition. Often the conversations chaplains have with the people they work with have nothing to do with religion or faith. The chaplain goes out into the places where there is suffering and offers comfort and healing. He/she is often a part of a team and/or plays a subordinate and support role to other authorities. (Ballinger, 2009; Paget & McCormack, 2006)

The people I worked with and interviewed for this paper either work in what they call ministry or chaplaincy organizations. They are all doing the work of a chaplain in the sense that they do not work in a religious institution or for a religious institution. All but one work in the homeless community of the Tenderloin District of San Francisco.

Although they all have some connections with a particular faith tradition and a particular congregation, in their work as street chaplains, they are affiliated with stand-alone organizations. The Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy is an exception in that it is located in San Rafael which is in Marin County about fifteen miles north of San Francisco.

In this paper, I will use the words chaplain/minister and chaplaincy/ministry interchangeably.

## **b) Faithful Fools**

The Faithful Fools have their roots in two faith traditions. In 1999 The First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco received a grant to establish a social justice minister within the congregation. Kay Jorgensen, who had been working in the homeless community since 1997, held this position from 1999 to 2006 when she retired. Carmen Barsody, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, lived and worked in inner-city Chicago and in the poor neighborhoods of Managua, Nicaragua. In 1997, they met over coffee and started walking the streets together. They realized very quickly that they had a similar way of working, and they shared a desire to respond to the growing impoverishment and suffering they were seeing and experiencing on the streets of the Tenderloin. From this connection and desire, they founded the Faithful Fools. In 2000, the Faithful Fools purchased 234 Hyde Street, a building which is in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. This is where most of their programs take place and where Carmen, Kay, Alex, and several others live. The Faithful Fools continue to be an independent outreach organization of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco, and they are entirely autonomous. Their mission statement gives a good sense of their focus and commitment:

We are called to a ministry of presence that acknowledges each human's incredible worth.

Aware of our judgments, we seek to meet people where they are through the arts, education, advocacy and accompaniment.

We participate in shattering myths about those living in poverty, seeing the light, courage, intelligence, strength and creativity of the people we encounter.

We discover on the streets our common humanity, through which celebration, community, and healing occur. (Faithful Fools, Facebook, 2012)

They call themselves “fools” to create a sense of the “in-between” state or moment where they do their work. William Woo, in an article for the *UU World* describes this when he says:

Kay Jorgensen and Carmen Barsody call themselves fools because the jester or fool is someone who lives without boundaries, someone of no social standing whatsoever but who can go anywhere and say anything. When a new member joins the board of their ministry, he or she is given a copy of Lewis Hyde's book, *Trickster Makes This World*. Writes Hyde: "The road that trickster travels is a spirit road as well as a road in fact . . . Trickster is boundary crosser . . . the author of the great distance between heaven and earth." (Woo, 2001)

In our interview, Alex stated it a little differently when he said:

In Tarot, the fool card is the zero card. The fool sees nobody higher or lower than himself. And so where we get to start off in is this place where we are going to make fools of ourselves . . . The freedom that comes from being a fool is because there is no expectation.

### **c) San Francisco Night Ministry**

The San Francisco Night Ministry started in 1962 with a question. Two clergy asked, “What happens to people in crisis during the hours of the night when all of the churches are closed and the only social services available are police, fire, and ambulance.” After a year of research the answer came back with, “Not much.” What happened next was collaboration between members of the Protestant Christian Community of San Francisco to financially support a program that would provide a Christian presence on the streets every night of the year. Seven different congregations made the decision to support this effort. At that time it was considered an experiment.

In 1990, the Night Ministry became an independent not-for-profit organization with its own Governing Board, charter constitution, and mission statement. (San Francisco Night Ministry Website, The Nightly News, 2012)

A portion of their mission statement will give some sense of what they do and whom they serve:

The San Francisco Night Ministry provides middle-of-the-night compassionate non-judgmental pastoral care, counseling, referral, and crisis intervention to anyone in any kind of distress. Through our Crisis Telephone Line staffed by trained volunteer Crisis Line Counselors, and through person-to-person encounters with ordained clergy on the streets, this ministry is available every night of the year from 10:00 pm - 4:00 am.

When requested, the Night Ministers will meet anyone, in person, anywhere in San Francisco. Occasionally other agencies will ask the Night Minister to provide transportation for a battered person to a hospital or shelter. Calls to our Crisis Line come from the entire Bay Area and beyond. All persons are eligible for assistance regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, life style, social or economic status, religion or no religion.

The *Nightly news*, the Night Ministry's annual newsletter reported that in 2011 the night ministers and the crisis line counselors had over fifteen thousand encounters, and that the topics included emotional issues, abuse issues, addiction, sexual, and money problems, and issues with food and housing. (San Francisco Night Ministry, 2012. P.6)

#### **d) Jana Drakka Community Services/ Zenkei Sangha**

Junsei Jana Drakka was ordained as a Soto Zen Buddhist Priest in 2001 and became a



Lineage Holder in Suzuki Roshi's Lineage in 2009. One of her interests is in working with low-income and homeless people. Her umbrella organization is called Jana Drakka Community Services and there are two focuses in her work, Zazen and Harm Reduction. Zazen is a meditation practice that calms the body and mind and trains the person meditating to be with whatever arises. Harm Reduction refers to policies and practices that focus on decreasing the harm that comes from abusing drugs, alcohol, and other substances. On her website Jana Drakka offers the following statement to introduce us to her work:

[We are] a resource for all communities and individuals seeking to harmonize, heal and grow.

How can we live in peace and joy in the chaos of this modern world? What will help all of us to mature in wisdom and compassion and live fulfilled lives? Look within! Here, through techniques both ancient and modern, find support and learn skills to enhance and enrich your life and the lives of others. (Sangha Outreach, 2012)

Jana works in many different places around the Tenderloin, Castro and Mission Districts of San Francisco. With different groups she has different approaches. She offers traditional Buddhist training in what is known as the Zenkei Sangha. She is the teacher for the Q-Sangha, a Buddhist group that serves the LGBT community. She has other groups for people of all faiths where she teaches stress reduction. Most of what she does is informed by her Buddhist practice and training. Through Jana Drakka Community Services, she consults and leads meditations with a weekly hepatitis c support group and is involved with a monthly support group for the case managers at the Tenderloin Housing Clinic. These are just a few of the activities she is involved in.

Most of the funding for Jana Drakka Community Services and the Zenkei Sangha comes from donations. (Jana Drakka Community Services, 2012; Jana Drakka Community Services's Notes, 2012, Sangha Outreach, 2012)

#### **e) Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy**

The Marin Interfaith Homeless Chaplaincy was founded in 1992 and renamed the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy (MISC) in 2005. When it started, its focus was to provide a spiritual presence on the streets of Marin. As the organization grew, it widened its focus to include activities of creative expression and in 2003 – 2005 published three volumes of poetry. In 2003 MISC moved into a storefront space in San Rafael where it created a sanctuary and art studios. In 2005 it had to close this space for financial reasons. Also, in 2005, it was taken under the auspices of Community Action Marin and refocused on a ministry of presence to the homeless community and on “street-level” interaction. At that time Reverend Paul Gaffney was hired as their sole chaplain. In 2007, the Marin Interfaith Council became the fiscal sponsors of MISC. On their website, they describe their practice of being present: (Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy, 2012)

**Being Present** – Homelessness can be scary and lonely. Often one of the most helpful things that we can do is slow down, stop, and listen. The Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy bears witness and offers support to those who are living life on the street.

People in transition often have nobody to simply bear witness to their situation. By being present to the reality that suffering exists in their lives, the Chaplaincy allows people to slow down and reflect on their situations. Through this process of reflection, people are able to experience the full range of their emotions and perhaps find some emotional release. (Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy, 2012)

## **Part III. Findings**

### **a) Paths to Street Chaplaincy**

The chaplains that I worked with did not all take the same path to street chaplaincy. For Kay and Carmen from the Faithful Fools, Thom, from the San Francisco Night Ministry, and Jana, from Jana Drakka Community Services, working with the people in the homeless community seems to be a natural transition from what they had done in the earlier parts of their lives. Lyle tells a slightly different story.

#### **Kay Jorgensen – Co-Founder of the Faithful Fools**

In college Kay majored in religion and theater and these two paths weave their way through the story of her life. She describes this in our interview in the following way:

It's like a thin coin – theater on one side and religion on the other, – but it's twirling around so fast, like a dervish, that the two sides are indistinguishable. This whole coin is my life.

After she graduated, she married and was living in Indiana. During that time she saw a performance by the French mime, Marcel Marceau, and she described her reaction as “a conversion experience.” She said, “I was never the same afterward.” (Woo, 2001) She studied mime, and started a children's theater called Fantasia Folk. In 1974 she moved back to Minnesota and was befriended by the late Robert Lehman, a Unitarian Universalist minister who introduced her to UU thought. She also became a member of an outdoor theatrical group. It was during this time Osgard, her clown, began to emerge. Kay says about Osgard, “You don't create your clown. You find her.”

In the 1980s she brought a street theater group to San Francisco, and during that time enrolled at Starr King, a Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkley where she received her master's of divinity in 1987. Her master's degree project was a performance by her clown, Osgood. She moved back to Minneapolis, became a minister, and then in 1995 moved back to San Francisco and started attending the First Unitarian Universalist Society where in 1999 she was appointed the church's Social Justice Minister. In Woo's article, she says:

More and more I was realizing that the streets were calling to me. This time they were calling me to do ministering, where last time it had been theater performances. I had a vision of ministering in the streets." (Woo, 2001)

It was also during this time that she met Carmen Barsody and together they envisioned the work of the Faithful Fools.

