

Living on the Streets of Austin: Attorney-Mediator Joins the Ranks of the Homeless

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I found an old water bottle in the trashcan. Needing to stay hydrated in the hot Austin sun and without any money in my pocket, I reached into the garbage can and picked up the bottle. I lifted my head to see if any passersby had noticed me. The suits gazed straight ahead, averting their glances from my eyes. Days before, I might have looked askance at someone in this situation. What would I have thought seeing an old guy who obviously hadn't washed his hair or shaved in days, beginning to smell from wearing the same old sweaty clothes, as he pulled other people's refuse from a garbage can? The previous week I was a successful attorney-mediator in Dallas, making a good living, eating in fine restaurants, interacting with professional colleagues, attorneys, and judges. Now I was living as a homeless man on the streets of Austin.

For me (unlike 3.5 million Americans who have been homeless for a significant period of time), this was a conscious and deliberate choice. I do not match the homeless profile. I am not a veteran - approximately 22% of homeless people are veterans. I can afford my housing -- between 25% to 40% of homeless people work full or part-time but cannot afford to pay rent. I do not suffer from a substance abuse problem, as does 38% of the homeless population. And I am not 9 years old, the average age of a homeless person in the United States (homeless children, for the most part, are truly invisible – over 1 million children sleep on the streets or in homeless shelters every night).

Count your blessings, we are told as children. Comparing our fate with those less fortunate, we say: “*There* but for the grace of God go I.” “*There*” is where I wanted to go. How else to truly understand another's life experience until standing in their shoes and walking that proverbial mile. For me it would be four days and three nights on the streets of Austin. I would step into a life unlike any I had ever known.

Sponsored by the Zen Peacemaker's Order and the Peacemaker Institute, the “Street Retreat” is a plunge into homelessness, a reality which most people choose to avoid even

thinking about. The homeless, America's untouchable caste, live in the periphery of our consciousness. They live in castaway corners and shadows, shuffled along to make way for "respectable" folk. We zone our homeless to the outskirts of town. In deciding to take the plunge, I would be entering the world of the downtrodden, the unemployed, the ones who just can't make ends meet (even with a job), the addicts, the mentally disabled, the generous and the kind, the swindlers and the thieves, the wise and the foolish, all of them like you and me just trying to survive.

Five days before the street retreat I stopped shaving and washing my hair. As my hair became greasy and darkness descended on my face, my sense of anxiety grew. Would I have the physical and emotional stamina to see this experience through? I have choices in my life. I have all the accoutrements of the "good life" – a nice car, a comfortable home, a loving family, and satisfying work. Shortly I would leave all this behind. I would wear the same clothes for four days and three nights, in temperatures cresting 100 degrees. With just a piece of ID and nothing more, I would need to survive on the streets of Austin. Twelve other hearty souls would be joining in this journey, not knowing from moment to moment whether or where we would eat or sleep, and what we would encounter.

The street retreat is a practice of renunciation. For a few days we renounce possessions, attachments, relations, ego ... and just live simply, asking for only what we need to get by. On the surface, it is like urban camping with survival skills. Deep inside, it is a journey of the soul. It would take me deeper into existential questions. I would see, more clearly, myself in others. With every connection, I came to realize that I could be on either side, and in the ultimate sense, I was on both. God (or fate or circumstances or the universe) placed me where I was and I was deliberately turning my world upside down.

As I reached into the trashcan and retrieved the discarded bottle, I felt a slight cringe. I might be spotted and what would they think of me? I quickly let go of that type of thinking. It was self-conscious, self-centered, and ultimately, self-defeating. I needed the bottle and someone had left it there for me. We walked in the hot sun toward the

Capitol Building. I ducked into a bathroom at a coffee shop to wash the bottle. Leaving the store, I imagined the looks when a non-paying customer, possibly a vagrant, uses the facilities. Would finding a bathroom for basic necessities be a challenge over the next few days? We continued walking.

We came upon our first display of unconditional kindness – a jeweler had placed a water cooler in front of his shop for thirsty pedestrians. It was a relief and a blessing. Moving a bit further we congregated under a shade tree on the lawn of the Capitol for our first “wisdom council.”

