Fools Fables
20 Years
In The Tenderloin
The Only Place to Start is In the Middle

By Sam Dennison
Fools Fables Editor and Designer

Every now and then someone shows up offering to make a documentary about the Faithful Fools. Indeed, I was that person the first time I came here seven years ago. Playing around with the idea of becoming a videographer, I came for a month to see if I could capture the ephemeral appeal of the Fools through interviews and video of everyday activities. Like many others, before and since, I gathered a great deal of material—more than 30 hours of oral histories and B-roll footage—but in the end, it lay beyond my abilities to shape it into a coherent “story.”

You see it’s not that the Fools’ story is impossible to tell; it’s just that it’s more like a thick medieval tapestry than a book or a movie. Like a tapestry it takes a long time to fully appreciate the details that transform thin threads into a rich, visceral experience. Each thing we do is entwined with something else, and everything we do depends on the people around us. If we think of this life as a tapestry, we begin to see how weaving is complex, how if you trace a single thread, you get caught up in the beauty of its path. On the other hand, if we cannot be confined. Along the way, we have learned how our well-being is bound up with our neighbors, be they living on the streets of San Francisco or in the countryside of Nicaragua.

So here seven years on, I am the editor and designer of this edition of Fools Fables, trying to capture how it is we have come to this moment in the ways that we have. I am still not sure there is a way to tell it as a coherent story, at least not one that radiates out from this small, steadfast community of Fools.

Stories harrowing to one another across pages and years is how we make meaning out of our lives. The trick to explaining the life of the Fools (or anyone’s life for that matter) is to avoid trying to tell the story as if there were only one story to tell. And each time the story is told, why not start at a different place? Our lives here at the Fools have many beginnings. Each of us has at least one story that starts with an encounter with a Fool or two, but Faithful Fools, as a whole, also began when Kay and Carmen met, so you see, there are many beginnings. More than anything, however, we are a community of people who welcome other people and in doing so we begin something new.

Our building is central to our story (that’s why it is on the cover) because our presence in the Tenderloin is intentional, and our presence in this particular place connects us to the larger world. A Fool by definition is one who crosses a threshold in medieval times moving easily from the palace to the streets and back again, often as one who heard and told both sides of a story. Without a doorway and without crossing through it into the wider world, we simply could not be Fools. In that sense, we cannot be confined. Along the way, we have learned how our being is bound up with our neighbors, be they living on the streets of San Francisco or in the countryside of Nicaragua.

The Fools live and teach a culture of abundance, not a culture of scarcity. There is always room for one more at the table. The Fools use their pennies wisely, and leverage their pennies, so that they can do a lot with a comparatively small number of pennies. That makes it more likely that people who have lots of pennies will give some of their pennies to the Fools. The Fools will make the same number of pennies do more and go further than people with lots of pennies would. The Fools pick up the two pennies on the sidewalk because they know they will be called upon to use them, even though they don’t know yet about the particular man they might meet in the grocery store who is two cents short.

We Extend A Heartfelt Thanks To One and All

We Fools have been counseled by some most remarkable people, right from the very beginning. Among them is Bob Bacon our current Board Chair, shown above, at one of our first events at the Fools Court. In our early days, each Board member was “invested” with a Fools vest and Fools hat. Susan Knutson (directly above) is investing Susan Starr, our first Board Chair; Craig Greiger (photo above left) invested Quentin Owell; Carmen Barsody and Daisy Xie are our two longest serving Board members (below celebrating with Kay Jorgensen, another invested Board Member). All of our Board “investments” have paid off with wise guidance and fidelity.

What Is It About The Faithful Fools?

By Bob Bacon
Faithful Fools Board Chair

The Fools live and teach our common humanity. They understand that there is no us and them, but only us. After all, they started when people who were called to very different religious traditions decided to live their religion together. That’s a lesson that’s sorely needed in an era when polarization seems to be getting more popular.

The Fools meet people where they are, which is the only place you can meet them if you really want to be part of their journey to somewhere else. But it’s not just about meeting marginalized people where they are. The Fools understand that one must also meet people of authority or influence or wealth where they are, too. Only in that way can the Tenderloin, the city, the region, the state, the nation be made to work better for everybody. The Fools help people work together who don’t think they have anything significant in common.

The Fools model goodness, not greatness. They model hope and not fear. Goodness is within our control, but greatness is not. Greatness is an impression formed by others, looking at us from the outside. We can’t make ourselves great. But we can make ourselves good.

The Fools live and teach a culture of abundance, not a culture of scarcity. There is always room for one more at the table. The Fools use their pennies wisely, and leverage their pennies, so…

Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it…

Hannah Arendt
Men in Dark Times

By Sam Dennison
Fools Fables Editor and Designer

and how the path for so many of us leads in and out of the Tenderloin, for the center is our beginning.

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Nothing binds you to the Fools beyond your desire & commitment to be present...

“Blessed be the ties that Bind”

Finding Fools In the Faithful Feminine
By rAmu Aki

The San Francisco Tenderloin is one of the last places in the United States of America to experience the first sunlight of each new day. Silent, the morning sun’s light, flowing/flowing ever pursuing night along the meridian of Earth’s rotation at 1037 mph (1670 kph) over oceans and estuaries, lowlands, forests, plains, foothills and mountains, grain fields, cities, towns, rivers, lakes, flora, fauna and all the huddled souls of humanity stretching from last night into this morning of our lives, spills from the mainland, across the bay up to the peak of Nob Hill where it releases itself like a yellow/golden fount of renewal into a block by block smooth slide down Hyde Street (as well as others) to sweep the Fools Court at 234 Hyde Street (as well as others) to sweep the Fools Court at 234 Hyde Street (as well as others) to sweep the Fools Court at 234 Hyde Street (as well as others) to sweep the Fools Court at 234 Hyde Street (as well as others) to sweep the Fools Court at 234

When I first met the Fools, I was not aware of looking to become part of a group of people cultivating a constantly transformational experience of creativity, presence, service, compassion, respect, sympathy, learning and sharing. Yet that was the radiance which beat like a great heart from the Fools Court, every pulsation nurturing the many who were involved and the many more who were touched through them. This nurturing, radiant pulse reflected, I believe, the particular matriarchal energy of feminine leadership (spiritual, psychological and physical) as exemplified by our founders. An organizational energy and style imbued with the highest ideals toward relationship and actualized in the daily leadership practices — indeed in the day-to-day being of Kay and Carmen, without dogma, force or manipulation: every Fool believes in what that Fool believes and every person a Fool extends themselves to is who they are and what choices they make are their own. This wasn’t about magic or miracles and did not even “make things easier.” What I came to understand is that this transparent leadership style facilitated establishment and sustenance of honest and practical human relationship amongst Fools themselves and with everyone who entered into the circle of Fools in a way and to a degree which served alike the individuals and the whole. This process of coming into relationship was sometimes a frustrating challenge demanding real personal commitment to intentional evolution from everyone involved. It was exciting and sometimes scary as points of “no idea what to do next” were not uncommon. But through meeting people where they are, learning to stay present, in the moment with them, and working with tools of accompaniment, arts, education, and advocacy, I’ve experienced relationships which last down through the years, producing an abundance of comfort, growth and a wealth of shared positive energy. All of this in a way that feels so normal and natural, that one is hardly aware of it until you look around one day and there you are, in relationship. Sort of like being a member of a large, extended family, except that none of the other members will take away your responsibility for yourself and you’ll feel how you’re being continually attracted toward a higher standard of relating.

Nothing binds you to the Fools beyond your desire & commitment to be present.