### **Sister Carmen Barsody - Co-Founder of the Faithful Fools**

Carmen was not available for this part of our interview. Fortunately she had written an autobiography for her Jubilee Celebration, which can be found at

[http://livingfranciscan.blogspot.com/2009\\_02\\_01\\_archive.html](http://livingfranciscan.blogspot.com/2009_02_01_archive.html)

Carmen, in her autobiography, described the kind of relationship that was nurtured while she was growing up and attending college:

We learned of a God who lived among us and was present in the Assembly as well as in the bread and wine. We were taught that Jesus was our brother and he wanted us to live as he lived. God was Love. As I went on to study at the College of St. Catherine, the same spirit and theology continued to be nurtured. We were encouraged to trust our own "authority" and bring it into active dialogue with the external authorities. (Barsody, 2009)

In 1983 she applied and was accepted as a Lay Volunteer with the Franciscan Sisters in Maracay, Venezuela where she planned to work with youth and music. There she realized that she wanted to join the Franciscan Community, become a Franciscan Sister, and work with poor and marginalized people. In 1984, she returned to the United States, entered the Novitiate where she began her in-depth study, volunteered at a shelter, and ministered within a predominantly Hispanic Community. She returned to Nicaragua in 1990 and continued working in the poor neighborhoods. She says in the article by Woo:

It was working with whatever came to you that day, and what it came down to was the fact that the greatest thing you did was whatever you could do with the person at that moment. (Woo, 2001)

On a visit back to San Francisco, she met Kay, and they found that they had a similar vision, that of living with people on the edge and bringing the quality of presence and respect that she had practiced in Nicaragua.

### **Alex Darr – Outreach Minister of the Faithful Fools**

Alex shared this story with me during our interview:

This is a big part of the answer to your question for me about how I got drawn into street ministry. It began when I was living across the street from a church on the hill, and there was a guy on the street. We developed a relationship by me passing by and him asking for money. At one point I hired him to help me build shelves for my apartment. Then, I had a month between jobs, and I ran into him, and he asked me for some money to buy heroin. He was feeling really horrible and yelling at all the cars that came by, and I could give him the ten dollars, but I knew that would only last for a few hours, and he would be at it again. Nobody was benefitting from him screaming at the cars. So, I just stood and talked with him for about an hour. I asked him what we could do to make it work better for him. I just had to listen and listen. “Why don’t you eat at St Anthony’s?” “Oh, I hate the food there. Beggars can be

choosers too.” “What about your welfare check? What happens to that?” “I tried to save it one month, but then it got stolen and all of the good will that I would have had from partying with my buddies at the beginning of the month, which is what I usually do, wasn’t available that month . . .” We went on and on. Finally we came up with a plan that I would meet with him every morning and bring him ten dollars of his own money so that he would start his day with enough money to feed his addiction so he wouldn’t be dope-sick. So we started there, but within a few days we moved to a different plan because he needed the money. Before long, I was just with him every day. So it was that relationship and my relationship here [at the Faithful Fools] with Kay and Carmen and the fun things that we do here that made it clear that this was something that I could do, that I wanted to do, and it was something I could benefit from. It is purely about relationship. That is what motivated it.

### **Rev. Lyle J Beckman – Night Minister with the San Francisco Night Ministry**

During our interview, Lyle told his story with great humor, continually chuckling at himself. He grew up in the Midwest as a “good” Lutheran and knew at the age of thirteen that he eventually would go to seminary. When he finished seminary, he describes the following conversation he had with God and what happened next:

[I told God] I want to be a pastor of a suburban congregation, not too small town and not rural. Not too urban, not too complicated, no big cities, no people of color, no languages, no issues, no drama. Just a plain and simple parish. I said this to God. I am negotiating with God. I am just plain, white bread, Middle America, and I just want to go with the flow. That is where my gifts are . . . I had maybe a handful of friends who were Afro-American. I was so clueless. I don’t think I had seen anybody sleep on the streets . . . the last place I expected to end up in ministry, right after graduation was a two-point parish, that is two congregations. That is the other thing I told God, no two-point parishes. It was a two-point parish in Union City and North Bergen, New Jersey. Union City was like Little Havana; it had the third largest Cuban population of any city in the world after Havana and Miami. North Bergen was a working class community, mostly Eastern Europeans.

When he left that two-point parish, after nine years, he said, “I learned so much, saw so much. . . This is when I began to understand that I really had to start paying attention to things that I had no clue about.”

His next parish was in Hartford Connecticut in the middle of a very impoverished Puerto Rican community. His congregation was 99% white, and they wanted to invite a pastor who would help them open the doors of the church to the rest of the community. He relates how he was feeling during his interviews:

When we talked about what it might be like to open up the doors of the church, they said, “That would be lovely, Pastor.” But you know, they were lying. It wasn’t going to be lovely. They were scared to death, and so was I. Again, I felt this incredible call. I was drawn by God in some way. I really didn’t know why. There were times after I went there that I was afraid. I didn’t know anything about what I was doing.

Then, after he was hired, started many activities, which connected the two communities, and learned enough Spanish to lead a church service in Spanish, he talked about how his work had been redefined and how he got involved in street ministry:

My vocation is more in what I call in the grey area. It is not the edge; it is the undefined area. Not really helpless but almost. Not awful, but not quite right. I was beginning to see myself in Hartford having this real strong sense of a vocation to people who are struggling through life and thinking we ought to do more.

Street ministry didn’t happen until I came out to San Francisco to be a typical pastor of a small Lutheran congregation. But I was really taken by San Francisco because it is hard not to notice people who are on the streets, people begging, and the poor. In my first couple of months I used to spend time in the Tenderloin just walking around because I was fascinated by the neighborhood . . . I got to know the night minister at that time and asked him if I could join night ministry because I was really curious and quite frankly, I needed a little extra money. So that was my incentive to get involved in the ministry. But I

was delighted because so much of my ministry on the East Coast had prepared me not only with what we have to deal with every night, but it was part of the journey I had to follow.

Lyle is now a full time minister with the San Francisco Night Ministry and spends most of his working hours walking the streets of the Tenderloin.

### **Rev. Thom Longino – Associate Night Minister with the San Francisco Night Ministry**

Thom started our interview by saying that even before he went into seminary in 2000, he knew that his path to ministry was not going to be normal. He says this about himself:

My friends describe me as quirky but sweet. I know this about myself. I am a priest with purple hair . . . So I knew even before going into seminary that I wanted to do something in the prisons or on the streets. I think that it came from just sitting with some of my close friends at my church who had been diagnosed and lived with bipolar disorder.

When he got into seminary he joined the Faithful Fools and said that working with them gave him a framework to see what street ministry might look like, vocabulary and language to use, and valuable mentoring. After seminary, he completed Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) as a hospital chaplain, worked with Catholic Charities, and worked on Treasure Island with people as they were just coming out of the shelter system.

Thom says this about this about his work in street ministry:

For me, it is not just about me wanting to do this. But, it comes from my own vocation as somebody who has taken spiritual vows . . . Integrity means a lot to me. If I express a spiritual belief, I have to live my life according to that belief. Even though I follow Christ, I have a very liberal, if not interfaith, approach to being Christian.



[My work] comes up almost like being a monk on the streets. That is how I see myself spiritually; that is how I see my vocation, being a monk in the city, or in the country . . . to take religious vows to live my life as a brother or sister to all. I think that is what shapes my approach. That is what guides me to do what I do, to have a vocation to live my life, to be a brother to all creation and humanity.

### **Junsei Jana Drakka - Founder of Jana Drakka Community Services and Zenkei Sangha**

Jana Drakka was born as Elizabeth Ann Potts and grew up in a poor family in Scotland where she had to work as a teenager in bars and workingmen's clubs to help support her family. When she was sixteen, she started working with children who were on probation with the social work department and were getting in trouble with the police because they did not have enough to do. Her job for the next four summers was to organize activities to keep them occupied. When I asked her what got her started in street chaplaincy, she said, " That is when I feel like I started." According to an interview in The San Francisco Chronicle by Juston Berton, during this time she also started experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and she identified herself as a lesbian. In the next decade she studied as a Wiccan priest, changed her name to Jana Drakka, and worked as a clairvoyant and a healer. (Berton, 2012) Her instinct was to be of service, but she described it as not being easy.

In the early 1990s she became homeless as the result of a traumatic break up of an abusive relationship, and she was diagnosed with PTSD. During our interview, she describes this time of her life:

I was out drinking a lot, and I thought I was just going to die. [I had] no support system. My family was poor and didn't want anything to do

with me. There was no money. I called and called the San Francisco Zen Center. It was so difficult.

She said several times during the interview that she can connect with people in the homeless community because she is “street,” that is she has been there; she knows from the inside what it is like to live on the street.

Two events brought her to a Buddhist practice at the San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC). First, earlier in her life, she had studied with a Tibetan Buddhist teacher. This was her introduction to formal Buddhism. Second, she said that reading the book *Street Zen, The Life and Work of Issan Dorsey* by David Schneider radically shifted her vision of what she wanted to be and do. (Schneider, 2000) She moved into SFZC and lived there until 2008.

In 2004, SFZC was approached by the Mission Neighborhood Resource Center to host a meditation group at the Center, and Jana agreed to give it a try. This grew from one group of fifteen to the four groups she currently leads in various public places around the Tenderloin District. Then, various groups began calling on her to conduct memorial services, teach mindfulness and relaxation strategies, and offer pastoral counseling for grief and burnout. She moved out of SFZC in 2008, and founded Jana Drakka Community Services and the Zenkei Sangha (Berton, 2012; Colgan, 2012; Goodby, 2009)

## **b) What do the street chaplains do?**

After attending many activities and engaging in many conversations with the street chaplains, I compiled a list of what they do, and grouped the activities into five general categories and one fairly specific category. (#5) First, they work to **bridge the gap** between the homeless community and the general community. They also help **build healthy, life-affirming communities**. They provide **companionship** for people who live and work in the homeless community. They work with **the issues of mental illness and substance abuse**. One of the chaplains describes the way she uses the **Harm Reduction Model** to help people with substance abuse problems. Finally, they attend to issues that have **fallen through the cracks**. These categories are not mutually exclusive. In each category I have included at least one specific example, but from what I saw and experienced, I believe that all of the street chaplains I worked with to some degree were engaged in activities from all of the categories. (In the specific examples, I have changed the names of the clients.)

