What compels us? What’s the cost? These are questions I ask myself almost every day. Kay Jorgensen and I started asking these questions more than 22 years ago as we were founding Faithful Fools together. We asked these questions at our first preparation meeting for our first street retreats. And we ask them today when we prepare to spend 7-days on retreat in the streets.

Like all good questions, over time our responses move out of the head and rise to consciousness from the cells of our bodies where our experiences and knowledge of life, our joys and struggles have settled. The answers aren’t simple, and most often continue to arise over our lifetime, showing up years after finishing the retreat.

Walking my questions in the streets in quiet dialogue with myself and with people around me is how I learn. A couple of weeks ago, as I was walking, I found myself thinking about my dad, about Kay, as well as Stone Allen, Edward Tyler and so many others who have passed away and whom I loved deeply and dearly. It was one of those moments where I was questioning whether I had spent enough time with them... how often I didn’t make it to visit them or sit down and talk because life was so full. As I was feeling some angst that they are gone and that I didn’t have more time, or didn’t take more time with them, a voice rose up inside of me through the density of my doubts: Would any amount of time have been enough time?!

It is in the streets where we meet and where we are leveled. That is how the word “street” became part of our identity: Faithful Fools Street Ministry, Faithful Fools Street Community, Faithful Fools Street Level Learning. I have been walking the streets of San Francisco for over 22 years, as well as the streets of Nicaragua, Chicago, St. Paul, and my home town of Elk River, MN before that, and what I have learned about what compels me is that my heart and mind beat in relationship with a whole world that I care deeply about. The cost is that I cannot and do not want to turn away. Our well-being is bound up with one another and we have work to do together.

This corporation (known as Faithful Fools) intends to foster awareness & analysis of deteriorating social conditions in the United States and the world at large, seen from the level of the streets, and to facilitate individual and collective responses thereto.

Faithful Fools Corporate Bylaws
Love Letter to The TL

From Elise Youssoufian

I don’t know what I want to say...
Something Significant. Something with Presence.
Something that touches people, touches me.
Something that makes change and shakes us to the core,
Wakes us up from the death-drive nightmares
Of capitalism and greed poisoning the waters of our only world.
Something that opens our eyes and our hearts,
That makes visible the threads of our lives
Weaving us together and shining all around us.

As I walk the streets, sometimes our threads gleam
With the almost blinding light of reflection
Bouncing off gold teeth and broken glass
And the shattered dreams glittering the sidewalk.

On the streets, the threads of our lives catch
On every unkind word and all the hugs and sirens and smiles,
On social justice street art and new police badges and old wheelchairs,
On invisible poets without shelter and the howls of cacophonous cat calls,
On school kids laughing and drug deals making life terribly bearable,
And on my sewing needles and visions of marigolds and Peace Poles,
Uplifting an army of us Fools, walking in time
With the thrum of the streets
That dances a duel with our beating hearts.

Now and then our intertwining threads are lit by the sun,
Through the tiny window at noontime when its warming rays
Reach the streets, frozen for a few moments,
Caught between temples of concrete and glass.
Stifled by the silence of steel beams and starless skies.
Where can I breathe? Where can we seek refuge?
Into the streets I go, again and again,
Walking and asking...
So, what do I want to say? Something with Presence,
That allows me to witness and be witnessed.
Something that helps me remember
Not all the beauty is revealed at once.
I step into the streets,
And everything changes...
Goings On:
The TL owes community activist Cheryl Shanks (immediate right) great gratitude. She’s accomplished so much. Cheryl’s father, Clarence E. Block wrote the poem on the back cover. Linda Chrisman (right), too, is doing her fair share. She’s been with the Fools since 2007 providing trauma recovery and resilience work (Somatic Experiencing). This last spring, Linda began volunteering with GLIDE’s harm reduction outreach team.

Goings On: Ade Kroll has a long history with Faithful Fools. Among the very first Fools, in fact. But we suspect that her history of blowing bubbles preceeds even her connection with the Fools. Here we see her giving expert bubble blowing advice to Turqoise and Tammy Lundy (above). Even Jolie Slater our newest Mercy Corps Volunteer and Maggie Brennan in her second year as a Mercy Corps Volunteer have benefited from Ade’s expertise and guidance.

