

Fools Fables

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

What Words Come to Mind?

by Carmen Barsody

Our mission statement is rooted in our early experiences exploring the deteriorating social conditions around us, seeing it from the level of the streets, and asking ourselves how we could respond meaningfully to what was (and still is) happening. We learned a lot in those early years.

Here is a story from around 1999 when Kay and I were leading one of our first street retreats for a group of youth. As we prepared the group to go into the streets, we asked, “What do you think you will see and experience today?”

They were very quiet and didn’t seem to know how to answer the question, so I asked, “What words come to mind when you think of people who are homeless?”



Slowly, they began to speak. We wrote their words on some newsprint hanging on the wall:

drugs
depression
isolation
loneliness
lost
invisible
disrespected
unwanted
lazy

After a moment, I asked, “What other experiences do these words describe?”

Everyone sat quietly. We were just taking in the picture our list of words drew. After what seemed like a very long silence, someone said in a clear, strong voice:

*That’s how people talk
about teenagers.*

We all felt the power of that observation. We sat in silence for a while longer, connected by this experience of our humanness and of our vulnerabilities.

Then we went into the streets. The youth walked together in pairs with an adult not far away as a “shadow.”

After a few hours, we returned to reflect on what we had seen and heard. We went around the circle, each person sharing something from their time on the streets.

In the moments that followed, we heard realizations that we would hear from different people in different forms over the years, but that first time we heard them clearly because the before and after were so very striking.

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What Words Come to Mind?

(Cont. from page 1)

The “before” words focused on negatives. The “after” words also acknowledged the negatives but didn’t confine people to them. Beyond words of hardship, they listed words like strength, community, energy, and connection. They described the people they’d met in detail and what they talked about together. Where earlier in the day, they didn’t seem to know what to say, now they did. They were no longer “just teenagers” and the people they met weren’t “just the homeless.” Something had shifted. They discovered something that connected them to the people of the Tenderloin. They discovered that none of us are only a simple list of words.

A few months after that day with teenagers awakening to our common humanity, we began to draft our mission statement. We went back to those sheets of newsprint and we were moved again by the words the youth listed when they came back from the streets. How could we not include those words in our mission statement? How could we not remember what it feels like when a myth shatters before your very eyes?

What did you
see on the
streets today?

relationship
Survival
Creativity
concern
strength
Resistance
INTELLIGENCE
Family
*COURAGE
Hardwork
light
LAUGHTER
COMMUNITY
ENERGY
Hardship
FRIENDLY
Little dogs



Carmen (above) ever present with YES!!
Sam (below) ever showing up where needed.



On Paternalistic Approaches to Poverty

Conventional approaches to impoverished neighborhoods and those who live there are thoroughly paternalistic. The trouble with paternalists is that they want to make impossibly profound changes, and they choose impossibly superficial means for doing so. To overcome the poverty of such neighborhoods, we must regard those who live there as people who are capable of understanding and acting upon their own self-interests, because of course they certainly are. We need to discern, respect, and build upon the forces for regeneration that exist in these neighborhoods themselves. This is a far cry from trying to patronize people into a better life, and it is a far cry from what is done today.

Jane Jacobs
(1916-2006) Urban Planner

So Much More Complex

by Sam Dennison

Myths offer us manageable explanations for things we don't understand. Once upon a time, we told ourselves that thunder was the laughter of giants playing games in the clouds. Today, less lightheartedly, we tell ourselves that homelessness is caused by laziness, drug addiction, lack of education, or even just being too proud to accept help. But as always, the reality behind these myths about people living in poverty (even if they contains a kernel of truth) is far more complicated.

We often ask what people living in poverty need to do differently—do they need to go back to school? get therapy? learn how to budget their money better? get a better attitude? Rarely do we ask about the bigger picture. Our myths are based on what we see but not on the complexity surrounding what we see.

Sometimes we encounter a person who doesn't show up for a housing

appointment, but then we realize they couldn't walk to the appointment because of a chronic foot wound and having no transportation. We know people who want a job but recognize that if there is no place to shower on the day of the interview, they will be too embarrassed to show up smelling like they've spent the night on the streets. Perhaps we could ask ourselves: Who among us would go to a job interview in dirty clothes and without a shower? Who is able to walk a long distance with a chronic foot wound?

Shouldn't we also ask: Can we change the world enough so showers are available to people on the streets and people can get medical treatment at the same place and time that they are completing housing paperwork?

When we begin to see the light, courage, intelligence, strength, and creativity of people living in and surviving poverty, we begin to ask ourselves, "What has to be different in my life and in the larger community in order to free everyone from poverty?"



This image is complex. No one wants to sleep on the street and no one wants to walk by someone sleeping on the street. What must change so no one in this picture is overshadowed by the poverty surrounding us all?