This feminine Fools energy flow, which nurtures the masculine energetic principle toward balance as well, is represented with the required subtlety in the Faithful Fools Mission Statement on the back of this publication and I invite you to read and consider it. One critical aspect which I associate with a feminine way of relating that you won’t find specified in the mission statement is the Fools call to and persistent practice of reflection. It reviews, it remembers, it critiques, it opens doors that lead from experience to a deeper comprehension of self and purpose. Fools do this both individually, around the work of the Fools, and with one another. It tends to be built into every aspect of what Fools do. Of this I say, “Blessed be the ties that bind.”
People are going back and forth across the doorsill where the two worlds touch. The door is round and open. Don’t go back to sleep.

By Mary Ganz

On the 7-Day Street Retreat each year, we often say that we are “walking a question” — something that is on our hearts as we stand in the food line or settle in for the night on a sheet of cardboard.

One day in this year’s 7-day, we wanted to try walking each other’s questions. We wrote them down, put them into a hat, and passed it around. Each drew one at random.

The question I pulled came from a college student from the University of San Francisco who had spent a day or two a week with us, for a year. What did it mean to me?

I’d been walking with Rumi, because Fools often do. My first thought in response to the question was that my first time with the Fools has afforded me glimpses of Rumi’s doorsill, the place where two worlds touch. The more I walk with the Fools, the more I live into faith that there are doors round and wide enough for the whole country to pass through, openings that we sleepwalk by every day, faith that another way is possible. The more I live in that way, the more I am convicted that my walking with Rumi means to me?

This was, I figured, my sixth 7-Day Street Retreat; the first one was in 2003. Fourteen years or 14 weeks, what did it matter? This young woman’s question is well worth reflecting on.

By Susan Knutson

Your Footprints are the Only Road

Mary Ganz, Street Retreat Reflection, 2004

Traveler, your footprints are the only road, nothing else.

Traveler, there is no road; you make your own path as you walk.

As you walk, you make your own road, and when you look back you see the path you will never travel again.

Traveler, there is no road; only a ship’s wake on the sea.

Antonio Machado (1875-1939)

(Trans. by Mary G. Berg & Donna Maloney 2003)

Where there is development, there are signs of displacement.

As new housing goes up and as rents go up, more people move to the streets.

San Francisco, July 2017

By Bernie Glassman

I Was At First Judgmental And Uncomfortable

By Susan Knutson

The second time I simply held a paper cup, sitting all day next to an ATM machine. It was painful. Mostly I was totally ignored. Some even crossed the street rather than come near me. It was dehumanizing, and I saw how people who are homeless are our modern-day lepers. There were some who did stop, even if they gave no money, and spoke to me, looking me in the eyes. That was so completely different, so necessary to my feeling human.

It was like the scales fell from my eyes. Like Francis, I felt that this is where I wanted to spend my time — on the streets with homeless people. My experience was similar to others making Street Retreats: I was at first judgmental and uncomfortable, yet I found I was able to step away from the smells, the dirty clothes, even the mental illness and see the human being. It was the start of my own “Francis moment.”

I felt the same Francis and the leper parallel during my trips to Nicaragua. Everything I was used to, relied on, took for granted in my daily life was not available to me. It was a poverty I had never known. “No water today. Maybe tomorrow,” the people would say, taking it in stride. I was like a baby. Everything was stripped away. I was not a nurse, not a Franciscan, not an administrator. Just Susan. Just a human being.

These two experiences are very connected for me. When your old heart and mind get stripped away, you get a whole new heart and mind. It affirms what I believe of the Franciscan way of life. When I, like Francis, step out of my clothes and leave them behind, then I can be embraced by people who are experiencing homelessness. It was the same with the people of Nicaragua—all happy to see me…just as I am. Just Susan.
The first night I had my son sleep in a real bed, instead of a crib, he fell out onto the floor with a “thud.” By the next night, I had installed a railing on the bed, which kept him from falling out again. If we were living in a traditional home in Japan, this wouldn’t have happened. We would all be sleeping on thin futon mattresses, which we would roll out onto the floor each night and put away in the morning. There would be no height to fall from. This has also been true when I’ve slept out on the streets, either on a few layers of cardboard or a thin, portable pad.

That’s something I thought of, while working with the Faithful Fools: to truly be safe, you must be so close to the ground that there is no height to fall from. Which isn’t to say that my son would be safer if we slept each night on cardboard on the streets. It is just that sometimes what we think of as safer or more comfortable results in a “thud.”

When I first started working for the Faithful Fools in 2004, I tried to live close to the ground. They offered me a job as Outreach Minister, and said they would pay “what you need.” I took that offer to heart, and at first made irregular requests of what would cover rent, or other expenses. Eventually we settled on a more predictable monthly rent, or other expenses. Eventually we had gotten from being with the Fools, more than anything, is what I have gotten from being with the Fools, in one way or another, for nearly 17 years: an ongoing practice of looking at my own life, in the context of a world of extreme wealth and extreme poverty, as something to learn from, in connection with other people.

I wonder how I have come to change so much.

That, more than anything, is what I have gotten from being with the Fools. I continue to think, every time I cash a paycheck or go to the grocery store, about friends, and those I don’t know, who live on next to nothing and those who have more than they could ever need.

It may be a foolish thought, that a small change in consciousness could change our world, but I refuse to believe in any other.

I know there is strength in the differences between us. I know there is comfort where we overlap.

By Alex Darr

Sleeping close to the Ground

By Dorian Dorey

Fiercely independent, it was Momma and I against the world and then my husband and me, despite my firm belief that we’ve all been lent to each other. While that determined independence taught me self-sufficiency, it kept me from allowing others to lend themselves to me. Connection is a human imperative yet we all too often isolate ourselves. Perhaps a smaller circle feels safer, especially with so much out of our control — my health, or lack thereof, leaves me grasping with that even more. The few people that we cling to are support network and there’s nothing more important than to find that safety net. Yet, our cherished friends and family cannot be all things to us. They need room to grow and above all else, people who need our help and support — if only we’ll open ourselves to the possibilities. True safety comes through community and the Faithful Fools allowed me to experience that.

The support of neighbors and knowing there are people to lend a hand creates a level of safety that you just cannot make for yourself. Just as John Lennon imagined, these Fools are dreamers that not only believe — in something, in each other. Their belief in each other and everyone they encounter sends ripples of hope into the world, the kind of hope that sparks change, and I’ll be forever grateful to have been caught in an eddy. My health issues are degenerative and disabling. While they are part and parcel of who I am, they can distract me from the very things that fulfill me; the Fools not only brought me into their rippling waters, they brought me back to myself. I missed other people — I missed new ideas and different perspectives.

Thankfully, my love of poetry and interest in writing drew me to the Faithful Fools. It started out simple enough, with a poetry reading at the library that led to talking to a couple of the writers which led to being invited to the 2015 Winter Solstice celebration (Thanks, Dr Dreamer!). In that iconic purple building on Hyde that I’d so often admired, the feeling of community was instant — those marvelous, disparate ideologues or a single defining faith, for it is simply enough to believe — in something, in each other. Their belief in each other and everyone they encounter sends ripples of hope into the world, the kind of hope that sparks change, and I’ll be forever grateful to have been caught in an eddy. My health issues are degenerative and disabling. While they are part and parcel of who I am, they can distract me from the very things that fulfill me; the Fools not only brought me into their rippling waters, they brought me back to myself. I missed other people — I missed new ideas and different perspectives. Thankfully, my love of poetry and interest in writing drew me to the Faithful Fools. It started out simple enough, with a poetry reading at the library that led to talking to a couple of the writers which led to being invited to the 2015 Winter Solstice celebration (Thanks, Dr Dreamer!). In that iconic purple building on Hyde that I’d so often admired, the feeling of community was instant — those marvelous, disparate ideologues or a single defining faith, for it is simply enough to believe — in something, in each other. Their belief in each other and everyone they encounter sends ripples of hope into the world, the kind of hope that sparks change, and I’ll be forever grateful to have been caught in an eddy. My health issues are degenerative and disabling. While they are part and parcel of who I am, they can distract me from the very things that fulfill me; the Fools not only brought me into their rippling waters, they brought me back to myself. I missed other people — I missed new ideas and different perspectives.