Goings: We have such fond memories of Hy Carrel and Nicole Fusco. Here’s Hy in 2017. Having volunteered with us for a few years, he then came on as a full-time, full-presence Fool. And Nicole came to the Fools as a Mercy Corps Volunteer 2016. She stayed on as a 2nd year volunteer and then she stayed for a 3rd year as a full-time Fool. She and Hy moved back east together in September. We tied purple yarn around their wrists for good luck and to remind them of how much we treasure them.

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Goings On: Jackie Hider, anchors us in the practices of presence and connection. She knows our neighbors, keeps us connected to Night Ministry, the Soujourn Chaplaincy program at SF General Hospital, and so much more. Jackie’s presence is an on-going exploration of what it means to be a street chaplain. She reminds us to reflect on our experiences and to question the all-too-easy stories we tell ourselves about the other human beings around us.

Goings: And who kept us all informed by writing, editing, and sending out the monthly Fools eNews? Mary Ganz of course!! Now she is well and duly retired these days. We have such wonderful memories of Mary, laughing with all kinds of friends and noting the comings, the goings, and the goings-on about the Fools Court.

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Comings: Sharon Weld, enjoying a moment of levity with Sam Dennison, is following in the footsteps of some very notable Fools. She is now the connecting Unitarian-Universalist Intern, walking the path between the UU congregation where Kay Jorgensen began and the Tenderloin. The path she walks keeps us connected to our roots and keeps the streets of the TL present with our friends up the hill.

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If you saw Stone on the street, you more likely than not wouldn’t have noticed him. Or if you did, you might have stepped away from him. He looked like any number of people who live on the streets. He was a unique individual who couldn’t be protected from the chaos of schizophrenia by family or financial resources.

**STONEWALL ALLEN**

(1955-2019)

As a young man, Stone Allen was as much a founding Fool as Kay Jorgensen and Carmen Barsody. If he wasn’t a formal member of the Fools’ Board of Directors, as Quentin Olwell was, his influence on the practices of presence and accompaniment are felt as keenly today as when he spent an afternoon with Quentin or a morning with Kay.

Thursdays, for sure, and most other days too, you could see Stone, a lone figure, sitting near the Fools’ Court, waiting to talk with someone (like Hy or Ade or Alex), for resources, or simply to find a place to hangout indoors. So often if he tried to spend time in a business, he was rushed out the door or scrutinized closely if he stayed too long. Those few places, like the Fools, where he could linger were his homes.

Highly creative, intelligent, and imaginative, Stone made works of art (a decorative spear made from a cigarette pack and a stick). One day, lacking a lighter, he pulled a magnifying glass out of one of his very large pockets. As Sam looked on, intrigued, he tilted it just so and focused the warmth of the sun on the tip of his cigarette. In no more time that it would have taken to strike a match, he lit his smoke with the power of the sun! He truly was a citizen scientist and urban survivalist.

Stone was a man of the streets. He knew his life was hard and he often felt betrayed by a civilization that dismissed his pain, exiled him from the conversations he longed to have, and cast his talents aside. But he remained connected to his family, to us, and to the City. So, we honor his wit and wisdom, his imagination and intelligence, and we will continue to honor him as a founding Fool.

**Acknowledging each human’s incredible worth**

**Seeing the light, courage, intelligence, strength, and creativity of the people we encounter.**
Conditions on the streets have been deteriorating for decades, since well before Faithful Fools was founded. We have pictures taken in our early days of people sleeping in doorways and pushing their belongings in carts. The streets today, however, are far more crowded than they were then. Generational poverty and the chronic lack of housing means that people no longer see a way out of poverty. So now they don’t just scavenge cardboard for the night, they invest in tents for the long haul, and they are building communities wherever they can—under highway bridges, in alleys, in parking lots and along sidewalks.

