A Discovery of Our Common Humanity
by Christina Riechers

Displaced, I timidly walk down the streets to venture more deeply into the heart o’ the Tenderloin. I remind myself of the Faithful Fools’ words which ask us to shake off any expectations we have brought with us, and to examine the stereotypes we hold. As I walk past “bums” and other “derelicts” who line the sidewalks and doorsteps, I purposefully begin my search for what is behind the grime, and filth-covered second-hand clothing.

I lower my eyes away from the uncomfortable stares of the homeless and realize I am reacting like a green foreigner dodging assimilation. I am adhering to the advice frequently given about passing the homeless: “Don’t make eye contact.” Aware that my uneasiness shines through, I pull up my shoulders from their semi-slouched position, lift my chin, and stride with increased confidence down the street. Appearing scared of these streets and their inhabitants is not going to help me accomplish the tasks at hand. What are my tasks at hand? Do I need to be somewhere at a certain time, or find a specific person? I don’t—that is strange as I usually have a crazy agenda. Today it is just me, my thoughts, and those people for whom I have been taught to be wary.

www.faithfulfools.org
The Fools’ Court...an Art Center...a Place of Celebration...

...this place where myths get shattered, where we all are invited to open up to our own humanity and find our commonness—the homeless and the homeless who are poets, dancers, painters, maskmakers, actors, singers, filmmakers, drummers, snilters, clappers, bubble blowers, minstrels, tellers of tales, jugglers—All are welcome!

Art’s Director... Martha Boesing, playwright and actor, has joined us as Director of the Art’s Center. Martha has been a faithful fool all her life. She fits like an old shoe and already has gathered artists from the neighborhood and the wider Bay Area to join her in envisioning what a Faithful Fools’ Art Center can be. In no time at all you will be invited to attend a play or even be in it.

We Remember and Extend Gratitude To... All who attended Oscar’s Feast, a magical night with Chef John Hearnberger and Andrea Jorgensen serving a meal that couldn’t help but warm our hearts. David Jones made music on the piano and Nicolette Toussaint wrote a play for Oscar to, kind of, follow...Yoci Choral Ensemble who co-produced a benefit for the Faithful Fools at the First Unitarian Universalist Society in SF, followed by a decadent reception catered by Eva Webber, Kathy Hamaker and their faithful kitcheners. Nancere Lemoins, a local artist, who has exhibited her powerful artwork at the Fools’ Court...Children from the neighborhood cultural center, guided by art students from the University of San Francisco, who exhibited their art and had an opening with soda pop and cookies...Erik Robertson and Janice King who graced the space with their book signing of Green Glasses...Diane Sherman and friends who created, Gathering of Hearts, a performance night with dance, poetry and song as a fund raiser for the Faithful Fools. Manisha Patel and Mark Wagner enlivened the Fools’ Court with their paintings for the occasion. Heike Wrede, Riki Bloom, Andres Rojo, ‘Til Dawn, a teenage a cappella group, & DJ Geej Mauriva all participated. And let us not forget Oscar...Unitarian Universalist Young Adults who sponsored a techno benefit dance to raise funds for the ministry...Nine at Night Productions, with film maker Rob Nilsson, who bring tremendous energy and life to the Fools’ Court every week...And Fools do weddings in the court...Nicolette Toussaint and Mason Ingram proclaimed their commitment publicly, with Kay as their minister. Beautiful!

Franciscan Srs. of Little Falls, MN
Idaho Falls, Idaho
Artists
United Copy Service
Business with Heart

Ramesh Patel, the previous owner of the building and business, was a presence of joy and bountiful generosity of spirit through his copy service. What made him successful was the respectful relationship he established with every person that walked through his door, whether they needed one copy or a thousand copies. Ramesh referred to his customers as "family."

Michael Hagerstrom, Brian Darr, Diane Sherman, along with Ramesh's ongoing support, are the generous hearts who are getting to know "the family." Ramesh is passing on to them the infinite amount of knowledge he has gained throughout his years in the copy service.

Michael, Brian, Diane and Ramesh are part of the overall ministry of the Faithful Fools. Together with the Fools of the Round Table, the staff and volunteers they are imagining ways to integrate the spirit and the mission into the day to day operation. There are visions of expanding the services to include a center for skills enhancement for people who come to us through the ministry.