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By Ed Bowers

I first met the Faithful Fools 350 words ago, I think in 2001, but I’m not sure. Fools are never sure of anything. I ring the Faithful Fools’ Zendo Bell which echoes a BIG ZERO.

I am sure of Nothing
Because Nothing is everywhere, peeping between the falling shadows of thoughts. This is a world where glue traps convince mice that losing is winning.

Very dangerous panic attacks parade through my mind, each one carrying a sign celebrating the many wacky years since first I met the Fools. They saved my life by giving it platform and focus and what they have done for me.

I am happy to be a small part of them, a Zero who rings the bell of their Zendo who is basically nothing but a possibility that might add up to something if he hangs out with the right type of Fools.

So thank you, Fools. May you live forever.

One of the central goals of Faithful Fools is to promote artistic self-expression among Tenderloin residents, especially street people, and so the Fools conceived the idea of publishing an anthology of poetry, prose, and artwork by people living in the Tenderloin. Ed Bowers was the editor of the first anthology in 2003, and he called it Living in the Land of the Dead to reflect the difficult lives of many Tenderloin residents.

Marsha Campbell, rAmu Aki, and I joined Ed as editors of the second volume, and we agreed to solicit submissions from writers and artists living outside the Tenderloin. It was nice being able to invite such excellent poets as Daniel Marlin, Julia Vinograd, and Judy Wells to be included in the anthology. Being part of a team with fellow poets rAmu, Marsha, and Ed was a memorable experience. I fondly recall the stimulating, sometimes heated, discussions we had as we carefully went over each submission. We generally worked well together, and we tried to include something from everyone who sent us writing or artwork.

After we made our decisions, rAmu would lay out the magazine, and then we would proofread it. Sometimes the whole process could be messy, but the end result was always satisfying: five attractive-looking anthologies with a wonderful variety of writing. And finally, there would be an exuberant publication celebration at the Fools Court, with an abundance of tasty food and powerful readings by the anthology writers.

The Crossroads of the Tenderloin

By Ralph Dranow, Poet

Crossroads. This volume of poetry was born very near the corner of Turk and Hyde. You might call that intersection a crossroads. So too the intersections of Golden Gate and Jones, Leavenworth and Ellis, Market and Polk are crossroads. These literal places evoke a visceral sense of crossroads, where people of all kinds pass by one another, going about their business, just doing their lives. The variety of people (and the grandeur of their dreams) at these Tenderloin crossroads are no less than at any oasis on the ancient Silk Road that once connected the spices and exotic goods of the Far East with the awakening culture of Western Europe.

[It is also a] crossroads of people: A place where poets meet one another, where students meet poets, where faculty meet Fools. And a crossroads of life: A place where words meet the page, where truth meets dreams, where the past meets the present. It is an oasis on the ancient Silk Road of poetry that connects distant corners of the world. Along the way we realize that the travelers we meet are often rough, and the experiences are rougher still, yet out of it all comes something remarkable, beautiful in all its complexities.
The Thing About The Fools—

By Kaye Carlson

Thinking about this article, I wrote down a lot of names hoping to rekindle the memories that go with them. That’s where the stories are, with the people who come to the Fools.

For example, I was so moved when John Di Donna passed away. John was a wonderful man with a true Fool’s story. Here’s this funny, shy guy who wandered in. I didn’t know him, but he looked familiar somehow. Then I remembered: I used to watch the Board of Supervisors meetings on TV, and that’s where I saw John, taking part in the Public Comments part of the meeting. Here’s this determined little man setting the Board straight on issues he felt were important. You know, in many ways he was a spokesman for those who couldn’t speak. He was well spoken and always within their time limit. He was there week after week, year after year. You begin to appreciate something like that.

Then one day Kay announced that John was going to do a presentation on Hank Williams. Good Lord, why was she going to have this guy in to do that?!? It didn’t seem like a make sense — but we all went, I guess out of faithfulness. John came with his record player and his Hank Williams records (the original 78s). He was nervous at first but by the time he went on, he relaxed a little. You could tell it meant a lot to him. Over time, Kay had him present several times and we listened; as time passed we not only got to know about Hank Williams, we began to have a much fuller picture of John, and I think that happened for John too.

This leads off to thinking about the amazing assortment of people you meet at the Fools: staff and volunteers as well as people off the streets. Way beyond my usual social gathering! You couldn’t help but be moved. The mission statement – “discovering the light, courage, intelligence, strength, and creativity of volunteers as well as people off the streets. Way beyond my usual social gathering! You couldn’t help but be moved. The mission statement – “discovering the light, courage, intelligence, strength, and creativity of volunteers as well as people off the streets. Way beyond my usual social gathering!”

I remember one of those early meetings with Kay, Carmen and Susan Knutson at All Stars Donut Shop at Hyde and Golden Gate. It was clear that they were “regulars,” as many of the customers greeted them; they had become known in the neighborhood. Their talk was relaxed, and when it was time to leave, I knew it was a group I wanted to be part of. Soon after I accepted an invitation to a meeting with them and a small group of folks who were interested in what they hoped to do.

For some time Kay and Carmen had been spending their week walking the streets of the Tenderloin, talking with those who lived and worked there. They wanted to continue and expand their work, and we became the first Board for the Fools. I think we all sensed that the Fools were going to operate differently from other groups we’d been affiliated with, at least that was true for me. They were fair and they were fearless. They managed no money to buy a building to house the organization. They were law abiding but didn’t operate with the usual rules about who you saw, how often or for how long. It was fascinating to see how an organization like this was formed, not only formed but succeeded. Exciting as many people, listening, building relationships. Kay and I met weekly for a working lunch when she would tell me of her ministry, and how she was engaging members of the congregation.

One day she told me of a meeting a Franciscan by the name of Carmen Barsody, and that they were creating a street ministry called Faithful Fools. Kay flourished in this ministry with Carmen, and they achieved many things including buying a building which became the Fools Court, a place of refuge, a place of beauty, a place of social justice and teaching, a place of meditation and prayer.

Kay continued to be very involved with the UU church, with the Social Justice committee, so the congregation felt it was part of this ministry in the Tenderloin too.

About fifteen years ago Kay was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. For many years this did not prevent her from accompanying those who needed her, being a source of inspiration to many as she deepened and widened her ministry of loving presence. Kay lived with Carmen and Sam at the Fools Court in the Tenderloin. She loved the richness of community activities there, she loved the engagement of profound reflection, she loved the political work of justice, and she loved the quiet prayerfulness in which this ministry was held.

But the Parkinson’s progressed, and Kay moved to the East Bay for the care she now needed.

Over the years I have visited Kay frequently, and have witnessed her struggles as the disease took over more of her possibilities. I have witnessed some of the dark and lonely places in which she sometimes found herself. But I have also been amazed by her capacity for appreciation: of sunshine on glossy leaves, of a bird singing, or listening to a poem by Rilke.

When I was with Kay last week, I asked how she’d been. Kay looked up at me, “I am well, very well,” she said and smiled—almost a conspiratorial smile—we were in this secret together.