### **1) Bridging the Gap.**

There is a large gap between the homeless community and the general community, which is driven by fear, misperceptions, and a lack of direct relationships. The Faithful Fools and the San Francisco Night Ministers have made it part of their mission to bridge this gap in two different ways.

One of the foundational activities the Faithful Fools is a one-day street retreat which they describe on their website:

They [the street retreats] offer an opportunity for people to bear witness to their own experience and life story as it relates with what they encounter as they spend a day walking the streets of the Tenderloin.

. . . Most people enter into the street retreat not knowing what they will encounter, but with a lot of apprehension about what it will be. From that place of not knowing, we ask people to allow themselves to discover what there is for them to know. This makes it possible for us to begin to “discover on the streets our common humanity,” as we say in our mission statement. Myths are shattered. Our own stories are revealed to us. We begin to see the light, courage, strength and creativity in the people we encounter. (Faithful Fools Street Ministry, Street Retreats, 2012.)

The retreat starts with a group meeting where the participants sing, reflect on their intentions for the day, express concerns, and get instructions. When I participated, we were told to just walk around the Tenderloin District and stay aware of our thoughts, projections, emotions, and physical reactions. We did not have to talk to anybody if we were uncomfortable. If we wanted to, we could eat lunch at one of the two big soup kitchens in the area. We were guided to walk with a group of phrases to help us focus our attention:

What holds me separate?  
What keeps me separated?  
As I walk the streets-  
What still connects me?

We reconvened at the Faithful Fools’ building five hours later and participated in a period of reflection and a meal.

Several people have written articles about their experiences on one of the Faithful Fools street retreats. Rayna Hamre, Director of Religious Education at Orange Coast

Unitarian Church, described her reaction:

Our re-entry back into the middle class world was aided by a hot cup of tea and a chance to share with each other what we saw and how we felt. What I came away with, I realized once I was back in my cozy, clean hotel, dressed in dry clothes and warm socks, was how tough and resilient the homeless are just to make it through the day. I was exhausted spending one day in their world, dealing with the wet and the cold, navigating meal programs, trying to find a place to be, to just to sit or stand, that was dry. The Faithful Fools Street Retreat gave me a whole new appreciation for owning an umbrella, having six dollars in my pocket, and being able to slip on a pair of dry shoes at the end of the day (Hamre, 2011)

The Faithful Fools also offer four and seven day street retreats. Gillian Siple describes one of her experiences during her seven-day retreat in 2010:

I prepared myself mentally before the retreat for a painful view of suffering, social oppression, and my own privilege. I found instead abundance, generosity, and the goodness of humanity.

. . . On my first day, I met a man named Thomas who was homeless. I asked Thomas where I could find a soup kitchen in the area. "While there are no soup kitchens close by," he said as he reached into his plastic bag, "I can offer you this rice if you are hungry." From the little surplus that Thomas had, his offer to me came from a place of abundance. This first act of generosity set the tone for my experience of the retreat. (Siple, 2010)

What surprised me during my one-day street retreat were the number of people that I talked to and the depth of our conversations. I met Diane, and William while I walked, and talked for at least a half an hour with each one. Diane lives in a SRO, and William sleeps on the streets. I have not forgotten Diane's desire to not use methamphetamines, the confusing stories about her Vietnam War experiences, her arrests, and her relationships with men. Nor have I forgotten William's haunting

comment when I asked him why he continues using cocaine, and he responded by saying, “It’s so bad, and it’s so good. I just can’t make myself walk away from it.” These two were no longer strangers to me; they let me in to see their humanity.

During our interview, Carmen made this comment about “knowing” a person:

When you know a person by name, you know that person differently. You invest yourself differently. You care differently . . . People who do street retreats in the Tenderloin say that they listen differently to what the media says. They know differently what the media or authorities are saying to them.

People come from all over the United States to participate in the Faithful Fools street retreats, and since 1998, over 4000 have walked the streets of the Tenderloin on either one, four, or seven-day retreats. (Interview with J. Hider, 2012)

The San Francisco Night Ministry bridges the gap in a different way. While the major part of the Night Ministers’ job is to provide a pastoral presence on the streets at night, they have historical and current roots with several congregations within the San Francisco area. On most Sunday mornings they attend services, give sermons, and lead adult forums.

During our interview, Lyle expressed why it is so important for the people of these congregations to “know” the people who live and work in the homeless community. He expresses this by saying:

We also need the experience of listening to the stories of the people who are hurt or in pain or are struggling to make us compassionate and loving and caring . . . People that are not hurting so much, who are comfortable and pretty sure that tomorrow they are going to have a roof

over their head and plate in front of them full of food need to hear about our experiences in the streets. We need to have them get to know people who go through the garbage cans, stand in the food kitchen lines, and who may have been horribly abused. We need to have people talk to each other and say, "I never knew that people could have experienced what you have experienced," and to learn and grow from it like I had to.

That is probably one of the roles that night ministry plays, to be advocates for the people that we serve and also help the congregations understand that we are all in this together. So we become a bridge . . . We say we are the Church's night shift. If they [the congregations] want us out there, they need to support us and pray for us too. I think we have a valuable role helping the congregations that support us understand the people that we serve, and how we are all connected in some way.

Thom adds:

Also, when we have faith communities walk out with us, they find their own voice around issues of poverty and homelessness. As such, we don't advocate [for people in the homeless community,] but help empower other people to advocate.

## **2) Building Healthy Life-Affirming Communities**

Supporting community and building relationships is a second category of activities that the street chaplains engage in. Building life-affirming communities is about fostering relationships where people can come to know each other's aspirations and concerns. It is creating the ground where people can listen to each other, begin to trust each other, and help each other. It means being creative together. It also means cultivating spaces where people, together, can clarify and celebrate the spiritual and/or religious parts of their lives. It is a place where people can worship together.

The Faithfull Fools have several weekly activities that are open to anyone who would like to attend. People come from all walks of life and it is impossible to tell who lives on

the streets, who is living in a shelter, and who drives in from an upscale community in Marin. The whole idea is to confuse the boundaries, and focus, not on a person's life circumstances, but on connections and relationships.

There are yoga classes, a Bible study group, two writing groups, and an improvisation acting class. They have a meditation room and meditation practice sessions five times a week. Each month they have a gathering of poets and a movie night. Art is an important part of their community building. They use their walls as an art gallery; everything is created by the community members. They have also published four anthologies of poetry. They see art as a powerful way to cross the boundaries of economics, prejudice and fear of the unknown.

On their website they make the following comments:

Many forms of art have been central to the Faithful Fools work since we began. Creativity and play are ways to unite people as we seek to reach across our separations. The Fools work on the streets has inspired seasoned and emerging artists to create new work. We have hosted numerous exhibits, performances and workshops. Our space is also open to classes from local universities, high schools, churches and seminaries.

We encourage individuals to create the projects that become our programs. No distinctions are made between the homeless and the professional. (Who may be one in the same!) People come and people go. Some stay longer than others. What remains is a tapestry of fantastic projects and incredible energy that leads us to a place we call home. (Faithful Fools 2012, Artist's collaborative)

The Fools, as they call themselves, also create community celebrations. I attended a baby shower for a couple that had worked with them for years. After twenty-five years of addiction, Liz, with the help of the Fools, had from moved away from drugs and was



introduced to meditation. She and her husband, Philip, are expecting their first child. The celebration included people from all parts of their life. We sang; we had a great meal, and there were joyful tears. Every one of the twenty-plus people who attended was part of the community that would become the new baby's family.

The San Francisco Night Ministry builds community by offering what they call the Open Cathedral two times a week. It is place where anyone can come to worship, get together with friends, and have a meal. The one I attended takes place in a side street adjacent to the San Francisco Civic Center, which is an area where many people in the homeless community congregate. The second is located close to a subway station in the Mission District. These gatherings are non-denominational. Several of the night ministers attend, and after the service they are available for private conversation, prayer, and pastoral counseling. To give a flavor of this event, I would like to share some of my notes from the afternoon I attended:

When I arrived at Civic Center Open Cathedral, there were twenty-five people scattered around. More drifted in and by the middle of the service I counted about sixty people. In some instances, it was not easy to tell who was from the homeless community and who was not. There were quite a few, though, who looked like they spend their nights sleeping on the streets and had to carry all of their possessions with them. There were also a few tourists who wandered by and ended up staying. There were three night ministers who wore white collars with their black shirts. People did not sit in tidy church-like rows. I was leaning against a van with three other people. Many were scattered around in beach chairs. There were a couple of folks in wheel chairs, and few people were outside the main group, some on blankets and others just leaning against a wall. It was cold, and a knife-like wind was whipping around our group.

We started with Prayers of the People where everyone was invited to share prayer requests. One person prayed for the people of Iran. Another prayed for his sister. Eric, the man standing next to me,

announced that it was his birthday. He said to pray for him because he wants to get off the [crack] pipe. Reverend Monique, who was the Night Minister leading the service, was walking through the crowd and quietly talking to different people. She said, "If you don't want to say your prayer out loud in front of the group, tell one of us." One man, who was in a wheel chair and looked pretty ragged, stood and talked. He was impossible to understand. Monique stood next to him, so warm and friendly, and asked us to notice that he was standing, the first time that had happened in years. Monique understood what he was saying and translated. We stood in a circle and held hands. The hands on both sides of me were warm.

We celebrated the Eucharist, that is, took communion. We were still in our circle, and Reverend Thom came around tearing off pieces of bread from a very large loaf. One of the other Night Ministers followed with a chalice of grape juice and dunked the bread in. Then different people from the group got up and sang to us. What I noticed was the inclusiveness of the circle. No one was too tattered, intoxicated, angry, or disturbed to be left out.

The Night Ministers also have a virtual on-line presence through what they call Sacred Space. It is a Facebook congregation of about five hundred people who offer prayers for each other. In addition, they have a Tuesday night gathering, which is a Bible Study group for people who are generally connected with one of the Open Cathedrals.