We invite you to come visit us. Bring us your copy business from your office, school, church, or business. We bind, fax, print, fold and COPY. We are honored to serve the Tenderloin Community and beyond. You can even wear a Fool's hat while you wait.

Call us at 415-673-4567, Monday through Friday from 9:30 til 5:30. In conjunction with United Copy, Diane Sherman offers her graphic services. She can be contacted at 510.757.7890.
Dear Friends,

"Welcome All Fools" is the greeting that meets you at our front door. We invite you in. We invite you to join with us in our personal reflections of what it means to live within a neighborhood where the face of human suffering is not masked. Walking the streets we see the effects of an incessant appetite for accumulated wealth and power which is devouring property, people, nature and the human spirit.

We begin each street retreat walking from Cathedral Hill where there is wealth and privilege into the Tenderloin where there is poverty and deprivation. The same streets connect these two realities. As we walk, we begin to grapple with the judgments, attitudes, assumptions, myths and fears that arise within us that keep us separate from knowing our common humanity.

The Mayor removes the benches from United Nation's Plaza to prevent homeless people from sitting there. We, sitting in the place of privilege have the audacity to express outrage without being impelled to act.

Michael is forced to close his Tenderloin Petals Flower Shop after 20 years because Skyline Corporation bought the building and more than tripled his rent. This corporate self interest not only robbed Michael of his livelihood but took from us, his neighbors, the beauty of flowers on the sidewalks and the joy of his helping us find the right flower for the occasion.

As we walk the streets we meet signs of "No Loitering," "No Public Restrooms," "No Lying Down," "No Sitting on the Grass," "No Trespassing." We come face to face with the power that withholds. And we come face to face with our participation in the withholding.

We hear people say that all people on the streets are addicted to drugs and alcohol. We cannot generalize that all people who are homeless are unemployed, addicted to drugs and alcohol, or suffer from mental illness. These addictions are prevalent at all levels of our society.

In our ministry we encounter working and non-working families who are forced to live in shelters that are sordid and crowded. We witness the pain of children as they begin to live in the cycle of neglect and poverty.

It is the fool in the king's court who is looked upon to speak the truth. While living and working within the Tenderloin we aspire to be fools; to tell the truth of what we witness. One truth is, "your liberation is bound up with mine;" homed and homeless, privileged and deprived. Our action is not to push people away and out of sight. It is to acknowledge the worth and dignity of each person such that we walk together towards healing and the potential of a better life.

Fools Fables is a messenger. It brings the news from the court and the active daily life of the Faithful Fools. We hope it inspires you to come join us. We say to you, "Welcome All Fools!"
Thank You Supporters

"If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."  —Aboriginal Woman

UU Church of SF

UU Church of Kensington

Coming of Age Youth
Discovering Humanity continued

I stand at the opening of the United Nations Plaza. The plaza is a wide concrete walkway, surrounded by grass, benches line both sides of the concrete. In the grass are tall maple trees with green and brown leaves. But this is no tourist park, rather a regular homeless area. Most of the homeless clump together in groups, some stand and talk like students during milk break, and others lounge on the benches. I never really considered homeless people to have “cliques” like kids do. Instead, I assumed homeless people were solitary beings.

With a deep breath I gather enough nerve to stop in front of a grungy-looking couple and comment on the weather. The woman gazes up at me, with a look of surprise and suspicion etched into her weathered face. She answers with an equally trivial response. She is petite, with long unkept brown hair, small facial features, and dull green eyes. She moves closer to the male beside her, and motions for me to sit. Her hands are delicate, but not at all like my grandmother’s dainty soft white hands. Hers appear just as fragile, but have experienced the rough forces of nature—too many unsheltered days and nights. She wears small sneakers, which probably once were white, but now are blotchy gray. Her brown pants are a bit too long, and are frayed at the bottom and at the seams. As I sit, I self-consciously attempt to shift my legs from her direction, embarrassed by my new, dark blue jeans. I am soon enmeshed in conversation with Bunny.