In This Together

By Margot Campbell-Gross

I first met Kay Jorgensen in 1983 at DeBernsville Pines, our Unitarian Universalist camp in the San Bernardino Mountains. Kay remembers we were roommates.

I remember Kay, in a white nightdress, dancing down through the pines to a worship service around the fire. What I saw was freedom, audacity, beauty.

Kay and I were students at Starr King School for the Ministry. In 1986 we were partners in a class called “Celebratory Meals” and I remember preparing with Kay was fun, creative, and joyful.

About ten years later, as I stood on the steps in front of the Unitarian Universalist church in San Francisco greeting people, a familiar voice said “Margot” and there stood Kay. After a ministry in Minnesota, Kay had come down to San Francisco to care for her sister.

Kay joined the church and soon we were discussing her becoming our sister minister. At that time was the creation of a free after-school program for children in the neighborhood, Up On Top, which has grown and flourishes today. About fifteen years ago Kay was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. For many years this did not prevent her from accompanying those who needed her, being a source of inspiration to many as she deepened and widened her ministry of loving presence. Kay lived with Carmen and Sam at the Fools Court in the Tenderloin. She loved the richness of community activities there, she loved the engagement of profound reflection, she loved the political work of justice, and she loved the quiet prayerfulness in which this ministry was held.

But the Parkinson’s progressed, and Kay moved to the East Bay for the care she now needed.

Over the years I have visited Kay frequently, and have witnessed her struggles as the disease took over more of her possibilities. I have witnessed some of the dark and lonely places in which she sometimes found herself. But I have also been amazed by her capacity for appreciation: of sunshine on glossy leaves, of a bird singing, or listening to a poem by Rilke.

When I was with Kay last week, I asked how she’d been. Kay looked up at me, “I am well, very well,” she said and smiled—almost a conspiratorial smile—we were in this secret together.

The original Bible Study in 2000 above) with Barbara Graves and Eve Rice. The group had lost their space and needed a place to meet. The Fools said, “Yes, you can meet here.” It has been a Thursday morning staple ever since. In 2011, Demidina Logers, Maria Isabel Berrones, Melissa Eisenman, and Dana Hull continue the tradition.

Kay Jorgensen and Kaye Carlson, 2003

John De Donata and Wayne Tomlinson at a Fools Holiday Party

Kay and Margot on Hyde Street

The original Bible Study in 2000 above) with Barbara Graves and Eve Rice. The group had lost their space and needed a place to meet. The Fools said, “Yes, you can meet here.” It has been a Thursday morning staple ever since. In 2011, Demidina Logers, Maria Isabel Berrones, Melissa Eisenman, and Dana Hull continue the tradition.
I lie on the floor with my face in a pillow. Memories of people, of conversations and programs, one-liners we laughed at or guided our lives by come forth one by one and in bursts. I get up on my knees to type a few words or phrases as I try to catch them, and then lay down again. I am still, and I wonder what to say about our faithful and foolish life as we approach 20 years. Kay used to say, “If we had made a five year or ten year plan we would never have what we have because what has come to be was not in our imagination.” We did not know that poets and playwrights, meditators and artists, clowns and thinkers would walk through the door and enlarge our life and our minds. Some of us had homes and others didn’t, and here we all were meeting one another draped in the fullness and awkwardness of our humanity. So many times at the end of the day or standing before a difficult situation one or the other of us would shout out, IT’S A BIG LIFE, CHARLIE BROWN!!

True to the Trickster, the Fool, Kay and I felt most alive at the edges of society and considered it our call to stir things up, to challenge destructive actions and ways of thinking, and to laugh aloud at silliness. We were both committed to our own religious institutions and felt a great responsibility to clarify and strengthen their engagement in the world. We felt a deep obligation to help keep our personal and institutional words and deeds grounded and relevant in time and place. Kay’s clown Oscard, and other clowns that showed up for work were magnificent at this job, truth-tellers par excellence.

When I returned to the United States after living 7 years in Nicaragua, I noticed people gravitating to meditation cushions, adoration chapels, yoga studios and retreat centers. It called my attention because I was aware how prayer and put their focus on their personal salvation or individual survival. It’s not that we ourselves weren’t sustained by our faith and practices for well-being, it’s that we longed for them to be intimately connected to our communal work for a more just world. We longed for the well-being of all, where all may have life and have it to the full. We too valued meditation and times of retreat. It’s not either/or, it’s both/and. It was out of our working at this personal and social edge that the Street Retreats came to be considered our “opening act” as Faithful Fools. We both had a conviction that from the get-go we needed to take our religious beliefs and social values, as well as our assumptions, and place our feet on the streets and practice them and calibrate them in real time.

As I continue to lie still with my face in the pillow, what I feel most is gratitude. What I overwhelmingly value about our mission is that it invites us into a life-long practice of action and reflection, of action and reflection, and more action and reflection, alone and together. That is how I learn to be a better person, not a perfect person. That is how we become a community of people working together for personal and social change. Reza Leah Landman, my spiritual teacher and the one to whom I will be forever grateful for bringing Kay and me into the awareness of one another, would say that our inner and outer work was about learning to be human. It’s about accepting our own humanness and the humaneness of others, and the work is full of time and life long.

And now we turn towards another 20 years and another 20 years after that. Whether or not Faithful Fools as an organization, (or, as Susan Knutson would say a living organism) exists, the mission lives on. I know that Kay joins me in being genuinely grateful for every moment and every person and clown who has been a part of these years, and for all who are here at this moment in time. Never have we walked this mission alone. And now as I get up from lying on the floor with my face in the pillow filled with infinite memories, I hear Keith Walker’s love-infused voice say loud and clear what he said so many times after ringing the bell at the end of meditation, “Who loves ya baby!!”
The Penny Story

It was a sunny day in Berkeley and Kay Jorgensen was in seminar. This particular day, she was walking down Shattuck Avenue to get herself some lunch when suddenly she felt something hit her upper arm. She stopped, turned, and saw a man standing at the bottom of the BART station steps. He waved and pointed, yelling up to her, “They’re down there!” She looked down and, indeed, there were two pennies at her feet. She reached down to pick them up and thought, “Well, now…that is strange.” She put them in her pocket and went on her way.

When Kay got to the Blue & Gold Grocery, she picked out a sandwich, and went back to the refrigerator section of the store to get something to drink. Just then a man walked up to her and said, “You wouldn’t happen to have two pennies, would you?” He gestured to the drink in his hand, “If I only had just two more cents, I could get myself this drink.” Kay realized, of course, that she did have two pennies. She pulled out those two pennies from her pocket, the ones that had showed up just moments before, right there at the top of the BART station stairs, and she handed them to the man.

Years later, during the early days of founding the Fools, Kay reflected on that moment of finding two pennies and moments later having them when she was asked for “just two more cents.” And she understood that she had what was needed before it was asked of her. And all of us, too—we understand that we have what we need before it is asked of us.

How Did Faithful Fools Started?

As Kay and Carmen were walking the streets one morning, they asked themselves, “What compels us to care that people are living on the streets?” After reflecting on this question, they recognized that they were compelled by their own individual relationships with people living in poverty, living without adequate housing and food, so they invited others to join them on the streets, engaging the Tenderloin as a place of reflection.

After that, Street Retreats simply became a way to invite others to walk together into the streets. They imagined a growing group of people who would move beyond fear, assumptions and judgments and begin to care in a way that they too would be compelled to respond to individual needs and work together for social change.

The 1st Street Retreat was on June 16, 1998

In 1997, Kay’s friend, Reza Leah Landman also happened to be Carmen’s spiritual teacher. Kay lovingly described Reza as a Jewish, Sufi, Mystic Therapist. She also was a teller of Teaching Tales.