One of ways that Jana Drakka builds community is with her public meditation groups. One meets at the Glide Memorial Church; two meet at a local gated park, and the final one, the Q-Sangha, meets at the Metropolitan Community Church in the Castro District. These groups are open to anyone interested in learning about meditation and Buddhist teachings and practices. Several of the people who attend these groups are students of Jana's, and when I was there, they were preparing for Jukai, which is a ceremony of receiving Buddhist precepts. According to Jana, approximately one half of the people who attend her meditation groups used to live on the street but now have places in

SROs. Others live in their cars or move from place to place sleeping on people's couches. Some live in nearby shelters.

Two of Jana's groups I attended took place in Howard Langton Community Garden, a small oasis of plants, chickens, a couple of turtles, and lots of spaces for small groups to meet. The meditation groups gather in a corner right next to the street, and one of the days I was there, a lively conversation from a group of about six men who appeared somewhat intoxicated, accompanied our meditation. Jana invited us to just be present to everything in our environment. A young woman, who was visiting the garden, asked if she could join us and stayed after to ask questions. When arrived, I was welcomed with great heartfulness. On that afternoon, Jana taught about extending loving kindness to ourselves.

In my experience of the five groups I visited, people spoke freely about the circumstances of their lives. Again, as in the Night Ministers' Open Cathedral, whoever showed up was welcomed and kindness was extended to everyone.

Paul Gaffney from the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy fosters community with the weekly Wellness Gatherings, which I described extensively in the introduction. During the two that I attended, I saw people relaxing together, sharing personal stories, and settling disagreements. After each Wellness Gathering the attendees are invited to an evening meal.

Another way that the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy builds community is through their Monthly Summer Supper Series. On their website they describe one of these evenings:

With approximately 100 people in attendance at each gathering, members of nearly a dozen different faith communities gathered to break bread and share fellowship with folks from the Street Community. The meals were prepared and served tableside by volunteers from the Street Community. Sidewalk Sideshow Productions hosted an open-mic during each dinner. We look forward to seeing you there! (Marin Interfaith Chaplaincy, Current Projects and events, 2012)

### **3) Companionship**

While the first two categories of what the street ministers do are about connecting through community, this third category is about building one-on-one relationships through companionship. Craig Rennebohm, who founded the Mental Health Chaplaincy in Seattle, WA, and wrote *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*, describes companionship in the following way:

Companionship, in this sense of acting in collaboration with the Spirit, is not a task or assignment. It is a calling rooted in our common humanity, arising out an inherent care and concern for one another. The aim is not to fix things; it is simply to be together, to be present for one another. Companionship is an unfolding and growing relationship, a way of sharing the world together. (Rennebohm, 2008. p. 72)

In his work on the streets of Seattle, Rennebohm describes companionship as having four main components: Offering Hospitality, Walking Side by Side, Listening, and Accompanying. (Rennebohm, 2008. p. 72 – 81) It is my impression that these four activities are deeply integrated into the everyday activities of the street chaplains I worked with

The Faithful Fools have made companionship, or what they call accompaniment, the second of their main activities. They describe accompaniment as helping a person get something done. It starts with careful listening. Carmen puts it this way:

When we listen deeply at an individual level, what the person wants begins to show up. We can help a person articulate what he/she wants, but we have to get out of the way and leave behind our own agendas.

From the place of deep listening that Carmen describes, it may become clear that there is some action to take. It can be as simple as helping someone fill out an SSI form; it can mean attending weekly Narcotic Anonymous meetings with a person, or it can be watching someone's possessions while he/she is standing in a food line. In our interview Carmen gave a sense of how this might work:

Doorbell or phone. It can come from many directions. Someone might call and say, "We have extra food; can I bring it down." Then the doorbell rings, and someone requests help, by saying, "I have an appointment tomorrow." We might have a whole bunch of appointments, but we do this quick assessment. We may have to shift things around. "Can somebody do this appointment?" "Do you need me to go get you up at six am for the appointment?" Each thing arranges our day.

Accompaniment may be a one-time event, or it may evolve into a relationship that lasts a lot longer. Carmen describes one man with a severe mental illness that she and Kay have been accompanying for twelve years. They met him as a clean-cut well-dressed young student who had just dropped out of college. As his illness progressed, they helped him apply for social security and became his payee. When his mother died, they aided in organizing a special needs trust and building a relationship with his family. Now, after twelve years, his family wants him to visit, and Carmen is helping with the

arrangements. During our interview her phone rang, and she had to leave early to meet with him and a DMV official to get him an ID so they can purchase plane tickets. She left with this comment. “That is why we call ourselves jugglers. We just have to keep the balls in motion.”

The Night Ministers practice companionship with their presence on the streets by listening, and by what Rennebohm calls, walking side by side. He says that when we walk side by side, “We look out at the world and share what we see, respectful of each other’s views.” (Rennebohm, 2008, p.73) To walk side by side means to literally and figuratively walk or sit beside the person we are companioning. This stance makes it clear that fundamentally we are equals; neither is more important or powerful than the other. During our interview, Lyle describes whom the Night Ministers work with and what they do as they walk the streets at night:

Many of whom we serve at night are people who are on the streets, and really for us, we are technically there for every one. We run into people in the bars and clubs and coffeehouses who are middle class folks. We have a great relationship with a lot of people who work at night and don’t have their own daytime spiritual place or support groups. We offer a lot of prayers and blessings and conversations around faith. We also are not connected to any one [faith tradition] even though we have a Christian background. What we do is present the Christian Church in some way to folks at night and because we wear clerical collars, we are pegged as Christians right away. But I think a lot of people are drawn to us because they know we are people they can talk to. I am thinking that most of our folks don’t really care that we are not connected with a denomination or a church body. We are a non-profit, separate from any specific belief system or series of doctrines or rules or laws. I think that makes us a little more available to a lot of people. We have a number of callers who are Buddhist. We have callers who are pagans, atheists, and Satanists. There are many people who would say they are agnostic. They are not calling us for religious reasons, and they want to talk about relationships, their jobs, or politics. They want to talk about anything but religion. And that is OK. It is a ministry of presence . . . It is

there as a presence and an opportunity for folks to connect with us in any way that they want to.

Thom adds:

I think a key component to add to what Lyle said is the importance of just showing up again and again and being seen in places where clergy wouldn't be expected, like the bars, like the street corners, like the red-light districts. We are there just to build those relationships and to build the trust.

I walked two times with Thom and was able to get some sense of what he does. He and Lyle describe their pace as a slow, alert saunter. It is a walk that says, "I am available; I am not pushy." Thom called it a meditation walk. When I asked how they make their first connection with someone, Lyle and Thom both agreed that they look for eye contact. If the look is returned and sustained; then, they start a conversation with pleasantries, such as, "It's good that the rain has stopped" or "A lot of people up tonight." Often that small opening will lead to a conversation of something that the person is struggling with.

Both nights I walked, Thom had some specific places he wanted to visit and people he wanted to catch up with. Those conversations started with every-day questions. "How is your dog?" "Is your roommate finally doing the dishes?" I heard reports of people gaining some control of their alcohol consumption, of people needing money, and of people having relationship problems. Thom rarely offered advice; he generally stood or sat beside a person and just listened. These meetings were not about problem solving, but were about connection, friendship, and about letting a person talk about what was happening in his/her life. The second time I went out with Thom, around 1:30 am we visited one man that Thom talks with every time he goes out. This time the meeting

involved two intense conversations. Jimmy, who lives in a SRO and is diagnosed as bipolar, was dealing with deeply spiritual questions, such as, "Is evil winning?" "Has the devil won the battle?" This was a continuation of a conversation that Jimmy and Thom were having the night before. Jimmy was waiting for another younger man who drives around in a new car, buys hamburgers, and hands them out to people on the streets. Jimmy said the guy was nice but pretty "messed up" and that he needs help. When the young man arrived with the hamburgers, Thom listened a long time to his desperation and anxiety. The young man said, "I do bad things," and "I need help." Thom did not say a lot. Again, his was a presence of careful listening. What Thom did say was about God's spirit having the young man's back, and he gave the young man his card, told him about the crisis phone line, and invited him to the next Open Cathedral. This conversation could lead no place, or it could lead to a relationship. Thom describes this in the following quote:

[To describe my job,] I would use the parable of the Sower. In that story, the sower goes out and scatters seeds. Sometimes they take root; sometimes they don't. So, for me I see what we do as not trying to change people, but to sort of provide and nurture that seed of hope. Sometimes it comes from just the conversation, the listening, letting people sort out their own fears, their own anxieties, and helping them find their own hope. I think that is at least a part of what we do.

In a conversation we had later, Thom added the following to clarify how he sees his role on the streets:

Recently in a discussion regarding predestination at a Lutheran seminar, a student asked me if these conversations come up for me in the streets? Yes, they do. I have people who I talk with who are concerned about the destiny of their souls. It gave me some clarity as to how I see myself as a minister on the streets. I see my role in part as to try to be a patient source of friendship, grace and healing. I like to look at the root of the word "salvation," which is "salve," a healing



balm or ointment. It is part of my role to be a healing presence through listening, conversation, and gentle nudging.

#### **4) Attending to Mental Health and Substance Abuse Issues**

The issues of mental illness and substance abuse are very real to street chaplains. In his book, *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*, Craig Rennebohm, describes Stirling, Terry, and Jerry. In the book, all three are homeless and suffering from an acute phase of their mental illnesses. Sterling surrounds himself with bags of garbage to protect himself from evil. (Rennebohm, 2008 p.3). Terri experiences periods of deep depression where she cannot take care of herself. (Rennebohm, 2008 p.9). Jerry manages to get himself banned from every shelter because of his aggressive and chaotic behavior. (Rennebohm, 2008 p.19)

All of the street chaplains I worked with describe many encounters with people in the homeless community who were experiencing severe and recurring episodes with mental illness, substance abuse, or both. Carmen from the Faithful Fools talked about Samuel, the young man who experienced a psychotic break in his early twenties and has worked with the Faithful Fools for twelve years. Thom, the Night Minister, checks in with Jimmy, who describes himself as bipolar and an alcoholic. Jana Drakka described a member of the Q-Sangha coming to a meditation group “falling-down drunk” two weeks in a row. I met Jose at the Faithful Fools. He was buried in filthy clothes and ranting; he screamed at me to get away from him and slammed a door in my face.

