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Faithful Fools chip away at the boundaries

Sharon Abercrombie | Feb. 17, 2009

Franciscan Sr. Carmen Barsody, left, and the Rev. Kay Jorgensen

SAN FRANCISCO -- It was nearing the end of the first day of Gillian Siple?s street retreat and she was hungry. Nervously approaching a homeless man standing on the corner, Siple asked him for directions to the nearest soup kitchen.

His news was not good. There weren?t any nearby. But the man, who later told her his name was Thomas, reached into one of the plastic bags he was carrying. ?I can offer you this rice if you are hungry.?

Three months later, Siple remains profoundly touched by the memory. Her encounter with Thomas occurred last October during a Faithful Fools weeklong retreat in the Tenderloin neighborhood -- an area of San Francisco notorious for its high concentration of poverty, homelessness, drug use and alcoholism.

For more than 10 years, the Faithful Fools, an organization founded and directed by a Franciscan sister and a Unitarian minister, have been sending hundreds of people to the impoverished neighborhood, which guidebooks of the city recommend avoiding.

To date, some 3,500 men, women and teenagers from Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Jewish, Buddhist and Unitarian church groups have ignored the tourist advisory, deliberately, mindfully and often fearfully venturing into the depths of the Tenderloin. They have walked out the door from their orientation session at First Unitarian Church, a place of privilege in the cushy Cathedral Hill area, to descend 20 minutes later into the world of the poor. They have carried a mantra with them: ?What holds us separate? What keeps us separated? As we walk the streets, what still connects us??

For Siple, a lifelong Presbyterian and currently a Lutheran Volunteer Corps member who practices Soto Zen meditation, the connecting thread was generosity. ?Thomas gave me food from his little surplus but it came from such a place of abundance.? Thomas? kindness set the tone for the next seven days. ?Every day, people shared their possessions with me, their knowledge of the streets, their company.?

Franciscan Sr. Carmen Barsody and Unitarian minister Kay Jorgensen have grown accustomed to hearing stories such as Siple?s.

One of the main reasons Barsody and Jorgensen started the Faithful Fools a decade ago was for sheltered, middle-class people to experience the company of homeless people, to listen to their stories and to discover the common denominator of their humanity on a level playing field.

The other half of their Fools ministry combines nuts-and-bolts service interwoven with spirituality and the arts. Faithful Fools staff and volunteers visit people in the hospital and take them to appointments with doctors or social workers, sometimes serving as unofficial advocates when there is miscommunication or confusion.

As Sr. Susan Knutson, a Fools staff member, explains, using her Little Falls Franciscan moniker is an effective way to chip away at bureaucracy.

Each day, after their appointment schedules, the Faithful Fools ministry of presence goes home with Barsody and Jorgensen. Their cheerful, purple dwelling place and office headquarters on Hyde Street has become a welcoming haven. Regular visitors come for Bible study, Zen meditation, poetry readings and theater. The Faithful Fools recently published an anthology of poetry written by members of the group. A playwright who made a street retreat has produced a traveling play called ?The Witness,? which chronicles the journey of a young woman encountering her own fear and judgments on a street retreat.

There is even a twice-weekly sewing class where people can stop by to make funny hats.

The funny hats are a visible symbol of the Faithful Fools ministry. Barsody and Jorgensen define themselves as fools because a fool or a jester is someone who lives without boundaries, who has no social standing whatsoever. But he or she can go anywhere and say anything. Fools once served as comedic commentators and entertainers in kingly courts. They could get by with saying the truth, something which no one else could dare to do.

?As fools we chip away at the place of hierarchy that separates us,? Barsody explained.

Denis Paul, full-time Unitarian outreach minister for the group, adds, ?The fool plays both sides of social boundaries. We can sit on the curb with a fool. And there we discover our common humanity. We can say without reservation, ?Friend, what ails you?? Then we report back to the King.?

Every new Faithful Fools volunteer is given a copy of Lewis Hyde?s book *Trickster Makes This World*. Hyde writes: ?The road that trickster travels is a spirit road as well as a road in fact. Trickster is the author of the great distance between heaven and earth.?

So what is the story around Faithful Fools originators Barsody and Jorgensen? How did they become the coauthors of this ?great distance between heaven and earth??