Sitting in a circle we began to meditate. After thirty minutes of meditation, we were instructed on the basic ground rules of the street retreat. Three times a day we would sit for meditation and sharing. It would be a difficult experience and we needed each other for support. Everyone came to this journey with preconceived notions. We had to let it all go. It was another act of renunciation.

The group was divided into two packs, each led by an experienced facilitator. Every person within the pack was paired with a buddy. During the day we would keep our buddy within sight at all times. At night, our buddy was to be no more than an arm’s length away. We would sleep together as a group for there was safety in numbers. But we would have to find a place to sleep. Nothing was prearranged.

We were to meld into the homeless experience but not to misrepresent ourselves as homeless. Our consciousness was to be guided by three tenets of the Zen Peacemaker’s Order: (1) Not knowing; (2) Bearing witness; and (3) Healing. “Not knowing” creates the freedom to see clearly, because ultimately we don’t really know, we just think we do. Forsaking preconceived notions and approaching each situation as if anew lets us see more clearly. We continually reexamine our relationship to an ever-changing reality. “Bearing witness” is being able to testify, to not look away from the aspects that make us uncomfortable. It takes courage to bear witness, but it is necessary for healing to occur. “Healing” is the process that brings the broken pieces together, after we have seen clearly (not knowing what we would see until we actually see it), bearing witness (by not looking

away as we experience even the unpleasantness), and taking action with a greater understanding.

We were all in a state of not knowing as the experience unfolded. And so we began our march to the Salvation Army for dinner. As we approached the building, we partnered up and were instructed to enter as pairs (easier to blend in), but to sit separately so we could meet with and interact with others on our own. Turning the corner and heading down the alley, most of us were taken aback by the hundreds of people lying about the pavement along the walls. It was like walking a gauntlet of homeless and for some, especially the women, warning bells began to internally sound. Some of the men looked rough and ragged, unshaven, some inebriated or high, all just waiting for a meal across the alley at Caritas, another kitchen for the homeless. We were going “the Army” for dinner that night.

No questions are asked when you stand in line for a free meal. Mostly the volunteers smile, say a friendly word, and hand over the food. I picked up a pale green tray. A young girl (who could have been my daughter) dished some stew-like concoction in one compartment, rice in another, and black-eyed peas in a third. A sweet roll, donut, or piece of cake was for dessert.

I sat down next to a few men. I nodded hello and began to eat. My table companions kept to themselves throughout the meal. Loneliness was my first impression of life on the streets. In a few days, I would glimpse camaraderie, family, and friendship. But on this first night as we ate in silence, my heart began to crack open at the sadness of living without a home, and all the warmth and security that the concept of “home” connotes.

I left the meat untouched, combined the rice and peas, added some Tabasco, and finished my meal. I took this as nourishment only, not for any sense of fine taste. I would later learn that the folks on the street could tell you where the best meals were served, where to find the best free coffee, how to get by at night, and a myriad other survival techniques. I couldn't help but think of the sorry state of their nutrition that night, and what havoc the sugary sweet high-fat empty-calorie desserts must play on their teeth. Still the hungry

were fed. Anyone, homeless or not, could partake of the meal. I spied what looked like students or travelers among us. Mostly there were just folks who were having a hard time making ends meet.

I met a couple that traveled from Colorado to Austin. He was a longhaired musician-type; she seemed to be an abused woman craving masculine attention. He was rough with her; she was loving in return. Life for women on the streets can be perilous. I was told that a woman's first order of business is to "hook up" with a man for protection. A lady we met had recently been thrown out of her ex-son-in-law's home and she had just arrived in Austin. In her 40's (but looking in her 60's), she found a fellow the very next day. It is simply a matter of survival.

Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness among women and children. Many are literally thrown out of their homes with little or no support. Of the women who become homeless due to abuse, 40% are not able to find room in a domestic violence shelter. There are three times as many animal shelters in the U.S. as there are shelters for battered women. More needs to be done.

