

## Seeking Our Common Humanity

by Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered March 1, 2015

To this day, I'm not sure why I did it. I certainly had no idea what I was getting into.

When I began my studies for ministry, there was only one class offered on community ministry, and so I signed up for it right away. You see, I knew I wouldn't be going into congregational ministry. No way were you ever going to catch me behind a pulpit, because at the time I was afraid of preaching.

Off I went to the Faithful Fools Street Ministry for what I thought was a discussion class. A nice, safe, discussion class where we'd talk about readings and other important things. Right?

Oh no. Kay Jorgensen and Carmen Barsody, founders of the Fools who were leading the class, had an experiential class in mind, meaning we had to do more than just talk. At some point during the semester, we had to attend what they called a street retreat. A street retreat is a day of walking around on the streets of the Tenderloin, the neighborhood where the Faithful Fools Court is located; it's one of the most impoverished areas of San Francisco. Street retreats are a special part of Kay's and Carmen's ministries, which you'll hear more about in their words in just a minute.

The first possible retreat date came along, and I found a reason not to attend that day. It looked like rain. The second one... it might have looked like rain also. Ever procrastinated when you didn't really want to do something? By the time the last one rolled along though, I had run out of excuses. That morning found me, filled with apprehension, approaching the starting point for the retreat. I was also compiling a list in my head of things I could do that day while on the retreat – the span of open hours ahead of me seemed intimidating, too. One of the things we were supposed to do was notice what was around us and to notice what we noticed, but I don't think I was paying attention to much of anything yet that day.

***Kay:** It's very important to notice the people who sit on the curb. They often sit there because they don't really have anywhere else to sit. Then other people look at them with preconceived ideas about who they are, how they've come to sit on that curb. Well, I sat down on the curb too. And the people who sat down next to me already had this idea, this preconception of who I was.*

***Carmen:** It's the thing about the street. When we come to the street, we come to know our own story better. We also find out how each one of us sees things differently. We can all be out on the same street in the Tenderloin, run into the same person, but the feelings and reactions can be very different. If we reflect on those differences, then we each become more familiar with the stories we carry with us, and how our own story changes how we meet people.*

***Kay:** We say we meet people where they are, but what does that mean? There are so many ways to see a stranger. There is something about a stranger that I don't know and*

*that strangeness is frightening, or it can be. The whole thing in the beginning was about meeting a stranger. We didn't know anyone, so if we were going to be here, we had to take a step towards a person we didn't know.*

**Carmen:** *In a way, that's why we started doing Street Retreats. Coming here to the Tenderloin, doing a Street Retreat, is like meeting a stranger. For some of us, this is a place of vibrancy and humanity and for others this is place of fear, of wrongdoing, or what have you. A Street Retreat is way of paying attention to our own humanity, to our own pain, or maybe shows us we're avoiding our own humanity.*

**Kay:** *Street retreats offer a kind of mirror: What holds me separate? What keeps me separated? As I walk the streets, what still connects me? The questions we ask as we walk provide people with an experience that becomes a reflection of themselves and their relationship with other people. When we say "aware of our judgments"--we don't say "without judgment" because we know that isn't possible--we have a mirror that shows us who we are and the judgments we carry with us.*

**Carmen:** *But the real learning happens in relationship. We need an open space to come and discover our own way of being in relationship. Meditation and reflection help bring strength to the center, but they are not the center themselves. When we have taken time to allow experience to become a resource—we can allow our reactions to come from a centered place, rather than just from feelings. There has to be a still point, what Kay calls a "rod within."*

**Kay:** *The still point has to be within oneself. Even in the midst of the most confusing times, there is a rod that's firm, that holds us steady. I am finding that this rod is more and more important now because the center has been threatened a lot in the last two years. Even in the worst times, I just had to accept that this was just the way things are. That's the still point. You discover that you are not at war with anybody. If there was any place I was at war, it was with myself. Of course, things are always changing; change affects me; I affect change. Being in relationship with other people IS our mirror. We hold that mirror before us as we walk so we might reflect on who we are and grow in our humanity.<sup>1</sup>*

"When we come to the street, we come to know our own story better. We also find out how each one of us sees things differently."

After some singing and a few instructions, each retreat participant wandered off in a different direction. The instructions were simple: stay in the neighborhood approximately, eat lunch in one of the local soup kitchens, and keep carrying our metaphorical mirror with us, helping us to see what we see and to see our own assumptions and our own story as well.

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<sup>1</sup> From Fools Fables 2013: Street Level Learning, <http://www.faithfulfools.org/#!print-publications/ceih>

I think my biggest fear was having to talk to someone. I reckoned that if I kept on moving the whole time and avoided making eye contact, that I could – you know – escape that possibility. Well, there are only so many times you can walk the same blocks – the neighborhood wasn't all that big after all. And I was walking fast because I was uncomfortable.

Then I ran into my biggest problem of the day – that pesky second instruction – that we had to eat in one of the soup kitchens. Not go there and help, but go through the line like everyone else, sit in their common room, and eat. Little did I know how common my fear of talking to someone and my resulting plan were, and that this requirement was specifically designed to disrupt my strategy.

Since I wanted to get the eating requirement over with as quickly as possible, I got into line early. Of course that meant standing still around other folks also waiting in line, thus increasing the likelihood of having to talk to someone. And I looked completely out of place, too. But that didn't seem to bother the woman in line in front of me. I'm not sure what she saw in me, but without much preamble she began to talk and to share with me all about herself, without my getting much of a word in edgewise.