Resistant or Resilient?

For almost three years, our neighbor Jackie Williams had her tent pitched snugly up against our purple building. After being here a year or so, a San Francisco police officer decided it was time for tough love. "She's had enough time to figure it out on her own," he said. "It's time for law enforcement to make decisions for her." So he arrested her and had most of her belongings carted off to the landfill.

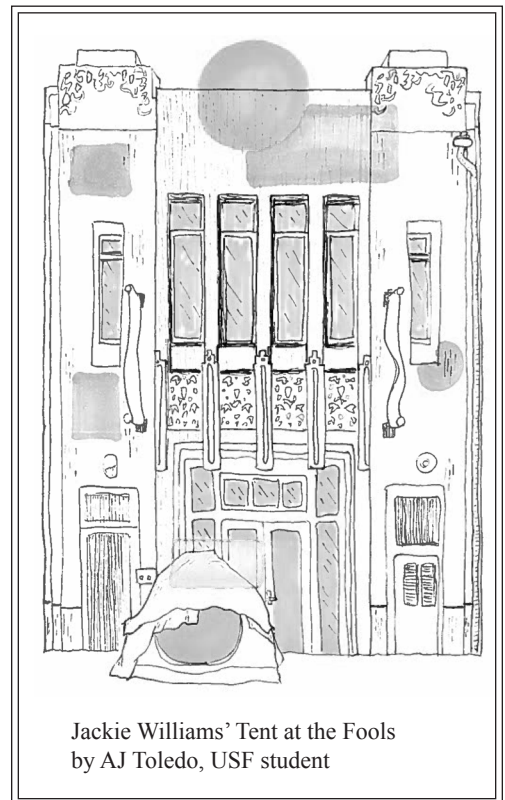
While Jackie spent the next few weeks in jail, we checked daily for her court date. On the day of her hearing, as Jackie entered the courtroom, she saw Sam was there for her. Both of them lit up, so glad to see each other.

"That's the day that changed my life," Jackie says. It took a long time for her to get over those weeks in jail, but she did. Her recovery began when

all charges were dropped for lack of evidence and she was released. She came straight back to the Fools that day and we welcomed her with a hug, a sleeping bag, and a safe place to be.

Then last January, a month before lockdown, she said, "It's time for me to move inside." In her place by the Fools' front door, Jackie did what she needed to do so she could move inside on her own terms. We had faith that she could do it. What she needed was community, not coercion, to find her own path forward.

We are so pleased to tell you that a week before the pandemic lockdown, Jackie moved into her own place. But don't worry. We haven't lost our neighbor. Jackie is ever our friend and companion. Most days she is here taking care of us. She is the essence of faithful presence at our front door.



Jackie Williams' Tent at the Fools
by AJ Toledo, USF student

FAITHFUL FOOLS

OUR COMMITMENT IS TO OUR MISSION AND OUR COMMUNITY

We are called to a life 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.

IN THIS YEAR OF PANDEMIC AND RACIAL RECKONING

As 2020 was approaching, we asked ourselves, "Will we see things more clearly this year?" We talked about how colors get brighter after cataract surgery and how a new pair of glasses brings the world into sharper focus. It was an upbeat anticipation of clearer vision. We didn't realize that seeing more clearly would also mean seeing the deep cracks in the walls and foundations of our culture.

Over the course of the year, our vulnerabilities came sharply into focus. We saw the essentialness of teachers, healthcare workers, farmworkers, caregivers, store clerks, and postal workers among the many others we have taken for granted for so long.

We watched wildfires burn in every hemisphere. Smoke descended on the Bay Area, turning our bright blue skies to



**Pray for
the dead,
and fight
like hell for
the living.**

Mother Jones
Union Activist
(1837-1930)

an unnatural otherworldly orange, vividly demonstrating that the earth itself is suffering the consequences of our actions.

We have seen racial violence, rooted in slavery, Jim Crow, and white nationalism, reassert itself in terrifying ways. We can no longer deny the pain and injustice of systemic racism. Too many lives have been lost to racism and too many are still vulnerable to both overt and implicit bias.

As this year of sights we could never have imagined nears its close, we hear the call, "Attention! Attention!" that reminds us that we can't hide from what has been revealed. We can't unsee what we have seen and we can't back away from what needs to be done.

Conditions may be changing but we remain committed to our mission and to our community.

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Dec. 8, 2020



Dear Friends,

A year ago, in our annual letter to you, we mused on the lunchtime conversations we had with various friends and neighbors—a dozen on this day, eight or ten on that other day. How we took those happy moments for granted! Just a few months later, along with all of you, we entered lockdown: no more movie nights or Street Retreats. No more community meetings or Jugglers' lunch. Inside, the home of the Faithful Fools became quiet except for occasional visitors who came by for socially distanced connection, just enough to stave off the anguish of isolation.