A fact sheet from the Homeless Resource Center reported a series of statistics from information collected from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s

June 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress. In this survey, people living on the streets, living in transitional housing programs, or living in shelters are counted as “homeless.” According to the collected data, the one night that they did the count in January 2010, 407,966 individuals were homeless. They also reported that from October 2009 – September 2010, 1,593,150 individuals experienced homelessness. On the night that the data was collected in January, 2010, 26.2% of all *sheltered* persons who were homeless had a severe mental illness and 34.7% of all *sheltered* adults who were homeless had chronic substance issues. (Paquette, 2010)

These numbers do not seem to include people who were sleeping on the streets, in parks, on all night subways, buses, or trains, or in canyons. When I did a ride-along with the San Diego Police Department’s Homeless Outreach Team, Sergeant Rick Schnell, the officer in charge of the team, estimated that the number of homeless *unsheltered* individuals with mental health or substance abuse issues in San Diego is significantly higher.

The street chaplains cannot do their work without taking into account that many of the people they encounter will be either in a phase of mental illness, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or both. One very important role that a street chaplain plays is what Paget and McCormack in their book, *The Work of the Chaplain*, call the role of the “Intercessor.” (Paget & McCormack, 2006, p 23-26) This is the job of being a liaison between an individual and the various available community services, including hospitals, mental and physical health clinics, organizations running group support meetings such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, and shelters that can accommodate people who are intoxicated or under the influence of drugs. They

know where there are special facilities for teenagers, and women with children. In the role of liaison, street chaplains educate themselves in how the system of services works in their community. They know the hours and rules of the shelters, and they have connections with caseworkers. They have a relationship with the local police department. They know whom to call if there is a question about benefits. If a person on the streets is ready to consider more permanent shelter, the chaplain will know which services offer transitional housing programs. These relationships are an absolute necessity for any chaplain working on the streets.

## **5) Working with Harm Reduction**

When I interviewed Jana Drakka, she spent quite a bit of time talking about the Harm Reduction Model of working with people who have substance abuse problems. Also, when I did a ride-along with the San Diego Homeless Outreach Team, the police officers had an animated discussion about the pros and cons of Harm Reduction. In addition, several of the shelters and transitional housing projects in San Francisco and San Diego use this model. In fact, in our interview, Jana said, “If you have no knowledge of Harm Reduction, you are worse than useless on the streets . . . One cannot survive on the streets without Harm Reduction training.” She has attended several training courses learning how use the steps of Harm Reduction. Although she is the only one of the seven chaplains I worked with who talked about this model, I think it is worth describing it in some detail because inherently it seems to focus on the issues of substance abuse with intelligence and compassion,

According to the Harm Reduction Coalition, “Harm Reduction is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use.” (Harm Reduction Coalition, 2012) The programs are structured to meet people where they are in their use/abuse of drugs and/or alcohol. A person is not barred from joining a program if he/she is drinking or using drugs. There are strategies to work with each person wherever he/she is on the continuum of use. One person might need clean needles; another might need a support group and a sponsor, and a third might have relapsed and need medical attention. The Harm Reduction model also acknowledges that there are some ways of using drugs and alcohol that are safer than others. Harm Reduction programs recognize the complex causes and conditions that brought a person to a place where he or she started to use drugs or alcohol in a way that causes harm.

There is a lot of on-line information about Harm Reduction, including current research studies that discuss how it works and its efficacy in dealing with addiction issues. In this paper, I only want to describe the part of the model that defines the stages of change and how these stages fit into Jana’s work. The stages are:

**Precontemplation** - a person is not even thinking about making a change

**Contemplation** - a person has started thinking that making a change might be a good idea and is perhaps starting to make plans about how to implement those changes

**Preparation/Action** - a person is taking concrete steps, which will lead to changing the behavior

**Maintenance** - a person maintains the change in the behavior through continued effort

**Termination** - the change is now ingrained and the person no longer has to make great efforts to maintain the change

**Recycling** - a person returns from any given stage to an earlier stage (HAMS: Harm Reduction for Alcohol. Chapter V: The States of Change Model, 2012)

From what I observed and what Jana said in our interview, it seems that she uses these stages in several ways. First, she advises that one has to listen carefully to figure out what stage a person is in. If a person says he is using methamphetamines, and she asks, "How is that working out for you?" and the person says, "No problems here," and walks away, that implies that the person is in the pre-contemplation stage. Jana says that all she can do at this point is to check back in with that person to make sure he/she is safe. That is one job of all of the street chaplains, to keep checking in.

On the other hand, if the person is in the contemplation stage, his/her answer might be something like, "I do have to stop drinking, but you know, I have friends to hang out with and that's what we do, get drunk together." Jana calls this a statement of ambivalence, and this is where she actively helps a person plan to take some action. At this point she is taking on the "Intercessor" role of the chaplain. If the person wants to get into a detox program, she might use one of her contacts to assess him to see if he qualifies. If he needs to stop sleeping on the streets, she might use another contact. Her chaplaincy work in this capacity is to advise and help a person make appropriate contacts.

## **6) Working "Between the Cracks"**

"The "cracks" are those places where there is a need, someone is in some distress, or something is missing, but there is no protocol or system in place to notice or take care

of the problem. Much of what the street chaplains do is about attending to people who have fallen through the cracks. For example, the Night Ministers offer the Open Cathedral for people who are generally not welcome in most churches. They walk the streets and maintain the crisis phone line at night when all other facilities are closed. The Faithful Fools give people a place to be creative and wall-space where a homeless artist can hang his/her work. Jana Drakka provides places in a garden where people can learn to calm themselves through meditation. The street chaplains, because they are in all of the corners and spaces of the homeless community, are often called on to attend to problems or life-issues that are missed by other agencies or institutions.

One of the cracks appears when a person is no longer in a position to get services. For example, in our interview, Alex described a situation he had recently encountered. James, a homeless friend of the Faithful Fools, was getting evicted from a hotel that is part of a transitional housing program. He has a caseworker that works specifically with the residents of that facility. When James had to leave the building, he could no longer receive the services offered in that program. Alex said, "I can keep working with him. We just follow the pathway, back and forth."

Carmen adds:

It is like "walking with" people . . . The fool is the space between. We are not the social worker; we are not the banker. We are a conduit of relationships. We are not working with somebody and saying our job is to get you into housing and once he is housed, our relationship ends. We are simply in relationship with no end to it.

So, we can see a person through many places and come to know in a depth that a [social worker, health clinician, mental health worker] who only has one hour or one month with someone would not be able to experience . . . We can also find ourselves in relationship with parents

or others that are burdened with historical emotional pain that makes it difficult for them to trust or become involved in a relationship. So, often we help bring together [a family] and facilitate a relationship. This may be when the person is in a healthy place. Then, there may be a fall, a relapse. At that point we can stay steady, just stay with the person.

It is not about judging though because many counselors have a caseload of sixty to seventy-five people. Their organization doesn't provide a situation where they get up at 6:30 am to go find someone on the steps to make sure that he/she gets to an appointment. That's where the street retreat [comes in] for us . . . These are people who care enough to go to those in-between places that other people can't. So it is often as simple as saying, do street retreats and cultivate greater care. We simply want people to care about each other.

A second area that needs attention opens up when someone dies on the street or in a single room occupancy hotel. (SRO) Both Jana Drakka and Paul Gaffney conduct memorial services in their respective communities. Street Chaplains have to be prepared to lead ceremonies that are in resonance with the faith tradition of whomever the ceremony is for, be it Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Pagan, or atheist. In an extensive article for the Mission Local Newsletter, Nina Goodby writes about a memorial service she attended that was conducted by Jana Drakka:

She [Jana Drakka] placed an incense bowl, a candle, and flowers from the corner bodega on a small table at the front of the room. Metal chairs were folded out across the linoleum in short, neat rows. Drakka sorted through a faded black folder containing the Kaddish, and various non-denominational prayers. "Sometimes only two people come. We'll see," she said, pulling out Psalm 23. "Reyna was a Baptist."

Over a dozen people showed up. Drakka lead the room in hearty voice through three verses of *Amazing Grace*. After inviting those present to drop a bit of incense onto burning charcoal, mourners stood one by one, remembering Reyna's cooking and love of bingo. "She gave a lot more than she ever got back," said one mourner. Through prayer, Drakka sent Reyna off, "into deep silence, carried away by the great ocean of birth and death. (Goodby, 2009)

Paul Gaffney from the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy conducts memorial services and each year leads a Memorial Procession. This is an opportunity for the homeless community to connect with the general community and bear witness together to the harsh realities of living on the streets. In this event they read a list of all those who died in the past year and pledge that they will not be forgotten. They follow this with a Celebration of Life, which is organized by the street community.

Another crack is opened by the fact that people who live on the streets, in shelters, or in SROs do not always have a way to get their concerns out to the authorities or to the general public. Street chaplains have a respected voice and can speak up for homeless community members who may not be heard on their own. They also use this voice when they are interviewed by members of the local media. These “human interest” stories reach many people and help to bridge that gap between the homeless community and the general community.

In summary, the job of the street chaplains is multi – layered. They work with communities and individuals. Their work is grounded in welcoming whomever comes their way, listening, staying present, showing up again and again, not-judging, and helping out when it is appropriate.

### **c) Lessons from the streets**

I asked the street chaplains two final questions: “How have you changed? What does working with the people in the street community have to teach us?” Although I asked



these two questions separately, the chaplains answered them as if they were one question. In general, I let the chaplains answer the questions in their own words. (By the time I asked this question in our interview, Carmen from the Faithful Fools had left for an appointment. Also, Paul Gaffney was not available for an interview.)