Apparently I came across as trustworthy, because before I knew it, she left me with a suitcase containing all of her possessions while she went off in search of a restroom. Of all the awkward feeling moments of the day so far, this was the worst. Here I was, standing in a line with a suitcase containing all of the possessions of someone I scarcely knew. I just wanted to hide or walk away, but my conscience wouldn't let me because she had trusted me with her stuff. Fortunately, she did come back, and latched onto me for what must have been the next two hours. We went through the line and ate lunch, went through the line again and got lunch again. She slipped both of our second lunches into bags to save them for her dinner.

I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering and wondering about what had just happened. It's possible she had just as many preconceived ideas about me as I had about her, but they didn't seem to get in her way. No, they only got into mine.

This wasn't to be my only street retreat. When I interned with the Fools later on, I went on many more of them, and led some as well. At the beginning and end of the retreat time together, we framed the discussion with a trio of questions based on a Montessori curriculum called Wish, Wonder, Surprise. And that's what the questions were about – what are you **wishing** for or hoping for today; is there anything you're **wondering** about; and then after experiencing the retreat – what **surprised** you. Wish, wonder, surprise.

My favorite question out of all of these was surprise, hearing what had surprised folks about their day on the streets. At their core, street retreats are border crossings, they're about intentionally putting oneself in a situation to come up against boundaries of difference and boundaries of otherness. We'd take ourselves to these boundaries – alright, sometimes it was make ourselves go to these boundaries – we'd go there and see what happens, see what we notice, we'd find our stories.

What surprised you today? The answers I remember most were about seeing community, seeing relationships, seeing commonalities. Or sometimes folks shared unexpected moments of insight. And that's when I saw folks growing. That's when I saw deep spiritual work and spiritual growth happening.

Now I'd like to say that growth is as simple as this, but it's not. Otherness and difference are some of the most complex things that we as humans wrestle with. Encounters with difference can draw out some of our strongest emotions, fear first and foremost. There are many factors at play with each of our identities. Encounters with otherness and difference have much going on, most of which is beneath the visible surface.

So why not avoid it entirely, if it's that hard? It's sure what we've been doing for millennia. But our interconnected and highly populated world doesn't allow that any longer. Our post-modern society and the commitments of our faith to justice don't either.

But it's a lot for us to be ready to take this on. Maybe we're each ready and doing it, or maybe not quite yet. It takes personal growth within each of us to help get there and sustain it. As individuals there's progress that we can make in our own spiritual growth around encounters with difference. That's what I most want for each of us – that we can find the ways that will help us each grow, ways that meet us where we are right now and take our growth one step further.

But there are a lot of enemies of our making that progress, things that get in the way of our being present in the face of difference. First, we each carry many preconceived ideas and generalizations about others – it's just the way our brains work. From infancy, our brains are categorizing and generalizing, just to be able to make sense of the world. The problem is when these natural generalizations kick in and get in the way of our being able to really see someone else.

Then there's the uncertainty that's there when we're meeting someone who is outside of our identity or outside our previous experiences. That taps into apprehension and even fear – going into my first street retreat had so much uncertainty, and I was afraid of what might happen, afraid of even talking to someone. I have to admit that it didn't really wear off either during future retreats. While I did get more comfortable over time, uncertainty and bits of fear lurked with me also. That fear can come from both sides, too. Ela found that the day she donned the hijab. She encountered cold shoulders, invisibility, and outright fear as she walked around the mall that day.<sup>2</sup>

Our everyday surroundings don't necessarily help us either. Encountering difference and making relationships with someone who is Other to you isn't something that's usually built into our typical schedules and typical surroundings. It may be for some folks and for some of our

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<sup>2</sup> <https://playingintheworldgame.wordpress.com/2012/10/26/a-little-girl-called-me-a-terrorist/> (this is a repost of the original posting, which has since been removed from tumblr)

relationships, but then there's also what we do with those moments and the intention that we bring to them. To make sure we have opportunities to grow takes intention and effort.

We have to make sure that we take care of ourselves, too. It can be truly exhausting work! I remember one street retreat I went on, later on when I had been with the Fools for a while. After only about two hours, I was unbelievably exhausted – I could barely stand up anymore, and I had been just fine earlier. The experiences and encounters of those two hours had just drained me, and I spent the rest of the day at the Fools Court resting and staring at bookshelves.

So what now? Where do we go from here?

In the reading earlier, Carmen (who was read by Beverley) stated that real learning happens in relationships. To start or recommit to seeking out encounters with difference, let's start with the relationships that we have, including those right here at First Unitarian.

Groups like sameness, or at least the appearance of sameness. This inclination groups have towards sameness is one of the biggest enemies of difference and diversity in our congregations.

But there's more here than meets the eye. There's more diversity, there's more variety, there are more identities than are readily seen. We're theologically diverse, economically diverse, politically diverse, as well as diverse in other ways. I've had newcomers question me on these because they didn't see it and didn't feel it. They didn't feel like they could fit in here, being outside the norm in some way themselves. With this inclination towards sameness, we have to find ways to go further than we do now in embracing the diversity in our own church community.

Spiritual growth through our encounters with those who are different or Other in some way is not easy stuff. But then again, spiritual growth virtually never is. Finding ways to intentionally come up beside boundaries of differences will help us grow. Find the Other, and we'll find ourselves. And surprisingly, we'll find ways we are not so unlike. It's by reaching through our differences that we find our common humanity. May it be so.