While Bunny and I talk, her husband reads the 2-day-old San Francisco Chronicle and scans articles and scour the want ads for work. As we speak a lady comes with bags of clothes she is giving away. She calls out to people to take what they want. Bunny excuses herself for a moment and joins the few who take advantage of the offer, returning with a small plastic bag. Item by item, Bunny assesses the clothes by size, whether or not they will fit her or her husband. One item is a used eighties style lavender sweater. Bunny holds up the sweater in front of her, looks at me with a grateful smile and says, “Isn’t this beautiful?” A friend of Bunny’s comes and stands beside us. She is shivering. The woman reeks of marijuana, and I look at her unmanaged dirty blond hair, her missing teeth, and how her left hand quivers. The one that holds her cigarette.

Without a second’s hesitation, Bunny hands the woman her treasured new sweater, and says, “Here, you look cold, take this sweater. The lavender is a beautiful color and will look good on you.” That exemplified the true meaning of sharing. Bunny possesses few material objects, yet she just gave away the little she did have. This experience is why I am out on the streets speaking to homeless people. It’s not to help them as much as it is to help me understand who these people are, which is, PEOPLE. They are so capable of and willing to love, perhaps more than many other “normal” homed people.

Part of the Faithful Fools’ mission statement hit me that day, “We discover on the streets our common humanity.” If Bunny is not an example of humanity in its most sacred form, then I do not know what is.

(Christina Reicher is a senior at Napa Highschool.)
Street Retreat Reflections

...I am offered soup in U.N. Plaza, and leftovers from someone's meal at the soup kitchen...Lunch at St. Anthony's—nervous to go in, but wonderful once in...lots of tablemates coming and going...

...Walking, walking...Smells of rubber from the tire store, frying onions, urine, and bus exhaust...Noise everywhere, longing for repose...

...Hugs from complete strangers...Uncomfortable moments of silence...laughter, so much laughter today with complete strangers...

...These homeless here are the same faces I've been meeting with for 13 years in A.A...

...Homeless people sitting in the benches...Lots of homeless people pulling their carts which have all their belongings...

...I still don't know how to approach to my neighbors, how to have connection with people who live on the street...

...Seeing all the homeless kids and old people made it worse...They are in stages of their lives where they need others for support...

...As I walk I feel alone...as I walk I feel scared...as I walk I feel confused...

...I wasn't as open as I wished I were...I never asked anyone any personal questions...Should I have?...

...I am asked by a black man "Who are you?"...He says "I see you."...It is not only I who bear witness...

"My initial motive for becoming a Fool was to help implement change. And, that has happened—I've changed."

—Quentin Olwell

Intern Musings

How can I summarize my learnings from this year of becoming a Faithful Fool, and bear witness to this time in one paragraph? One learning is that the boundaries between the walls we call church or home and the streets are actually very thin. People cross the boundaries every day—I meet someone in church that I might have expected to see on the streets or I encounter a problem on my home doorstep. That is similar to one in the UN Plaza. When I talk to someone who is coping with her present and past pain, I realize what I do to cope and where I need to be more open. When I worry about what's coming next for me, I remember how much more I need to trust the pennies. But I have learned to trust a bit more, to separate myself a bit less, and to savor the silence that births each response. I've let go of the discomfort of my first street retreat in being "discovered" as a non-street person, and instead just see where each conversation leads. Awareness of my judgments and where they come from has grown. I am deeply grateful for this year and for my teachers, particularly Kay and Carmen, but especially each person I've met.

—Karen Day

If you have questions about internships, call us at 415.474.0508.
2001 Street Retreats
August 11th
September 29th
October 27th
November 17th
December 15th

Fees & Donations
We ask for a donation of $45—$200 for the retreat and the ongoing work of the Faithful Fools. If that is not within your means, please give whatever you can even if that be a smile or the tip of your hat. Please call Kay or Carmen at 415.474.0508 for information.

Check our website:
www.faithfulfools.org

Faithful Fools Mission Statement
We are called to a ministry of presence that acknowledges each human’s incredible worth. We seek to meet people where they are without judgment through the arts, education, advocacy and accompaniment. We participate in shattering myths about those living in poverty, seeing the light, courage, intelligence, strength and creativity of the people we encounter. We discover on the streets our common humanity through which celebration, community and healing occur.

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