Kay – Faithful Fools:

It is a fulfillment of something that has been in my future from wherever I have been, and I have another future right now. There is always a new future. . . And for me, it's true, things show up before you need them . . . The first three [years in San Francisco], I had a little office at the church because a colleague who was a minister there allowed that to happen. She gave me a space that Carmen talked about, a little room. Then I started meeting people literally on the curb . . . It was mostly was by City Hall which was being restored and people were lying on the steps. Something just wasn't right. That's when I made the decision to give up being a minister in a church, which I had been in Minneapolis, . . . when I decided to give that up and go on the streets was the beginning of the answer to this question. It's like all of the pieces came together.

Alex – Faithful Fools:

Well it is kind of a cliché. For me, I have learned a lot about love. It has helped me get in touch with my feelings of love and how to articulate them simply verbally and also in my life. I can see a very strong parallel between coming to work at the Faithful Fools and being in those difficult moments of love and care with the people that we encounter in this work, and to see my own ability to be in relationships with partners growing at the same time. [I have] a much better understanding of myself, and what it means to care for and to love somebody.

Lyle - San Francisco Night Ministers:

Everybody has a fascinating story. They are unique and wonderful. They are all children of God and worthy of our attention, love, caring and compassion. Even the people that drive me crazy; I also love them dearly. . . They don't all know each other but they know us and we know all of them and it is an incredible community. I think that gratefulness is my best answer. I am so grateful for having been called

to this ministry and for knowing these incredible people and their stories. It is humbling in so many ways to know that human life can change in an instant. I have a whole different view of the world and my life and my place in it. I am not at all the person I was when I was twenty-six and getting out of seminary and telling God where I should be because I knew better. I don't do that much at all. I am much more aware of what God is telling me. I like that a lot better. It takes a lot pressure off. I feel like I have learned so much about myself and the world from the people that we work with every night.

Thom – San Francisco Night Ministers:

I think one of the things that I have learned about myself in relationship to being on the street is just not to move through my own anxiety. Because I am not going to lie and say it is easy being out there every night . . . I am one of these people who in my past wanted to have the right thing to say or do at my fingertips or on the tip of my tongue. Working with Night Ministry and working with the Faithful Fools has always reminded me that there is no panacea; there is no cure-all. There are no magic words. There is no magic ritual. . . Sometimes it is okay to just say, "I don't know. Let me think about that, and I will get back to you in a couple days." Learning to trust the moment has been my reminder again and again. Learning to trust that if I have to say anything, it will come from deep within and will arise out of a conversation and out of a relationship I have developed with a person in that moment or perhaps over time.

Jana Drakka - Jana Drakka Community Services/ Zenkei Sangha

Jana started by saying:

The community on the streets is enormously strong. And kindness is most important. When people ask, what is the difference working with the "un-housed" people, I'll say, "They are so much more kind than other people."

Then she described one of the first times she met somebody who was, "medically speaking, psychotic." In this particular meeting, the participants started with a check-in and shared a little bit of what was going on in their lives. Jana described asking, "How are you doing," and one person started talking but was "not making one whit of sense." As Jana looked around

everyone was smiling and nodding encouragingly, although it was difficult to tell when to nod because nothing made sense. When the meeting was over and this person left first, Jana jumped up and said, "Alright, I have to ask you all something. We all know that, in the kindest way possible, that person wasn't making any sense . . . you acted like you were being told how to win a million dollars. Why?" They said, "Because we are homeless, we have to be good to each other. We have to be kind to each other. There is no one else to fall back on.

Jana adds:

They are so much more kind than other people with donations. At the Q-Sangha . . . there are two people who just got out of living in their car. Every week they come with donations. "Here, take this to the shelter." They go and get toothbrushes and then they put them in bags and give the bags to me take it to the shelters. I get more donations from poor people than from anybody else.

## **IV. The Journey Between the Zendo and the Streets**

During the last two years, the two strands of learning how to be a Buddhist chaplain and learning about the homeless community have intertwined, each informing the other at every turn and at many levels. Each course of the chaplaincy program at Upaya helped me cultivate a lens and a heart-space to take with me as I explored homeless communities of the Tenderloin District of San Francisco and of San Diego. Each time I walked the streets, talked to street chaplains, and interacted with people living in the homeless community, what I was learning and experiencing in the Zendo came vividly alive. What I would like to do in this section is to investigate what we, as Buddhist chaplains, can learn from spending time in the homeless community and what our practice as Buddhists can contribute to the work of a chaplain working in this community.

### **a) What can Buddhists chaplains learn from the homeless community?**

#### **1) Opportunities to know oneself and cultivate a meditation practice off the cushion**

First, by not turning away from places and situations that we usually avoid, we open ourselves to a genuine, real-life exploration of our consciousness. As Buddhist chaplains, we are committed to a meditation practice that is focused on meticulously exploring how our physical, emotional, and cognitive continuums work and interact. We start this practice with ourselves when we engage in our meditation practice on our meditation cushions. In his book, *Faces of Compassion*, Taigen Dan Leighton, a

Dharma teacher who leads the Ancient Dragon Gate sangha in Chicago, IL, describes this practice in the following quotation:

To study the reality of spiritual life means intimately studying one's self. This can lead to letting go of self-obsession and to the clear awareness of the sounds of all beings . . . But the first, indispensable step is actually to study this self of ours that we usually take for granted . . . We must carefully and deliberately track our own intentions, desires, conditioned habit patterns, and actual everyday conduct, and take responsibility for them. As we thoroughly study the workings of our self, but with compassion, we can let go of the self and awaken to the deeper reality of all things. (Leighton p. 189)

The work we are doing as chaplains takes us off our meditation cushions and out into places of social interaction, and we are trained to bring this same intensity of concentration and the same focus on deeply knowing ourselves to our workplaces.

Working as a street chaplain offers us an abundance of opportunity to explore aspects of our consciousness. When working in the homeless community, in every moment there is the possibility of finding ourselves in very unfamiliar places and encountering situations that are surprising, confusing, frightening, disturbing, and possibly even dangerous. Life does not move in expected ways. Yet, it is what it is. On one of my first trips with the Veterans for Peace, I remember feeling disgust tinged with fear when I met a young man who was slurring his words and could barely stand upright because he was so altered by some substance. I watched my condemning thoughts and felt the tightness of fear in my chest, while my vet friend, Jan, gave the young man a sleeping bag, helped him unzip it, and found him a sheltered place against a building. In another situation, we were talking to people camped out under a bridge and one woman started

yelling at us saying, “You are all fakes; you hand out sleeping bags and a Thanksgiving meal, but you would never invite me to sit at your table” From her outburst, which contained an uncomfortable truth, I felt in my gut the embodiment of shame and anger. By moving from the meditation cushion to the streets and then back to the meditation cushion, we learn to feel the emotions, body sensations and watch our thoughts, and at the same time hold steady and compassionate in our actions. Working in the homeless community is the perfect ground for this practice.

## **2) Opportunities to practice “Not-Knowing.”**

Second, we can experience the futility of thinking that we actually “know” what is going on. One of the common ways we enter a situation is arriving with some image of what we are going to find and a whole load of judgments about what is right and wrong, skillful and unskillful, and good or bad. Through our Buddhist meditation, we endeavor to set aside this “knowing” way of looking at the world and find ways that we can cultivate the practice of “not-knowing.” Not-Knowing is one of the three tenets of the Zen Peacemakers Order founded by Bernie Glassman. Glassman in his book, *Bearing Witness*, describes the essence of not-knowing:

We like to use the phrase “let it be.” The truth is, we have no choice. No matter what we think, we are never in control, and things will happen as they happen. But in a state of unknowing we actually live without attachments to preconceived ideas. There is no expectation of gain, no expectation of loss. There’s just what’s here right now.  
(Glassman, 1998 p. 68)

Working with not-knowing is not easy, and it takes intention and practice. The homeless community is a perfect place to explore the “knowing” mind, set it aside, and cultivate a way of being in a situation without trying to label, figure out, and/or judge what is

happening. It is perfect, because so much of the time it is impossible to actually know what is going on or what will happen next.

In the interview with Carmen from the Faithful Fools, she gave an example of being with “not-knowing.” A woman she had been companioning, or working with, had left her sober living group and started using drugs again. One of the other people working with the woman made the comment, “Nothing was gained.” In response, Carmen said:

How do we know that? The external behavior may not show progress, but we don't know what entered in those moments that precipitated her leaving. There may be something that is building a pathway. We can't know. So, we take that very seriously. We don't know what is happening within a person. We don't know what their ultimate path of healing needs to be . . . We can't get the whole picture.

Recently I had an experience, which made the value of not-knowing very apparent. I had gone downtown to visit Wendy, a sixty-year old woman with diabetes, who had set up her camp on a dirt patch right next to a downtown street. She sleeps in a beach chair completely wrapped in blankets, and a couple of days before we talked someone had stolen some of her bedding. I had a lot of stories about Wendy, the main one being how sad it was that she ended up living on the streets, and I wondered if I could help her get some housing. While we were chatting, I asked her how long she had been living on the streets and, to tell the truth, I was expecting some sad story. She said, “This time a year and a half. I was in a place, but I couldn't take it. I wanted to be back outside.” My image of “poor” Wendy began to fall apart. I asked myself, how could she possibly choose sleeping on the streets instead of having housing? Here, from my notes, is the surprising set of events that happened next:

As we were talking, a friend of Wendy's, who was also living on the streets, came by and they had a long chat about all kinds of street stuff. While they were talking, another woman came by with a big styrofoam container and asked Wendy if she wanted some delicious smelling roasted chicken, and potato salad. Wendy said sure, and they chatted about family and money problems. Then, a car drove by and someone said, "Hey Wendy, can you eat bagels and cream cheese," and handed her one when she said yes. A group of students from a local Catholic university stopped by to say hello and asked if she needed anything. Then, she invited me to her Sunday morning prayer and gospel-singing hour. Finally, she said I had to go because she had a football game to listen to.