After dinner we crossed the street to hang out at ARCH (Austin Resource Center for the Homeless). We just sat and rested. It was much cooler inside. We waited. We waited some more. I came face to face with my sense of restlessness. I lead a very busy life. Now all the busyness was gone. There was nowhere to go, no one to call, nothing to do. I started to settle into myself and slow down. First there was boredom. Then came spaciousness in the freedom I experienced when there was nothing at all to do. We waited some more and then ventured forth into the night.

It was getting late and we needed to find a place to sleep. We were not going to sleep in the shelters in order not to take up bed space for the real homeless. We began a long walk to find a safe place for the night.

Like many cities, Austin has laws prohibiting sleeping in city parks or public places. It is against the law to loiter on a park bench, and the homeless told us that the police would

rouse you to move, sometimes ticket you, or sometimes arrest you. We walked, hot and sweaty, out of the city limits and found the local Elks Lodge building. Nearby someone had left a bunch of cardboard boxes out for recycling. The cardboard was a treasure trove. We grabbed what we could. A couple of scouts determined that there was activity at the Lodge so we sat in the shadows, in the dark of a nearby tree, until all the cars were gone. Then we stealthily moved in pairs, dragging our cardboard behind the building. We were far from sight but still concerned that if a neighbor spotted us, the police might be minutes away. After 30 minutes, we relaxed. We laid out the cardboard. I unearthed a thin piece of Styrofoam (sleep number dialed to 1,000) and, lying in my sweaty clothing, I went to sleep. It was a restless night, trying to get comfortable on a piece of cardboard on the ground. It would turn out to be the best sleep of the three nights. I tossed and turned, shifting from one side to the other, and then it was morning. We managed to survive our first night as if we were homeless.

I didn't brush my teeth that morning (or the following two). Feeling rather grungy, we began to make our way across town. We said a silent thank you to the fitness company that laid out dozens of water jugs for runners in the park. We drank, filled our water bottles, and continued on our way. We passed a handful of bedraggled men. We said we were looking for a place to eat and they volunteered several options and directions. It was a reaching out to others in need (and we were the ones in need). They also told us where we could get day labor work. It was a kindness, an unexpected resource in the homeless community itself. Time and time again, members of the homeless community would reach out to each other. It was nothing more extraordinary than people helping other people.

I became keenly aware of the simple humanity that we all share, especially now that I was living as part of the homeless community. Where first I saw them as loners, I now began to recognize relationships and a communal spirit. Standing outside ARCH, a scrawny woman with no teeth smiled broadly at everyone and warmly embraced her friends. She suddenly became absolutely radiant. On the first day of this retreat, I felt distant and removed from my environment, observing the homeless like an anthropologist. Now I was sensing a commonality with them. My sense of

belongingness was shifting. The people I viewed as “outsiders” were no longer; the businesspeople I passed on the streets seemed ‘outsiders’ to me now.

We passed several homeless men, still sleeping in the park or on the grass near office buildings. Beer cans surrounded one fellow. My internal barometer registered compassion rather than judgment. I was becoming sensitized to the tremendous suffering in the streets, and in the souls of everyone we met – homeless or not. It was not my place to judge how someone gets by. It is my place to help whenever and wherever needed.

We arrived at the Salvation Army and learned that breakfast was over. They had stopped serving shortly before we arrived. We were directed to the Trinity Center but the doors would not open for a few hours. Some of us were able to snag a free cup of coffee at ARCH but when the coffee ran out, we moved to a hillside scattered with concrete rubble, in the yard of an abandoned church. There we would hold our first wisdom council of the day.

As before, we began in silent meditation. After affirmations and a brief liturgy, we passed the “talking stick” (in this case, a piece of rusted pipe) around the circle as each spoke his or her truth, sharing stories, impressions, and wisdom. A shout came from afar, and a disheveled young man approached the circle. Rick was clearly disturbed, likely suffering from a number of psychological maladies. He asked if we were a church group (we were not) and whether he could join us. This lonely man was looking for the companionship of strangers and he knew that men and women of faith were safe. We told Rick he could sit with us as we waited for the Trinity Center to open.