But COVID-19 didn't quiet the sidewalks outside our door. Within days of the lockdown, the streets filled with people being released from jails and homeless shelters because those were places likely to spread the virus quickly to very vulnerable people. The non-profits that ordinarily provide emergency resources shifted gears to serve people safely: Public dining halls set up tables to distribute thousands of boxed meals, but clothing distribution had to stop while medical clinics could only accept appointments for people with critical needs. This meant that people coming out of jail cells and hospital rooms had nothing but the clothes on their backs and nowhere to go. They hunkered down on the streets, scavenging cardboard for warmth and drinking water from broken faucets. We were all just doing the best we could. As the rest of the City became eerily silent, the Tenderloin was bursting at the seams—no social distancing here because the streets were overwhelmed with people who had no place to shelter.

We spent our days distributing masks, tents, and hand sanitizer and then logging into zoom calls where we joined other organizations cajoling and pleading with Public Works to bring water and toilets to the makeshift encampments of tents and cardboard. We begged for shelter. Finally, forced by a lawsuit, the City opened 2,500 hotel rooms to the refugees from jails, shelters, and the streets. What a remarkable and truly historic moment that was. San Francisco, a City famous for unimaginable rents and unfathomable numbers of homeless people, did what it took to

Feed the hungry!

Free the imprisoned!

Shelter those living on the streets!

There is much more yet to be done, because we did not feed or free or shelter all who are hungry, imprisoned, or without housing. But no one can or will ever forget the marvel of seeing so many people coming in from the cold.

The impact of these "Shelter-in-Place" hotels has been a wonder to behold. People who were bent and pained from sleeping on cement stood up straight. Their faces became bright as daily showers washed away layers of grime. Some people put on weight and others lost a little as they ate three good meals a day. There are people we hardly recognize now for they looked 10 years younger after just a few weeks inside.

It was partnership that made this happen. We are partnered, as Faithful Fools always are, with people in organizations, large and small, people from the City, and our neighbors. We are also partnered with you. Your energy, phone calls of concern, emails of support, and dollars and cents—they all make a difference.

Without our annual spring fundraiser or the revenue from our educational programs, we've had a lean year. We know this has been a lean year all the way around, so even as we take this moment to ask you for a donation (be it large or small), we are also expressing our deep gratitude for all you do.

Who you are and what you do is important. Our shared struggle and our shared steadiness in this year of COVID-19 is what makes it possible for all of us to continue to do the work that must be done—together.

Foolishly, Faithfully, and above all *Fondly* yours,

Carmen & SKM

NEW FOOLS

WELCOME!!

I'm the newest Fool to the Court. My journey to the Faithful Fools started with a Street Retreat in 2016, followed by a few work-related interactions, a series of reflection times on Wednesdays with Carmen and Sam and eventually, a two-year board membership. I'm now the resident generalist to help with operations, community engagement, and everything in between.



Leah Laxamana &
Berkeley

I was born in the Philippines and raised there by my extended family. I spent summers in the U.S. with my parents who immigrated to the Bay Area in the 1960s. Going back and forth exposed me early on to the vast differences in how people live. That was reinforced by the service-oriented Jesuit education I received, and later on by my Peace Corps service in Honduras. I've lived in San Francisco for almost 20 years where I've worked in the corporate, philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, which developed my passion for connecting with people of all backgrounds.

I was drawn to the Faithful Fools' way of showing up for their neighbors and I look forward to being part of Fools' work to foster compassion and highlight the common humanity among us.

Guaranteed to bring joy to my heart at any time are playing capoeira, dancing, being outdoors and hanging out with my nephews and nieces.

My name is Ollin Rocha and I'm from Oxnard, California. I'm the youngest of three, I'm following in my sisters' footsteps by doing a year of volunteer service as a Mercy Corps Volunteer.

I began my journey at Faithful Fools in August of this year. Although the neighborhood I grew up in is different from the Tenderloin, it is also similar in many ways. I have seen people struggle with poverty, addiction, and mental health challenges before. I have friends and neighbors who live in households with multiple families. Ever since I started working, I've had various jobs. I worked delivering pizzas, stacking boxes for eight hours in an industrial factory, parked cars in upscale hotels for the elite, and provided customer service at my university library. I am now serving at Faithful Fools accompanying some of the most interesting people I have ever met. I have seen how people survive on the streets, how they overcome obstacles, and how they advocate for one another.

Although at times I struggle at finding my calling in life, my experience at Faithful Fools is in many ways helping me better understand myself. I'm learning how to be patient with others, and how to meet people where they are. The days may not always be easy, but I am gaining life experience and developing an understanding of the community where I serve.



Ollin Rocha
Mercy Volunteer