This story is not in any way meant to glamorize living on the streets. There are many who want housing, but it seems that Wendy, at that point, is not one of them. My stories about her were a creation of my own mental images. For me this was a powerful lesson to be more diligent in setting aside assumptions and focusing on being present to reality as it is. And, it is just one example of how working with the homeless community automatically provides a fertile ground for fostering a practice of not-knowing.

### **3) Lessons in Unexamined Privilege and Entitlement**

Third, there are bountiful opportunities to viscerally experience the privilege that we carry just because of our backgrounds, education, and gender. By working with privilege, we can begin to tune into the emotions that come up when we do not get what we think we are entitled to. A loss of privilege can result in feelings of discomfort, dismay, and anger accompanied with thoughts like, "It's my right . . . I deserve . . . It's not fair."

For Buddhists, who explore the unexamined nooks and crannies of human consciousness, there are valuable lessons that the homeless community can teach us about our own sense of privilege and entitlement.



The examination of privilege can start with a simple human biological need, the need to use a bathroom. One woman who attended the same street retreat that I was on with the Faithful Fools described unsuccessfully looking for a public restroom that was not occupied. She finally gave up and walked into a restaurant to use their facilities. Her privilege was being able to go into the restaurant and not be noticed or asked to leave. When I asked Diane, the woman I met in line at the soup kitchen in the Glide Memorial Church, where I could go to the bathroom, she pointed to the curb. I made a face; then, I had to accept the fact that that might be my only option.

A second kind of privilege became apparent to me early on when I was handing out dinners with the Dharma Bums in San Diego. Dale, the person in charge, told me not to put raw carrots into the salads because many people who live on the streets have missing teeth and cannot chew. On that evening's walk, ten people turned down our salads because they could not eat them. I have the privilege of bi-annual visits to the dentist. It is something that I just take for granted.

Another privilege we encounter on the streets is the privilege of choice. A homeless person who depends on soup kitchens and kind people who hand out roasted chicken and organic salads may have an adequate amount of food, but does not have the privilege of choosing what he/she is going to have for dinner.

A privilege that we might not have thought of is the ability to leave a place. This became apparent to me on one of the days I was just walking around the Tenderloin. After a

couple of hours I was exhausted and needed a pick-me-up coffee, so I jumped on a trolley and headed down to the Ferry Landing, an area of bustling shops and coffee houses. I felt like I was certainly entitled to a break. Then, on reflection, I realized how much privilege was wrapped up in this small act. I had the privilege of money in my wallet, the attitude that I belonged in the fancy coffee house down by the Ferry building, and the ease of getting there on the trolley. It felt like a simple everyday event, but the ease of it was a result of layers of privilege.

#### **4) Unexpected Kindness and Generosity**

Fourth, when working in the homeless community, we can learn about ways that compassion and loving interconnection can be expressed, and we can experience our hearts open in the most unexpected situations.

This paper is filled with stories of kindness that was extended to me and that people in the homeless community extended to each other. Jana Drakka talked about it in when she described the time that a group of people in one of her meditation groups listened attentively to a psychotic woman who was making no sense at all. That was the generosity of listening. I just received an e-mail from a member of Veterans for Peace who was handing out sleeping bags this weekend. He said:

Many that could have used a sleeping bag declined, saying they were okay, and please give them to others. This is really amazing, but also routine for those of us who are out a lot with the homeless. They look out for their "less fortunate."

When I was on a ride-along with the San Diego Homeless Outreach Team, I met Sandy, who is nineteen years old, lives on the streets, and is a heroin user. She was sleeping in a tent next to Scot whom she wanted to stay close to so she could help him get to his daily Narcotic Anonymous meetings.

I have to include here the kindness and generosity that the members of the homeless community extended to me. When I walked either with salads, sleeping bags, or empty handed, there was always an abundance of friendliness and willingness to engage in conversations. This happened again and again, too often to be an anomaly.

**b) What does a Buddhist chaplain bring to the homeless community?**

What a Buddhist chaplain brings to the homeless community is the wisdom that the Buddha, or Awakened One, discovered when he was trying to understand where suffering comes from. What he awakened to and shared for the rest of his life is embodied in The Four Noble Truths. The first is The Truth of Suffering. We will get sick; we will get old. We will die. We are impermanent. Everything is impermanent. The second is The Truth of the Source of Suffering. He identified greed/clinging, aversion/hatred, and delusion/ignorance as the reasons that we suffer. We cling to the stuff and the conditions in our lives that we like, and we want to push away or get rid of the stuff that we do not like. We delude ourselves into thinking that we are separate, in charge, and that things will not change. The Third Noble Truth tells us that there is a way out of suffering. The Fourth Noble Truth outlines this way through the Noble Eightfold Path, which is a set of practical principles to end greed, aversion and delusion.

We bring these teachings into our chaplaincy through our commitment to our own meditation practice, our desire to dig deeply into our human consciousness, and our intention to embody the practices of the Noble Eightfold Path. By deeply knowing ourselves, we can then begin to resonate with everyone we come into contact with. These are practices that keep us awake and connected.

Jennifer Block, in an article titled, "Toward a Definition of Buddhist Chaplaincy," states this idea from a slightly different perspective:

In a classically Buddhist sense, there is not a lot of emphasis on hope or intercession from an outside source or deity, but more on how to use one's intelligence and basic goodness to be skillful and more at ease right in the middle of what is difficult.

She adds:

All difficult situations can be improved by applying intelligent perspective and loosening one's tight grasp on how things have always been, or should be right now. This means any of us can work internally with our suffering to change it for the better, even if what is happening outside of us does not change. (Block, 2011)

Another basic teaching of Buddhism is that all humans are born with a basic Buddha nature, which gets covered over by an ego-self that defines certain conditions as good, others as distasteful and claims that certain people are worthy, and others are to be avoided. What the teaching says is that there is a possibility that everyone can awaken to his/her Buddha nature. Dan Leighton, in his book, *Faces of Compassion*, gives this description of Buddha nature:

The awakening experienced by a buddha is this realization that all beings are fundamentally open, clear, and totally integrated with the whole of existence . . . It is not a matter of achieving some new state of

being or of mind in some other, “higher” place or time. Rather, it is the nature of reality already present and always available to everyone. The problem is that we are obstructed from realizing and enjoying this reality, and then creatively embodying it. This obstruction comes from our confusion, our grasping, and our aversion, which are produced through the complex web of psychological and cultural conditioning affecting us throughout our whole lives. Our work, individually and collectively, is to break through or let go of the attachments that block our inherent freedom and radiance. (Leighton, 2012, p. 33)

As chaplains, we bring this teaching to our work in the way we greet each person we meet. This does not mean that we overlook the suffering in a person, but that we experience that beneath suffering is someone with alive, vibrant Buddha nature. What we engage in are practices to experience our own Buddha nature, and then practices that show us how to cultivate a ground where a person can begin to experience his/her own awakened nature.

This can come in many ways. In the homeless community it might sound like, “It’s time for me to stop with the “crack” pipe.” It might be acknowledging our common humanity through a memorial for a beloved pet that someone kept close on cold nights. It might come from a comment as simple as, “Can we stop and take a few moments to breath together.” As one of my friends in the San Diego Police Department Homeless Outreach Team says, “It’s about baby steps.” We start with ourselves, wherever we are, and we open to another person wherever he/she is.

Buddhist chaplains bring three more teachings to their work: the teachings of no-self, non-duality, and the teaching of the “bodhisattva ideal”

According to Buddhist thinking, the separate self is a psychological construct or creation. From the illusion that the self is something real and separate, we derive a sense that the “I” is inside us, and the rest of the world is outside. We live our lives as if the self is real, substantial, separate, and at the center of who we are. In Buddhist teachings, the idea of a separate self is a delusion. Everything is interconnected and interdependent. We live in a world of non-duality. What this means in practical terms is that there is no “self” and no “other.” When we are doing the work of a chaplain, extending compassion, loving kindness, and joy is the most natural thing to do. We extend all these because there is no separation, no “us” and “them.”

Buddhists have many teachings about the bodhisattva ideal. A bodhisattva is a being who dedicates him/herself to helping everyone move beyond greed, aversion and delusion and to realize the truth of interconnection and interdependence. Dan Leighton says this about what it means to be a bodhisattva:

Bodhisattvas usually are unknown and anonymous rather than celebrities, and function humbly and invisibly all around us, expressing kindness and generosity in simple, quiet gestures. Having opened their hearts beyond delusions of craving and estrangement, bodhisattvas can just be themselves, not seeking out good deeds to perform, but in their very ordinariness presenting inspiring examples that help others. (Leighton, 2012, p.29)

The bodhisattva ideal is embodied in The bodhisattva bow which is a set of phases Buddhists chant to hear and feel the truth of suffering and the possibility of freedom from suffering.

Creations are numberless. I vow to free them.  
Delusions are inexhaustible. I vow to transform them

Reality is boundless. I vow to perceive it.  
The awakened way is unsurpassable. I vow to embody it.

This may sound daunting, especially the part about numberless creations and inexhaustible delusions, but Leighton encourages us when he says:

As soon as we are struck with our own urge or intention to take on such a bodhisattva practice, we also are included in the ranks of the bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas can be awesome in their power, radiance, and wisdom, or they can be as ordinary as your next-door neighbor. (Leighton, 2012, P. 26)

As Buddhist chaplains we endeavor to embody the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, Buddha nature, the ideas of non-duality, interconnectedness and interdependence, and the bodhisattva ideal in the different places that we work. Each workplace has its own challenges. In the homeless community, many conditions had to collide to bring the residents to a place in their lives where they cannot meet what we consider their basic needs. There may be no shelter, and food may not be easy to find. Taking care of the needs of the body may be difficult. Many people in this community are afflicted with mental health issues, substance abuse issues, or both. Prostitution and rape are issues. Work is difficult to find. There are a lot of people living in chaos. Being a chaplain in this community means being acutely aware of the environment and understanding the unique challenges of everyone who works and lives there.