For several years, Barsody, a Franciscan sister of Little Falls, Minn., volunteered at a shelter for homeless people in Minneapolis, and then went on to help start a ministry of presence in Managua, Nicaragua, with two other members of her community.

The three women lived for seven years in ?a spontaneous settlement on the outskirts of the city.? Because their often hungry barrio friends could not afford meat, the sisters started a tofu kitchen to help provide the necessary protein for their neighbors? diets.

The sisters were unable to provide much more in the way of material resources to the barrio, Barsody said, so

?we worked with whatever came to us that day. What it came down to was that the greatest thing you did was whatever you could do with the person at that moment.?

Jorgensen used to accompany her physician father when he made house calls to poor neighborhoods. She and her sister would stay in the family sedan while he was inside. She never forgot the black children who would stare through the windows at them.

She later majored in theater and religion at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, and married a psychologist. They moved to Lafayette, Ind., so he could attend Purdue University. One day, the French mime Marcel Marceau made an appearance at the school. ?Watching him perform was life-changing,? Jorgensen recalled. She began studying mime and started a theater called Fantasia Folks in her home.

When her marriage ended, the mother of three brought a street theater company to San Francisco, but it didn?t succeed. There was too much competition. Jorgensen cleaned houses to support herself.

In San Francisco, she couldn?t help noticing the increasing numbers of homeless people. Their presence reawakened her compassionate social conscience and led her to become a minister. She enrolled at Starr King School of Divinity in Berkeley and graduated in 1987. After a pastoral stint in Minneapolis for a few years, she moved back to San Francisco to be near her eldest daughter and began attending First Unitarian Church.

When the church board decided to establish a social justice outreach ministry, Jorgensen became its minister. Somehow, she knew she needed to build an outreach to the homeless using both of the two major parts of her life -- theater and ministry.

Barsody had come to the Bay Area on a sabbatical from Nicaragua. A mutual friend, who figured Barsody and Jorgensen were kindred spirits, suggested that the two meet. They got together over coffee, which led to lunch because they had so much to talk about. ?We were speaking the same language,? said Barsody.

The Faithful Fools resulted. Since then, many religious communities have provided low-interest loans to help finance the building and staff stipends. When the Fools wanted to buy their present headquarters, the Sisters of Loretto supplied the first $100,000 toward the $600,000-plus mortgage.

Americans who are immersed in a fix-it mentality might wonder: Has Faithful Fools? ministry of presence inspired a profusion of life turnarounds? Knutson chuckled. Perhaps six or seven people have made the leap. As for the rest? Fools don?t judge or try to change a person, she said simply. ?Whatever happens, we don?t go away.?

Frequently, Faithful Fools street retreatants return for their second and third experiences. Robert Brown and Franciscan Bill Minkel, both members of a Just Faith group at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in San Jose, Calif., revisited the Tenderloin this past Dec. 20 for a daylong experience.

Brown, a middle-school math teacher, was not surprised by what he saw in the Tenderloin, because he used to volunteer at a homeless shelter in San Jose. Many of the people are trapped in the Tenderloin because of joblessness and illness, he observed. ?How can people who are disenfranchised get out and look for a decent apartment?? he asked.

Brown also discovered that some homeless people are ?addicted to the cold streets. They?ve had the opportunity to break away and get a different life, but they?ve gotten so used to having no rules or regulations, they can?t make the shift.? Brown believes, however, that it would be possible for them to do so if there were more long-term shelters to help people transition back into the mainstream.

Minkel used to be a police officer in the Tenderloin before he joined the Franciscans, so he already knew some of the situation. Through street retreats, though, he discovered that ?all homeless people are not sad and depressed 24 hours a day seven days a week. They are people who experience ups and downs, good days and not-so-good days just like anyone.?

The Fools challenge him ?to stay connected with the joy of the Gospel that needs to exist most especially at the margins of society if the Gospel is to be conveyed at all.?

On the last day of her retreat, Siple was moved to proclaim to the world what truth she had found by walking with the homeless as a homeless person herself. ?I took a piece of cardboard and wrote on it in black marker: ?I believe in the strength of human generosity.? I sat in front of City Hall in the grove of trees holding my message.?

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