Kay’s response to Reza Leah’s invitation to meet Carmen was hesitation. She didn’t really want to meet one more “nice” person with a romantic vision of working with homeless people. The romance usually didn’t last. The harsh reality of the streets would sink in, and the injustice of it all became overwhelming and they’d leave. It had happened to Kay before and it was not how she wanted to use her time and energy.

But it was generally an unwise thing to ignore one of Reza Leah’s recommendations. Her advice was most often exactly what you needed and usually came right when you most needed it.

So Kay called Carmen, and they met over a cup of coffee at B.B.’s Café on Franklin Street. Within a couple of hours, they both knew something unique was about to begin.

If we had made a five year or ten year plan we would never have what we have now, because what has come to be was not in our imagination
About the Building
And the Pennies

At the height of the dot.com boom of the 1990s, Carmen and Kay knew they wanted to create a home for themselves and Faithful Fools in the Tenderloin. While on a Street Retreat one day, they asked each other, “Should we give intention to a place today?” They walked out of All Stars Donuts (their “downtown office”) and stood on the corner. They put a finger in the air and asked which way they should go. They went left. At each corner they did the same until they found themselves in front of 234 Hyde Street, United Copy Shop. Carmen knew that this was the right moment and the right place. They called someone and Fools together a few days later, and they sat in the space and asked another, “What would mean for the Fools to have a space?” They then invited people to walk the question from room to room. It was then that Joanne Klinnert called down the hall, urging us all to come and look. There in a back room, pennies were scattered all around and a bottle of Champaigne was sitting amongst them.

Quentin Ohwell said in a voice full of certainty, “It isn’t What if any longer. This is the place. Now the question is: do we move toward it?”

It’s the Nature of a Fool
To Not Be Taken Seriously

By Joanne Klinnert

A little less than 20 years ago, I walked through a street level door at 234 Hyde St. in San Francisco and proceeded to walk down the hallway to the right. At the end of the hallway I came into a room where a small mountain of pennies filled much of the floor. I shouted, “Here they are—the pennies!”

And thus it began—what is now a 20 year presence in San Francisco’s Tenderloin District “founded” by Kay Jorgensen, a Unitarian Universalist minister and Carmen Barsody, a Franciscan. They were introduced to each other by a mutual friend and have walked the streets of the neighborhood ever since.

Carmen and Kay recognized that they were Fools, i.e., someone that sees a different reality and walks a different path than the people by whom they are surrounded. So they began to sit in coffee shops and chat with other customers. There was no agenda other than being part of the human stream that occupied the streets and doorways, that found coffee and acceptance. Coffee shops are a temporary refuge. They are not a home. So now: “A place to live?” said the 2 pioneers. Kay had already had the experience of finding 2 pennies on the street as she headed to get lunch, and they soon were needed by a man who wanted to buy a soda and was short just 2 cents! The two began to follow as they were led, knowing pennies would show up.

But humans have organizational systems. It was 1999 and I was part of the Leadership of a Franciscan community of which Carmen was also a member and Kay was soon to become an Associate. This new ministry looked to the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls for recognition and financial support. Acknowledging and funding a new ministry half a continent away took some discernment on the part of the community in Little Falls. In meetings it was said, “It won’t work” to which I answered “It will.”

“Why do you think?” they asked.
“Because,” I said. (I have been to the mountain of pennies!)

This knowing has sustained for 20 years. From the daily wandering the streets to inviting people to be wandering together to have a place (Fools Court), acceptance of one another and sharing life has characterized the first 20 years of Faithful Foolishness.

Wow! That’s a Lot of Pennies
By Anton Jungherr

My earliest connection with the Faithful Fools was in 1999 when I was working as the bookkeeper at the San Francisco Unitarian Universalist Society. I was wandering around the building to see what was going on when I came upon Rev. Kay Jorgenson. She was in a meeting talking about getting a sprinkler system installed. I thought, WOW, these Unitarian–Universalist ministers do everything!

A few months later my bookkeeping contract ended. I thought maybe the Faithful Fools could use a Business Manager. I talked to Kay. She said they had no money. Then she told me the “penny story” and that she and Carmen had just put a $500 down payment on the 234 Hyde Street building, for a purchase price of $650,000, which included a Copy Shop.

I thought to myself, “Wow, that will take a lot of pennies.”

I said, “I will work as your Business Manager for $1 per year.” She said, “We can pay you that.”

She then told me to go get the rest of the pennies we needed to buy the Hyde Street building.

The rest is history. We solicited short-term loans for the down payment, tried to learn how to operate a copy shop, and subsequently refinanced the 9% mortgage to several mortgages at 1%-2%.

Today the 234 Hyde Street Building has a value of $2,000,000 with two mortgages totaling $47,000.

As They Say, It’s All in a Name, And the Name Says It All – The Faithful Fools

By Diane Sherman

I met Carmen and Kay when they were just coming together 20 years ago, to form the Faithful Fools and to begin their ministry in the Tenderloin. Every time I sat with either of them, I felt inspired to listen more deeply to what is true, and how to be of service.

One of the most amazing memories I have of the inception of the Fools was….

With few dollars in their pockets, they set out to buy a building in the Tenderloin in San Francisco. A feat that seemed daunting to my mind. But they embodied the term Faithful – staying true to their vision – when many would have abandoned the mission.

During those first few years, the Fools grew slowly and steadily, trusting that whatever they needed would be provided. Kay and Carmen’s constant and steady commitment inspired me in more ways than they will ever know. Their steadfast ways within the Fools supported me to keep walking my own path as an artist and teacher and to focus on what it means to grow a heart of compassion.

I continue to ponder the name – The Faithful Fools – and it still inspires me to keep choosing faith, love and art as ways to make this world a better one.

The world is indeed a better place with the light of the Faithful Fools guiding a corner of it towards wholeness and compassion. Thank you, graceful souls, for all you do and for who you are.
The Purple Door

Over the years I walked past fearful, hesitant, judging but always invited to see, hear, relate, let go of fear.

The Purple Doors opened and I walked through to engage in creativity, acceptance, intelligent talk, to laugh, cry, hope with anyone else who walked through.

Brian Darr around 2001

By Ade Kroll
Can I trust in a person’s capacity to heal themselves?

Has my perspective been shaped and my empathy been impaired by unconscious privilege?

Can be measured more by the questions with which I struggled rather than by answers.

I am grateful for the companionship of Fools as I walk with these questions and discover for myself that my answer is yes.

Folks wearing out the soles of their feet and carrying the wisdom at Fools Court that came from spaces in which mistakes were welcome. My growth as a practitioner and director of theatrical works came in August of 2001. I had just heard of the Fools that summer so I made a Street Retreat. I was late and got there when they were already ready to leave for the streets. The BART train had broken down and I had to take a bus. It was torture. I thought it must be something good, something special if it took that much energy just to get there. Since I was late, I missed the opening circle so going onto the streets was more of a spontaneous kind of thing. There was a guy there who was going to write an article and he asked me, “Are you afraid?”

That’s how I got started. I came back within a week or so, and Kay and Carmen and I talked a long time. I had been working very close to here so I just stopped working and became a Fool. In the early stages, I did a lot of work around the building and then began working with people. It was really good for me to share people’s lives and the stuff they had to go through.