From this description of what a Buddhist chaplain brings to the homeless community, I offer the following list. Several of the items on the list are not unique to Buddhist

chaplains but are simply the attributes of a skillful chaplain. Others are generated by the Buddhists teachings I described in the preceding paragraphs.

A. A willingness to listen.

- Skills in eliciting people's stories and when appropriate helping them find out what is important and what they value.
- Training in empathic listening.
- Training in listening while attending to one's own physical, emotional, and cognitive states.

B. A commitment to meditation practice

- A commitment to work with our own suffering, grasping, aversion, and delusion.
- An understanding that healing can happen through bearing witness to suffering.
- A practice in staying grounded and present when things get uncomfortable.
- A background in meditation practices, which, when appropriate, we can share.

C. An understanding of the non-dual nature of existence and that everything is interconnected and interdependent.

- An understanding that we are not separate from the people we work with.
- An understanding that as humans, we suffer because we think and act as if we are separate.
- Training in practices that lay a ground so people can experience this connectedness. When it is appropriate we can share these practices.
- An understanding that if there is no separation and everything is interconnected, acting with kindness and taking care of each other are the only sensible things to do.



- D. An intention to embody the bodhisattva ideal.
- Training in compassion and loving kindness practices, which, when appropriate we can share.
- E. An understanding that sometimes the most appropriate thing to do is just to be present and do nothing.

## **Part V. Conclusion**

Before I started this project, I had many ways of avoiding the homeless community. I would usually give a couple of dollars to the man on the corner with the sign asking for money, but as often as not, I would look away if someone appeared too disheveled or intoxicated. Although I have lived in San Francisco, I never visited the Tenderloin; its reputation was too toxic. In San Diego, I noticed feeling uncomfortable when walking past doorways where people were obviously living. I certainly never engaged anyone in a conversation. When I started my work in the homeless community, I had all kinds of mental images and attitudes about who the homeless people were and how they got into a place where they had no home and had to ask for food and money.

It did not take long for my attitudes to shift quite dramatically. During the time I was handing out dinners with the Dharma Bums and sleeping bags with the Veterans for Peace, I was often touched by the gratitude people offered, startled by my inherent privilege, and intrigued by the variety of interactions I had with the people I met on the streets. My mental images were melting away. I had many experiences of not-knowing, interconnectedness, interdependence, kindness, and compassion. I came face to face with suffering time and again and gained some experience in staying steady and present. I found and continue to find that the homeless communities in San Diego and San Francisco are complex, rich, and compelling.

I was lucky in that I had very competent, loving, and generous guides during this journey. The Faithful Fools: Kay, Carmen, and Alex; the Night Ministers, Lyle and Thom,

and, Jana Drakka from the Jana Drakka Community Services/ Zenkei Sangha all talked with me for hours, took me on excursions, and shared their work with me.

To end this paper, I would like to offer a couple of suggestions on how to start working in and experiencing the homeless community.

The easiest way to begin is to find a group that has a homeless outreach program. It might be handing out food, clothes, books, anything that gets you out on the streets and talking to people. Ask a lot of questions. Look for a spiritual presence on the streets. Ask people if there are chaplains or ministers who walk around talking to people. Look for outdoor church services. Look on-line for people or groups that do street chaplaincy or street ministry. You will find a lot, but what you are looking for is a group or person that does the work of a chaplain, someone who offers non-denominational, non-judgmental pastoral/spiritual care. As you get involved at one level, other doors will open; the need for pastoral presence on the streets is great.

The four groups I worked with all offer opportunities to get involved in their work. Volunteers usually start their work with The Faithful Fools by going on a street retreat. They also have three to twelve month programs for live-in lay volunteers. When I asked about their future plans, Alex disclosed that they are working to purchase the building next to one they currently own. With this new space, they have plans to develop internship programs for social workers, nurses, and lawyers who would be able to work and live in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. Also, they encourage people to

create projects that become the programs that they offer. This is how the writing groups got started, and how their Zendo got built.

The San Francisco Night Ministry offers training to become a Crisis Line Counselor, and ways to help with the Open Cathedral. They also invite people to join them as they walk around the Tenderloin at night.

Jana Drakka Community Services began developing trainings for interns in 2011. These internships include working with the community meditation groups, working in a women's shelter, and conducting memorials. (Jana Drakka Community Services, Notes, 2011) The best way to contact Jana is by attending one of her groups. The list can be found at the janadrakka website. ([www.janadrakka.com](http://www.janadrakka.com))

I end this paper with a final suggestion from Lyle of the San Francisco Night Ministry that I think embodies an essence of what a street chaplain does.

[I say to people} "Tell me your story." We meet a lot of people and give them the opportunity to tell their stories. They are delighted because people who are living on the streets, people with mental health issues, prostitutes, nobody asks them to tell their stories. Nobody gets to know them for whom they are and that is one of the things that I have learned over the years. Every one has a fascinating story, or two or three or a hundred. They are individual and unique. They are wonderful folks, and so unless you take the time to know them and listen to them and really know what their needs are, you can't really minister.

## References

- Ballinger, S (2009), Chaplain/pastor – is there a difference. *Living shields ministry*, [http://www.livingshield.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=53&Itemid=58](http://www.livingshield.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=53&Itemid=58)
- Barsody, C. (2009). Sister Carmen's Jubilee Autobiography. *Living Franciscan*. [http://livingfranciscan.blogspot.com/2009\\_02\\_01\\_archive.html](http://livingfranciscan.blogspot.com/2009_02_01_archive.html)
- Berton, J. (2012). Priest brings Zen to S.F.'s neediest souls / Buddhist teaches meditation, holds memorials for homeless. *San Francisco chronicle, SF gate*. <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Priest-brings-Zen-to-S-F-s-neediest-souls-2625838.php>
- Block, J (2011). Towards a definition of Buddhist chaplaincy. *Buddhist chaplains.org: Community, Resources. Momentum*. <http://buddhistchaplains.org/cmsms/index.php?page=definition-buddhist-chaplian>
- Colgan, S. (2010). Zen in the Streets: Jana Drakka. *Examiner.com*. <http://www.examiner.com/article/zen-the-streets-jana-drakka>
- Dharma bums* (2012). <http://www.thedharmabums.org/>
- Ecclesia ministries common cathedral and The Rev. Dr. Deborah Little. (2012). <http://www.ecclesia-ministries.org/ecclesia.html>
- Faithful Fools street ministry. (2012). <http://www.faithfulfools.org/>
- Faithful Fools, Facebook. (2012) [https://www.facebook.com/FaithfulFools/page\\_map](https://www.facebook.com/FaithfulFools/page_map)
- Faithful Gools, Street retreats. (2012) <http://www.faithfulfools.org/programs/street-retreats/>
- Faithful Fools Arts Collaborative. (2012) <http://www.faithfulfools.org/programs/arts/>
- Glassman, B. (1998). *Bearing witness*. New York: Bell Tower, Random House.
- Goodby, N. (2009). Zendo without walls. *Mission local: a News lab for everyone*. <http://missionlocal.org/2009/12/jana-drakkas-zendo-without-walls/>
- Hamre, R. (2011). Religious education ministry blog: April DRE report. *Orange Coast Unitarian Universalist Church*. <http://ocuuc.org/reministry/2011/03/>
- Harm reduction coalition. (2012) Principles of harm reduction. (2012). <http://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>

HAMS: Harm reduction for alcohol. Chapter V: The stages of change model. (2009). *The HAMS harm reduction network, inc.* <http://hamsnetwork.org/ch5/>

Hyde, L (1998). *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York

Jana Drakka Community Services. (2012). <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Jana-Drakka-Community-Services/106284870605>

Jana Drakka Community Services's Notes. (2012). <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Jana-Drakka-Community-Services/106284870605>

Ladinsky D. (1999). *The gift: Poems by Hafiz, The great Sufi master*, Penguin Books, Middlesex England

Leighton, Taigan. (2012). *Faces of compassion: Classic bodhisattva archetypes and their modern expression*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications,.

Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy. (2012). <http://www.homelesschaplancy.org/>

Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy: Current projects and events. (2012) <http://www.homelesschaplancy.org/current.html>

Paget, N & McCormack, J. (2006). *The work of the chaplain*. Valley Forge: Judson Press

Paquette, K. (2010). Individuals experiencing homelessness. *Homeless Resource Center*. <http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=48800>

Rennebohm, C. (2008). *Souls in the hand of a tender god*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Rennebohm, C. (2012). The Mental Health Chaplaincy. <http://www.mentalhealthchaplancy.org/>

Rinker, B. (2011). Faithful Fools, Parish of the streets. *Central City Extra*. <http://studycenter.org/centralcityextra/2011/08/faithful-fools-parish-of-the-streets/>

San Diego Homeless Outreach Team. (2012). *The City of San Diego*. <http://www.sandiego.gov/homeless-services/programs/hot.shtml>

San Francisco Night Ministry. (2012). <http://www.sfnightministry.org/>

San Francisco Night Ministry, The Nightly News. (2012)  
[http://www.sfnightministry.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=52:stories&catid=39&Itemid=59](http://www.sfnightministry.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=52:stories&catid=39&Itemid=59)

Schneider, D. (2000). *Street Zen, The life and work of Issan Dorsey*. New York: Marlowe & Company

Sangha Outreach (2012), <http://www.janadrakka.com/>

Siple, Gillian. (2010). I believe in the strength of human generosity, *San Francisco Zen Center*. <http://news.sfzc.org/content/view/639/52/>

San Diego Veterans For Peace. (2012). <http://www.sdvfp.org/>

Woo, W. (2001). Fools in Faith. *UU World*.  
<http://www.uuworld.org/2001/04/feature1.html>

Zenkei Sangha. (2012).  
<http://www.janadrakka.com/>