The Trinity Center’s target population is the homeless individuals and families who live and congregate in downtown Austin. We assembled along the wall outside the Center. The homeless are accustomed to getting in lines and waiting, and so we did the same. I spoke to a fellow behind me. He was a long-time resident of Austin. He said his disability check was late and he couldn’t pay the rent. He was “temporarily homeless,” hoping to find cheap housing as soon as the check arrived. Lack of affordable housing and no savings forced Tom onto the streets. Others would repeat the same tale as we

continued our journey. As studies indicate, the three principal causes for homelessness are lack of affordable housing, lack of living wage jobs, and lack of health and supportive services.

We shuffled into the large hall and took our seats. The pastoral assistants welcomed us and told us about the facilities. Two computers, connected to the Internet, were available for our use. Counselors were on duty for economic, financial, housing assistance, and social (psychological) needs. After the brief announcements, we lined up for breakfast. More lines. Everywhere we go, volunteers serve us in serving lines. This was one of the better meals: a hard-boiled egg, cheddar cheese in wrapper, flour tortilla, salt and pepper, orange wedge or part of a banana. One of my tablemates told me that the best free coffee in Austin was served here. He was right.

After our meal, several young men from the Church began to engage the group. Three put on a skit, enacting the David and Goliath story from the Bible. One read from Scripture. A young man sang religious songs and encouraged us to lift our voices. At the end, the volunteers mingled with the audience offering to assist in personal prayer. While I did not share their faith, I admired their conviction. They exemplified the best of religious tradition – hospitality to all, compassion, understanding, and solidarity. They offered counseling and assistance – financial, social, and spiritual. I left in good spirits and looked forward to my return.

We filled our water bottles at the church and walked into a blaze of heat. My partner and I made our way to the public library in downtown Austin. There we could rest, stay cool, use clean bathrooms, and not be hassled. Some of our group took time to read, send email, and catch a little sleep. We hopped on the Dillo, the free shuttle bus around Austin. After a complete circuit, we got off at the University and went to the art museum. We found out the museum was free the next day so we left and walked to the Texas State History Museum. Standing in the atrium admiring the art, I realized that the security guard was warily watching my every move. I went to the bathroom, expecting that we would soon be escorted. This was a new experience for me. After leaving on our

own accord, we walked through the State Capitol and landed on the other side, near the place where our group would convene for meditation and wisdom council.

We arrived at “the Army” too late for dinner that night. Fortunately, a loaves and fishes mobile van had parked in a nearby lot. A family of volunteers, husband, wife and young daughter, handed out sandwiches and fruit. I remembered how my own family had prepared sandwiches and distributed food to the homeless in Portland, Oregon. Now I was on the receiving end of the same type of line. When I stepped up to the window, the young girl gave me a small bottle of shampoo. She could tell I needed it. I recalled how my compassionate wife collects small toiletry bottles from hotels we visit, and then gives the toiletries to a homeless shelter or women’s safe house. This little bottle was making full circle, coming back to me. I thanked the young lady. In the days ahead, I would use the shampoo as soap whenever it was difficult to wash up.

That night we had difficulty finding a place to sleep. Several of our members were having trouble keeping up with all the walking. We commiserated with blistered feet and sore knees. At one of the city parks, in the shadow of downtown, we settled to sleep on the ground near a two-foot retaining wall. We lined up along the wall, where we would be less obvious to a passing policeman. One of us had the foresight to save a piece of cardboard from the previous night. I tore a cheap light rain parka and spread it on the ground. It was a miserable night. I tossed and turned all night, hardly getting any sleep at all. In the morning, I found my stomach and feet covered with insect bites. A fire ant hill was not very far away.

We walked slowly to the abandoned churchyard for our morning meditation and council. Our group continued to share our fears, discomforts, and the remarkable transformation in how we were relating to the men and women on the streets. We were developing an affinity for these people. Compassion trumped fear. We wanted to help. We had to first understand, to see clearly without knowing, to bear witness, and then to bring about healing.