After about four or five months I began thinking I needed to get some meditation in. I have a Zen habit. I was getting so involved and I really needed some Zendo time, so I asked Kay and Carmen if there would be a Zendo time, so I asked Kay and Carmen if there would be a corner where I could put my cushion. You have to be a little careful when you ask for something when you are around the Fools because you are going to get more than you need. Before I knew it, I had a room downstairs off the entryway and people to come and sit with me. Kay and Carmen joined me so we added cushions. Then more people came so we added even more cushions and opened up the door to the adjoining office so everyone would have a place to sit.

By Hy Carrel

In early 2014, Alex Darr and Sam Dennison began inviting me to the Fools. I sensed a kind of thing. There was a guy there who was going to write an article and he asked me, “Are you afraid?”

That’s how I got started. I came back within a week or so, and Kay and Carmen and I talked a long time. I had been working very close to here so I just stopped working and became a Fool. In the early stages, I did a lot of work around the building and then began working with people. It was really good for me to share people’s lives and the stuff they had to go through.

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By Hy Carrel

The simple comforts of tea and coffee and a smile and hug from the minister.

Of the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes

Folks wearing out the soles of their feet on mean streets.

Sanctuary By George Wynn

At Faithful Fools

The solo ceiling Fan is as still as the meditation Hall which serves as the neighborhood Living Room with the simple comforts of tea and coffee

And a smile and hug from the minister of the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes

For everyone and An extra hug for folks wearing out the soles of their feet on mean streets.

Questions

By Hy Carrel

In early 2014, Alex Darr and Sam Dennison began inviting me to the Fools. I sensed a wisdom at Fools Court that came from spaces in which mistakes were welcome. My growth can be measured more by the questions with which I struggled rather than by answers.

2014 Has my perspective been shaped and my empathy been impaired by unconscious privilege? 2015 Can I listen to someone’s complaints without trying to solve their problems? 2016 Can I trust in a person’s capacity to heal themselves? 2017 Are there times when my only appropriate action is to silently witness? I am grateful for the companionship of Fools as I walk with these questions and discover for myself that my answer is yes.

Come As You Are . . .

In Whatever Guise

By Martha Boesing

So here I was about 15 years ago having moved from my home community and theater world of Minneapolis, wandering around, when I decided to see my old friend, fellow theater artist and housemate Kay Jorgensen and see what she was up to. I found her in her new purple homestead in the heart of the Tenderloin, in a place she and Carmen had named the Faithful Fools. What a treat! Because art was such an important part of the Fools’ work, she insisted that I come work at the Fools Court… “Write us a play, or lead some workshops,” she said. So I said ok, and after going on a retreat with the Fools myself, I set out to write a play about that experience. When I was looking for a container, Kay said: “base it on the Osho-dering poems of Zen Buddhism — a teaching I have long loved. So I did. And out came THE WITNESS, which I wrote in collaboration with Anna Brown Griswold, who performed the piece until she had to leave and was replaced by Rebecca Noon. We joyfully went about presenting this play about a young woman who is transformed by walking the streets with the Fools. We toured up and down the West Coast in the Fools’ vans. We went on to the Midwest and New England, kicking up our heels and having a wonderful time.

Meanwhile back at the ranch I was helping to create theater events for the Fools’ annual celebration of Oscar’s Feast, and teaching improv and playwriting (which I continue to do to this day). And I wrote another one-woman play for the Fools about growing old on the streets as a homeless person, called SONG OF THE MAGPIE. I still perform and tour this play for the Fools, mostly around the Bay Area.

To this day, even as the Fools grow and change, and I, too, find it more difficult as I age to get from my Oakland home to the Court for meetings and gatherings, I continue to respect, admire and deeply love the Fools — for their courage, their tenacity of vision, their playfulness, and perhaps most of all for their open door policy. As Anna Aki once said: “Anyone is welcome to the circle – it’s a ‘Come-As-You-Are Party.’” And the home of the Fools is indeed a place for any and all of us to be accepted in whatever guise we are wearing on a given day.

Here is a short piece from SONG OF THE MAGPIE, spoken by the old woman, Sophie, who has made a home living on the streets. She talks about the hardships and the pain, but also about the advantages of living there.

Sophie:

Some folks say living in the streets is a way to get ready for the apocalypse. Might be right. We might be the only ones who survive. Us and the cockroaches.

We’re nomads…we’re the remnants of the old nomadic cultures, who used to wander around the earth with their camels and their goats...It’s not easy to be a nomad these days. You wander around the cities, looking for food…anything to ease the pain.

But there is this: living out here in the open, you slow down. You do. You slow down. You pay attention... to how things are, to how things are shifting all the time. And then sometimes when there’s absolutely nothing left for you to hold onto, the veil between the visible world and the invisible world gets thinner and the heart breaks open... It’s said that the heart has to be broken like the husk of an almond, for the sweet nutty fruit to come out...
The Path To & From Nicaragua

In October 1998, Kay and Carmen traveled together to Nicaragua. Carmen introduced Kay to the people and places that she had come to love during her years of living and working there. Before long there was a Fools Court in the barrio and more Fools in the countryside. Over the years, many Fools have spent time there, sometimes for a week, sometimes for several months. Likewise Fools from Nicaragua have come to San Francisco, ensuring that the path between the two Fools Courts remains open, running both north and south.

Soy Bufona Fiel

By Mercedes González Martínez

This is my story as a Fiel in Managua, Nicaragua. I am Mercedes. I am the mother of three wonderful children, Fatima, 33, Luis, 31, and Karina, 27. I take great pride in being a single mother and in my family. I think I am and always will be a Fiel because of my thoughts, attitudes and my way of living life. In 1993 I met a person who showed me a path and a way of walking that brings together family and community. She taught me that there is no boundary that prohibits us from having a relationship of sister and brother with others. That Fool is Carmen Barsody.

With Faithful Fools I have had the opportunity to meet many people in my community, in my country and many others in North America, among them Kay Jorgensen, Damien Weldon, Alex Darr, and all who have come to share with our community. I give thanks to God for bringing us together.

The greatest lessons with Faithful Fools has been to share my life with my community, to share my time, my home, my achievements, and my many difficulties. My walk through life is made easier in community. I support my friends and they support me.

To this day I continue to weave this web of friendship—brotherhood and sisterhood—and learning together. I am grateful to be a Fiel, a woman free to think and with a joy-filled attitude toward life.

Samos Bufones También

By Heidi Meza & Max Jerez

Twenty four years ago when we arrived in our new community, a small settlement in Managua, Nicaragua, we always thought that we were here for some reason or trusted that God knew why we were here. From the moment of our arrival, we were fortunate to have the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls as neighbors. At that time we became part of some community groups the Sisters coordinated such as a women’s reflection group and a group of “Men Against Violence.” It was out of these groups that our motivation and interest to work for the common good of our community grew. Since that time that we have not only been observers, but also participants in the transformation of our small community through various initiatives and projects.

As teachers we have valued the role of education in the development process of our community. That is what led us to coordinate a musical education program as well as support preschool and primary education. In 1999 we founded a small school named San Francisco de Asis that currently serves more than 200 children each year. For 18 years it has been the only school in our neighborhood and surrounding communities that has given girls and boys an access to education.

When we met the Faithful Fools we very much identified with their work and the values expressed in their mission statement. Being a part of Faithful Fools has given us an opportunity to share our motivations, work and community experiences with a global community that seeks to make positive changes in the social contexts in which each one lives and works.

Finally, the value and scope of the support we have received from the Faithful Fools community is undeniable. It has been very important in terms of experiences and resources to sustain our day-to-day work. For this reason we are grateful for a community with which we can continue to share our achievements and difficulties, but above all to work hand in hand for the fulfillment of our commitment to our fellow human beings.