The City’s attempts to clear the streets of tents and drug trafficking entails bringing out fire hoses as if the sidewalks only need a good cleaning, as if the suffering that grows out of poverty can be washed away with the gum and the grease and the dog waste. There is an idea that we can make laws to force people who are poor to stop living out the consequences of poverty. It’s really just the human desire for simplicity, and we hear it from lawmakers and neighbors alike: “Some people choose to live on the streets. They are happier there. They choose their drugs over their families. If they really had to face the consequences, they would change.” But we are reminded daily, from the level of the streets, that such simplistic thoughts hide the reality that keep people on the streets. Generations of poverty and racism give people the strength to survive on the streets but rob them of the resources (the housing, the jobs, the education, and the health care) to live well.

People are called “service resistant” if they can’t or won’t endure life in the shelters. With rigid rules and routines, shelter life is much more like being in jail than on a path to housing. Any stability, even if it’s sleeping on the same stretch of sidewalk night after night, is critical to survival. But strict laws against sitting, lying, and having tents on sidewalks threaten that small mechanism for building community. Aggressive enforcement of those laws is a practice that leaves trauma in its wake, evidenced by flaring tempers, vacant eyes, and broken trust. These are the deteriorating conditions that we attend to, day-in and day-out.

The Peace Pole is our reminder to resist the break down of our community. Our revolution, here on the 200 block of Hyde St., is a quiet one. Our neighbors on the streets are voting, (sometimes for the very first time), they return after the fire hoses are put away and take up their places again, they keep Narcan on hand in case someone overdoses, and they sit with one another, enjoying the community that aggressive laws try to banish.

We respond as individuals. We respond collectively. We are reminded that if peace is to prevail, it will only be because we have become people who are truly accountable for the wellbeing of our local, national, and global communities.
On July 24, 2019, after nearly two weeks of protest, Puerto Rico’s governor, Ricardo Roselló, resigned. The resignation was less than courageous, delivered late in the night via Facebook video.

I was there waiting upon the cobblestone streets in front of the governor’s mansion, chanting amid the flags, the coolers of beer, the flag vendors and newscasters awaiting their cue to go live. Preceded by decades of corruption, squandered resources, the theft of education, health, and opportunity, the protests manifested after a private group text chat belonging to top officials was uncovered by Puerto Rico’s center for investigative journalism. After Hurricane Maria, the disdain, vileness, and shame found in those chats were too much.

We were unified on the streets of San Juan, even those of us from the small-est corners of the diaspora, because we had all been touched in some way by Hurricane María.

In Puerto Rico, we will find a way to celebrate anything. The protests were themed street parties beginning with ghetto kings revvng dirt bikes outside the capital building to jíbaros on horseback, activists on kayaks and so on. One steaming day a million of us, octogenarian to infant, marched along the highway. Just as the DJs were setting up for the night’s theme, perreo (think raunchy dancing), I found myself tired of waiting on Ricky and went down to one of the placitas. The plena players were singing, “You ain’t the boss no more! No! You’re not my boss no more.”

On the streets of Puerto Rico, it was loss and injustice and our island home that connected us as a collective. Human connection has been an ever prevalent and deepening realization in my recent years defined by family—the birth of my son, the passing of elders—and the brief bursting moments that fold day over day through my work on the streets of the Tenderloin.

From left to right: Chucky Torres, Ximena Gasca-Iranzo and Fernando Pujals. These Boricuas of the diaspora have found connection and community at the Fools. Chucky became close to Kay many years ago and remains close to us. Fernando is our friend at the Tenderloin Community Benefits District. And Ximena? She lives across the street and is as full-time as a Fool can get!
I shall walk in the streets
Among you my friends
My earthly brothers and sisters,
Any when you see me --
And I you --
We shall know each other
For you are my image,
And I'm yours --
For we are of the Creator.
The Creator, whom I should know
(But I don't)
I believe --
But do I? --
Among you my friends
I'm like you --
But I'm not --
I seek the truth,
And you are the truth
Because you are yourselves
My friends,
my earthly brothers and sisters.
Look at us --
We're White,
Black,
Brown,
Red,
Isn't it beautiful?
We are like a bouquet of roses,
We are all one,
But yet we're not...

That's the challenge --
But yet it's not.
Because the good flower
Will shine
I'll have a universal smile --
A smile that's real --
The other flower
Shall have no glow...
Profitable success it may have
But it really won't.

But now here we are
In the streets among each other!
For we are truly
Earthly brothers and sisters.

By Clarence E. Block