Standing along the wall of the Trinity Center – waiting again – I watched the world pass lazily by. A particularly loud woman dressed like a prostitute stood in front of the center. She maintained a clear boundary around her, and warned others who came near her space to back away. The clean-shaven man behind me engaged in conversation. As others had before, he told me he was waiting for a paycheck, and then he'd find housing and be off the streets. Most homeless expect that their circumstances are temporary. It is a difficult life. There are resources, but obviously not enough. More help is needed.

We ate at the Trinity Center again. I recognized familiar faces, both the volunteers and the street people. I said a prayer of thanks for the food and blessings for the staff. After our meal, we lingered a bit, as we had nowhere in particular to go. When we returned to the circle, we were instructed on how to beg for change on the streets. Many of us were uneasy about the prospect. It is unpleasant to feel accosted so we didn't want to intrude in another's "space." But we needed to come face to face with the difficulty of asking for what we needed, and being able to accept rejection. It is critical to be able to ask for what you need, even if it makes another uncomfortable. For many homeless, it is matter of survival.

Begging within city limits is strictly prohibited but some disregarded the injunction. I had a lot of internal turmoil with the whole concept, thinking about how I have responded to panhandlers in the past. My partner and I walked to the convention center. Passing by men who could have easily been me in another life, I asked for spare change. A few gave me incredulous looks (like "get a job buddy"), muttered "no," and walked swiftly by. Others would not look at me or just say nothing at all. I mattered little to these people. In fact, it was clear that my presence was an intrusion in their conventional life. After a few hours, the asking became easier but the rejection continued. I still had no money. My partner did not fare much better. She collected less than a dollar in change. I was there to learn from those that gave and those that did not.

Later that day our group was resting on a bench near a bus stop. A homeless man asked us for spare change. We told him we had nothing. Sitting beside us on the bench was another homeless woman. All her worldly possessions were in four plastic shopping

bags. She reached into a pocket and retrieved some change. She gave a quarter to the beggar. In that moment, her generosity transformed the situation. She took from what little she had and shared it with this man. I observed how the more affluent tend to jealously guard their possessions, so strong are their attachments. For those with nothing, there is nothing to lose. Sharing becomes a way of life.

The last night we traveled to another part of town for a church-sponsored dinner. Standing in line with me was a young family – mother and two little children. The mother obviously loved these children and took good care of them. The kids were clean and happy. They played with each other while patiently waiting in line. I was glad that there is a place for them to go – a safe and warm environment to eat and rest. I wondered where they would sleep tonight.

Families with children are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population. 50% of all children in shelters show signs of anxiety and depression. Disruption in school studies means these kids are more likely to drop out of school. Children on the streets are the most vulnerable, subject to engaging in abusive behavior, addiction, crime, and prostitution. We need more day care to help homeless parents work their way off the streets while children are cared for in a safe and supportive environment. The Vogel Alcove Childcare Center for the Homeless in Dallas is one such institution, and I am proud of my daughter for having volunteered there during her teenage years.

We slept in the park our third night, waking about 4:00 am when some young people started drumming in a nearby gazebo. We were concerned that the police would come so we got up and moved. It was interesting to watch the city awake as we walked along the streets, a group of disheveled souls. This was our last day. By noon we would be returning to our “regular lives.”

Being part of the Retreat was a profound and moving experience. Treating others with dignity, caring for all who are suffering, lending a hand ... simple lessons but powerful experiences when you have nothing to offer but yourself. As a mediator, I know the

importance of paying respect to the parties and listening to their stories. Through that act of bearing witness, healing (a willingness to let go of conflict) may occur.

We share a common humanity, regardless of our life conditions. Each of us is deserving of dignity, of recognition. The longer I stayed on the streets, the more acute the feeling that my identity was being shaped by the surroundings. I was becoming more comfortable relating to the homeless because the others refused to relate to me.

Businesspeople would turn away from me, refuse to make eye contact, deny my very existence. A kind word, a smile, any reaching out made my situation more tolerable. It is critical to look at that which makes us uncomfortable and not to turn away. Therein lies the dignity and humanity. If you don't want to give money to a person in need, at least look at them, acknowledge them, speak kindly, and lift them up in your eyes. That, in itself, is a gift.