Discovering My Clown

By Meg Whitaker-Greene

In the beginning, I was a member of the founding Fools’ Board which we called “Fools of the Round Table.” This delighted me. I have never before been in meetings of a Board where laughter was woven into the agenda! Kay had a clown, Carmen had a clown, Alex had a clown. But I had never imagined that I, too, had a clown.

A Fool who might get the ear of the King!
A twist on telling Truth to Power

Early on we made a Fools trip to Nicaragua. We stayed with “mamas” and “papas” in homes that welcomed us. We were told by Carmen to be careful what we packed as we might have more in our suitcase than our family would have in their house. People waited to eat until a fork and spoon was free and washed. We learned to know one another on a living-together basis despite linguistics. On our first trip, we walked the question “What is poor?” Relationships in the barrio had a depth of caring that seemed to be wealth.

We traveled to the mountains of San Diego where people farmed. I would dance or draw in the dirt to communicate when a translator was not present. My Spanish was pitiful.

After three days, we met at the bus stop for the return trip to Managua. As the gathered community waited with us, I asked for a “bano.” (My Spanish was so bad that I couldn’t pronounce or even imagine an it to save my life!)

The Faithful Fools encourage people to find their insights and talents. Joy in the serendipity of humor keeps people to find their insights and talents.

One woman pointed to the outhouse in her back yard. I went into the latrine. Inside in the darkness, I realized that I had a clown nose in my pocket! When I came out, I had on the clown nose and a plastic bag over my hair with a feather sticking out. I launched into my terrible Spanish saying, “Qui est mi Espagnole?” I looked in Francisco’s hat, Maria’s shoe, Dolores’s sleeve, Mario’s wooden toy box. I looked and looked. My Espagnole was no where to be found! People were doubled over with laughter. Kay embraced me with joy as she announced, “You have found your clown!” I was ecstatic. The name of my clown is “Entones” which means “and so on” in Spanish because I first heard this word as “Antoine Says.” I wondered out loud, “Who is this Antoine who is saying things?”

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The Faithful Fools encourage people to find their insights and talents. Joy in the serendipity of humor keeps people to find their insights and talents. Knowing one another is the wealth!
There are so many stories and so many people who have come through those purple doors. In the pictures below, there's Maria Brenny talking with Pagan George as Jay listens in. And Edward Tyler who knows the Fools and the Fools know him. He's serving soup to Alex who had a strong connection to Jay. There's the story of the piano that Carl brought in out of the rain because he couldn't bear to see it get ruined. It's been enjoyed by many including Stone. He too has been with the Fools for a long time—here he is as a young man, a decade and a half ago. Stone and Kay met at the Unitarian Universalist Church, where Jay and T often slept at the doorsill. More than once of the two of them made 7-day Street Retrants feel welcome.

We are all connected. One person leads to the next. Each relationship, each person, is part of who we are.

Golden Aura of the Heart
By Robert-Harry Rovin

I have offered the creative writing program “WRITE ON!!” at the Fools since 2011. Through cultivating an atmosphere of acceptance it has provided a green house for those who need a place to write their truth and be appreciated for whatever degree of truth their potential creativity has sprouted.

The Fools have so deeply absorbed the teaching of the Christ—unconditional love for all and unlimited forgiveness—that they effortlessly walk the talk to provide a nurturing environment for all. These truths of unconditional love and unlimited forgiveness have so deeply affected the Fools that their hearts and minds emanate the essential quality of merging gold. It is this quality of merging gold which melts the appearance of separation and allows the experience of oneness of all. It is this experience of oneness that provides a nurturing environment for all.

Here’s What I Believe
By Julia Older Funkuchen

H ere’s what I believe: Somewhere along the way, our wanting to know the world must build so that we yearn for experience more than ease and for truth more than comfort. Our hope for growth and depth must compel us to venture into new landscapes and forbidding places even if we are frightened and the path is unclear.

Happily, as I was wrestling with these ideas, I met Kay Jorgensen and Carmen Barsody and the Faithful Fools.

One day I went out into the streets with them for just 6 hours and I can tell you that it felt MUCH longer. I felt tired almost immediately, and quite uncertain. By midmorning, I had found a little park with a gathering of folks sitting around who seemed to make their home on the streets. I sat down on a bench just outside the group.

After awhile, a man came over to join me. “What are you doing here?” he asked in a pleasant way. I was surprised that I had not just blended in. How could it be so obvious that I was not from there before I said anything? I was embarrassed but I told the truth. “I’m here to learn about homelessness.” I felt absurd in that moment. What could I know about what it is to be destitute and without a home in less than one day? The man looked at me and smiled. He said, “You will learn something.”

He was right. I learned something.

Another year, I walked out from the Fools Court and turned down an unfamiliar street. Very soon I passed a man, a tall African-American street person, which is an important part of the story as it occurred for me. As I passed him, I said, “Hi.” He said “Hello” and then he spun around and said, “Are you from the South?” “Yes,” I said, “North Carolina.” He replied, waggling his finger at me, “The best barbecue in the world is Chatham’s in Raleigh.” “It is not!” I yelled. “The best barbecue in the world is Bullock’s in Durham.” And we both laughed. It is always good to meet someone from home.

And, that is how my day on the streets began. I fell in love. Or maybe, I remembered, again, that love is everywhere.

Nieves Moreno

What would we do without him? Nieves has been part of the Fools from almost the beginning. Over the years, he has become an “all around Fool.” He does a little bit of everything all of the time, but best of all he is with us almost everyday with his smile and his love. Here he is taking gift bags to people he knows on the street, and above you see a younger Nieves helping paint the Hat Factory.
Enrolled in Street Level Learning

In the very beginning, Faithful Fools was incorporated as a charitable and educational institution. Over the years, many a Faithful Fool came to the Tenderloin through some form of educational enterprise. There have been internships and practica; classes—"Artist as Citizen" and "Women, Poverty, and Catholic Social Thought" to name just two; community interns like Jackie Hider, live-in interns who stayed for a few months or a few years. All of us are here to learn, to be sure, and here are some who have practiced learning with great intention.

Lover of leaving,

Kay and Josh Mann (live-in intern 2010-11) play "Whose Nose Is This?" 7-Day Street Retreat 2011

Come, come, whoever you are, Wanderer, worshipper, Lover of leaving,

Ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come.

Barbara Meyers with her weaving based on the Unitarian Universalist Hymn "O Remi Pium "Come, Come, whoever you are. 'If you come by the Fool, you will find it welcoming you in the stairwell."

Richard Kamber, who taught "Artist as Citizen," (University of San Francisco) was the first professor to use the Fools Court in a classroom. We honor his influence as an artist-activist and musician his passing on November 1, 2017. His definition of art is "Making things." "Well, not only did he make art, but his art makes a difference. We will always value what he taught us.

Thom Langjip (left), a ministerial intern and steadfast Fool—In 2003, 7-Day Street Retreatants were given cloth by friends, Fools, and family to carry as talismen and intentions. Tom, an accomplished textile artist, made his into a "Street all." 7-Day Street Retreat 2009

How "The Institute for Street Level Learning" Got Its Name

In May 2004, The Starr King School for the Ministry awarded Kay Jorgensen an honorary Sacre Theologiae Doctor. The award specifically mentioned these as her qualifications:

Friend of the homeless
Compassionate ally and advocate of society's most marginalized
Witness to the creative arts as ministry for all ages
Educator of the importance of spiritual practice
Stewards of street level experiential learning

We named the educational work we do "The Institute for Street Level Learning" in order to continue the work of stewarding experiential learning.

