

Street Retreat 2
Russell Delman October 2014

Last month I announced a new experiment for the Embodied Life School {POST LINK to first article}. December 17-20 we are hosting a Street Retreat in San Francisco in conjunction with the Zen Peacemakers. The response has been intriguing. A few people want to join us, a few have reservations about the whole undertaking and many have expressed gratitude for the way their perception of homeless people has been influenced just from reading the invitation.

Today, I am writing to tell you more about the retreat and to invite you to join us. In addition I will respond to some of the questions that have arisen.

The street retreat was created by Bernie Glassman Roshi as a way of expanding the usual Zen practice of meditation in cloistered settings to experiencing life on the streets in metropolitan areas around the world. Zen is the study of living and dying. Bernie saw that living in more vulnerable, insecure ways could be illuminating for his students.

After starting in New York, these retreats have taken place throughout the world for the last twenty years. All participants live without money, dependent on the goodwill of others for three days. Living in such dependency and without any goals other than simply living can be quite challenging for most of us. Also, the requirement that each retreatant raise at least \$500.00 to be donated to homeless organizations from friends and family and not from their own funds creates quite a challenge for many. Most participants are economically comfortable and often self-identified as the people who take care of others.

Questions:

First, my favorite questions: what is the point? Why put yourself in such an uncomfortable and dependent situation? Do you think you are really experiencing homelessness?

The first and most accurate answer is "I don't know". I imagine that the learning will be different for each person. The "point" may reveal itself after the retreat, right now I just have some ideas. I see that there are many potential opportunities for learning while living on the streets. There is no illusion that this is the same as actually being homeless. Homelessness usually includes a sense of hopelessness. All the retreatants know that a warm bath, plenty of food and a comfortable bed await them after these three days. There is no illusion that we will know what true homelessness feels like.

For me the most important experience that comes from meditation is not bliss, it is the sense of interconnectivity with all of life. To be "One with All" is not an abstract concept, it might become a living experience. The street retreat is an opportunity to experience one's connection with all of life. What is it like to depend on others for everything? What is it like to be ignored, scorned upon or given to? What happens when "those people" who seem so dirty and dangerous are not "other"? Is it possible to include all beings in one's field of care? This is not a sociological experiment. This is not to show that we can do it. This is a way of growing our capacity for connection to life.

Don't you disrupt the lives of the actual homeless?

This is a key question for me. I have connected with a few people who work with the homeless and learned a bit about life on the streets. People on the streets often have their own corners for begging. We always respect these territories. While we learn about free meals and beds offered by churches and other organizations, we are mindful of the needs of the truly homeless. We will access these offerings with consciousness of the needs of others.

Where do you sleep and what do you take with you?

Part of the day is finding cardboard and locations for sleeping in the cold winter night. We use shelters if there are enough beds. We only have the clothes on our backs, plus a thin blanket and possibly a poncho. We don't shower and men don't shave for the week before the retreat and we all wear old, dingy clothing. We don't take anything else other than prescription drugs and one piece of identification.

Where do you find toilets?

Anywhere we can.

Is it safe especially for women?

In the twenty years of doing these street retreats no one has been harmed. We all travel with a buddy so we are not alone and we don't wander too far from the whole group. In addition we meet at least twice a day in parks to share our experiences, meditate and do other practices together.

What do you hope to learn?

My hope is to learn about living without any direction or goals other than living. In most of my life there is an intention, a direction, a purpose to my day. Even on vacation I am intending toward enjoyment or relaxation. What is it like to just live? Isn't this the main purpose of Zen retreats, to discover what it is just to be alive?

Who can join the retreat?

All are welcome.

If this feels right for you, please contact my office at office@Russelldelman.com

Why do you collect \$500.00 per person?

The idea is to ask your circle of people to support the retreat. The intention is two fold: first the money is sent to organizations working with homelessness. This benefits many. Second, as I am discovering, it is challenging to the "ego structure" of many relatively successful people to ask others for money. It would be easier for most of the participants to pay for themselves. Each participant creates a mala- a string of beads- as a remembrance for the retreat. Each donation becomes a bead on the string thus we carry our supporters with us.

If you want to donate to my mala please send a check made out to Russell Delman and send to 2836 Bloomfield Rd Sebastopol, CA 95472 OR use PayPal and send to office@russelldelman.com (note "street retreat") Maximum donation I am accepting is \$20.0

Wishing you well.....Russell