Before the Retreat, I struggled with whether to give to a beggar. Of course, the gift of dignity and recognition can always be offered, but what about money? Before the Retreat, I would wonder what they might do with money. Will they buy drugs or alcohol? Am I fueling an addiction? Is this a "scam?" Do they prefer to panhandle as a way of life? By giving, am I encouraging someone to beg and not to work?

Many religious traditions teach that the one asking is giving us an opportunity to give. The good deed is being able to give, and then giving. The giver needs the one in need. The two are interdependent – one cannot exist without the other. When someone asks for help, we have the opportunity to practice open-heartedness, generosity of spirit, and compassion. We can see how under other circumstances, we could be standing in that person's shoes. When we see our face in the face of the stranger, we have indeed touched the deepest part of our humanity.

Does it matter how the money will be spent? I am paid for my work and not once has anyone asked me how I intend to spend my money. At the end of the day I might settle down with a scotch, smoke a cigar, drink a cup of coffee. Addictions? They might be,

and the people who pay for my services finance those habits. I am not cross-examined on how I will spend my money. Why do I feel compelled to question others?

For someone living on the streets, I have learned not to judge what it takes to get through a day. I would rather they ask for what they need than steal it. In addition (but not in lieu), I would financially support the programs that uplift and restore dignity to these people – housing assistance, job placement, counseling programs, 12-step programs, and the like.

Thieves and charlatans abound, but not just among the homeless. Do we refuse to invest in the stock market after hearing about rogue brokers? Will we stop eating at restaurants because a friend gets food poisoning at a café? Isolated incidents ought not taint our global perspective. There is wisdom in the adage that “one bad apple does not spoil the bunch.” Even if a cottage industry of beggars was developing, we must look at the causes and conditions that give rise to it. Getting at the root cause of suffering is far better than turning away those truly in need simply because we are offended by the actions of a few.

Being free of money and possessions, even for a few days, was an unusual experience. The relative importance of our “stuff” evaporates when living simply. This is not idealizing poverty but acknowledging that the chains of our possessions often prevent us from touching what is real and meaningful. An experience of doing without can be the catalyst for tremendous personal growth.

Like wandering monks and mendicants of various spiritual traditions, being on street retreat is an experience I would recommend for many others, especially my colleagues – lawyers, judges, and businesspeople. In the meantime, here are a few ideas we can do:

- 1) Treat all human beings with dignity and respect. Do not look away, regardless of how uncomfortable you feel. Then examine your discomfort. Look in their eyes. Smile. Say a gentle word, even if you think you cannot help, you are by doing this.

- 2) Care about those less fortunate and try to lift them up. Start with your thoughts, and then bring action to your intentions. Be generous with your time and your money.
- 3) Buy the “Street News,” the newspaper written and distributed by the homeless. For every paper sold, money is set aside in a special savings account earmarked for rent.
- 4) Distribute food to the homeless – take a few extra sandwiches and pass them out.
- 5) Give recyclables to the homeless – collecting and cashing in on recyclable material is honest hard work.
- 6) Clean out your closet and give away the clothing you no longer wear. If you haven’t touched it in over a year, donate it.
- 7) Give away the toys your children are no longer using. Make it a habit to buy a new toy for a homeless child every time you buy a new toy for your own child. Engage your children in this activity.
- 8) Support institutions that help the homeless – food banks, shelters, counseling agencies, rehabilitation programs, job training. Donate time and money.
- 9) Volunteer – at a soup kitchen, a shelter, a women’s safe home, tutor homeless children, conduct a food drive, spend time talking with the homeless. Don’t be afraid. Engage your children in helping others. Teach by example.
- 10) Support the creation of more affordable housing and transitional living arrangements.
- 11) Combat violence in society. Begin in your own heart, and then extend your efforts to community-based models of dispute resolution.
- 12) Go on a Street Retreat and see for yourself!

This is our world and we are responsible for each other.

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