A Fools Mission

I've often heard Carmen Barsody say that "Things Take Time." When we started Fools Mission on the San Francisco Peninsula, we sensed that things would be different for our nascent sister organization. We have little here to compare with the Tenderloin neighborhood. Poverty and homelessness are more invisible to the drive-by eye. A Silicon Valley professional might encounter someone who struggles with poverty in the guise of a financial transaction with a service worker, employee, or panhandler—but only rarely as someone to socialize with.

Nevertheless, Fools Mission has a lot in common with the Faithful Fools, beginning with the identity of the fool. We uphold the freedom to speak truth to power, and the power of art to shift attitudes and culture. Both organizations see accompaniment as a path to discernment and a sense of shared destiny. Both tap into the healing energies of community, where everyone engages in the work as equal partners who seek understanding, meaning, and empowerment together. Sharing circles weave together to create an egalitarian space for storytelling, honest reflection, and healing.

This is a short list of things I think I've learned from the Faithful Fools and it might be more delusional than historical, but of course, any misunderstandings are as much their responsibility as they are mine:

• Ministry is relational. For people of privilege accustomed to mass movements, online petitions, and advocacy campaigns, a community of Fools offers an opportunity to live, listen, and learn from human beings who are abstractions to most—the outcasts, the misfits, the wretched refuse. Instead of casting ourselves as providers who already know what to do, we accompany, celebrate, and listen to the "resplendent cracks through which the light shines."

• Small is beautiful. As Rosemary Bray McNatt says, "If we cannot bring justice into the small circle of our own individual lives, we cannot hope to bring justice to the world. And if we do not bring justice to the world, none of us is safe and none of us will survive." Direct accompaniment and widening circles of compassion will overcome assumptions, judgments, and prejudice in due course.

• Humor isn't optional. A clown nose or foolscap can be a healthy reminder that we're all basically the same underneath all our pretensions to unworthiness or superiority. Laughter opens windows of perception, centers us in the moment, and heals all wounds. We learn a lot from oppressed people about how to expand our emotional range—when to laugh if it's happy, and cry when it's sad. Revel in the irony! Things are rarely what they appear to be.

• Embrace a life of service. We won't create social justice just by sitting at our computers, but sometimes the administrivia is important, too: the newsletter mailings, the thank you notes, setting the table. Sometimes showing up as a privileged member of society and being sufficiently polite is enough to get the job done. Think of it as spiritual practice—the consciousness you raise might be your own.

• Trust the relationships. Successful human relationships are not about fixing others—they're about being open to being transformed by the relationship yourself. If you feel judgment welling up inside, use regular reflection in community as a mirror of your own brokenness. Spread the word about how your work and play are making a difference, and watch how hearts break open and generosity wells up on its own. Networks of healthy human relationships are a resilient form of wealth, and you can accomplish a lot with the simple faith that you'll have what you need before it's asked of you.

Thanks to the influence of the Faithful Fools and five years of building trust together as Fools Mission, we sense the emergence of a collective living organism that's so much wiser and stronger than any individual. Our arts and companionship programs have become an oasis in the "business as usual" world of providers and clients: souls are feeling their worth; human beings are connecting with social service; and justice is being done. May we populate the landscape with more "fools with a mission" willing to live as though we belong to each other.
I was inspired by how Sheila Kopanang in South Africa to the Faithful Fools was that being treated as a worthy human being is powerful and not typical of many programs that just provided services. Within the first two hours of our program, I saw how having an authentic voice in shaping a collective future was empowering and energizing. If someone fell asleep, it was OK. If someone needed help with a question, it was OK. They needed to sleep.

I also helped to introduce Sister Sheila Flynn and the women of Kopanang in South Africa to the Faithful Fools. I was inspired by how Sheila was embraced, and the work of the women was honored and celebrated, even to the extent of commissioning a work of art. With great enthusiasm Sr. Ade Kroll, OSF shared with Sr. Sheila the books by Brian Swimme on the Universe Story. And, oh my what a story was told in 35 brilliantly designed, embroidered and beaded panels telling the evolutionary story of the universe. Not only did it provide inspiration for those seeing it in the Bay Area and throughout the U.S., it also gave inspiration to the women who created it and was exhibited in a museum in Johannesburg, South Africa.

What I so value is that Faithful Fools look inward and look outward to transform lives. Fools have always been great readers. A number of books have had deep influence on us over the years. For example, in the early days, rather than consult traditional organizational development texts, Kay and Carmen read The Art Spirit by Robert Henri. They viewed the early days of Faithful Fools as a creative act and so looked to the advice of an artist in order to keep the principles of creativity in the forefront of their work.

I am sitting behind an unbroken window in my air-conditioned room after hurricane Irma, feeling lucky. But going through the storm makes me ask yet again, “What am I doing here?” Nineteen years ago when I first started writing I was asked similar questions, feeling uncertain of my place. A class called, “At the Crossroads” (of parish and community) beckoned to me, and Faithful Fools – Kay Jorgensen and Carmen Barsody – invited me into “not knowing” and into being present in that fertile meeting place. A Street Retreat was a total relief. I didn’t need to have answers or be a leader or act ministerial. I could just be – walk, witness, reflect – pick up pennies and enter into the present.

Ever since then when I am unsure or overwhelmed, I return to foolish wisdom learned at the Street Retreat. First, slowing down, listening within and sensing the strand of connection that holds me to you. Then finding the crossroads one step at a time, feet on the ground, aware of my judgments, preconceptions and entanglements, yet free to be present, to bring presence. Discovering the abundant gifts: pennies, sandwiches, conversations, bathrooms, available in the moment they are needed. And discovering, if only for a moment, how to do without. Returning to a safe haven with the comfort of soup and acceptance of my experience. Returning to the task, the life, of being a Fool. Since that class I have pastored a church that became a crossroad of interfaith and community engagement. And I have returned to the Fools to be renewed and reminded that, “Life erupts at every intersection,” as Kay once said. I have started an organization (without really intending to) of neighbors growing and sharing food. It’s named Plenty! to remind us of the abundance generated when gifts are shared. Now I am in St. Petersburg, FL, a community minister walking, witnessing, reflecting once again. Wondering where I am being led. Not knowing. Returning always to the Fools to be reminded, “… take your time, go slowly. Listen deep inside yourself. Simple things are holy.”

You changed me, I am grateful and, on my best days, I am still a fool.
The tale begins with the king as a boy having to spend the night alone in the forest to prove his courage so he can become king. While he was spending the night alone, he was visited by a sacred vision. In the fire appeared the Holy Grail, a symbol of God's divine grace. A voice said to the boy, "You shall be keeper of the Grail so it may heal the hearts of all people." But the boy was blinded by greater visions of a life filled with power, glory, and beauty. In this state of radical amazement, he felt for a brief moment not like a boy, but invincible, like God. So he reached into the fire to take the Grail. And the Grail vanished leaving him with his hand in the fire to be terribly wounded.

As this boy grew older, his wound grew deeper until one day his life lost all reason. He had no faith in any human, not even himself. He couldn't love or feel loved. He was sick with experience. He began to die.

One day a fool wandered into the castle and found the king alone. And being a fool, he was simple minded. He didn't see a king; he only saw a man alone and in pain. He asked the king, “What ails you friend?” The king replied, “I'm thirsty. I need some water to cool my throat.” So the fool took a cup from beside his bed and filled it with water and handed it to the king. As the king began to drink, he realized his wound was healed. He looked at his hands and there was the Holy Grail—that which he sought all of his life.

He turned to the fool and said with amazement, “How could you find that which my brightest and bravest could not?” The fool replied, “I don't know. I only knew that you were thirsty.”

We Discover On The Streets Our Common Humanity
through which celebration, community, and healing occur.

The Guest House

Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house empty
of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.