FOOLS FABLES
COMMUNITY

2016
Towards A Sustainable Community

“Sustenance.” What a lovely word! It tastes good in the mouth when you say it—not like chocolate, exactly; more like a rich, hot soup on a cold and drizzly day, or like a quiet conversation with a dear companion, when that was exactly what you needed. “Sustenance”—support, encouragement, and strength to do what needs to be done. “Sustenance”—what it takes to keep on going, to endure.

These days at the Faithful Fools, sustenance is much on our minds and in our conversation, as we think deeply together about how this work is to be sustained into the future. It is still a small shock to realize we have been here more than 18 years!—and so we are asking ourselves what we will take to enable new generations of Faithful Fools to be present as needs of this neighborhood become all the more pressing in light of all that is going on locally, nationally, and globally?

From the very beginning, our work as Fools has been to be present to meet needs as they arise—at our door, on the sidewalk, in the neighborhood, at City Hall. For individuals who knock on our door, we are a stillpoint, and a place of connection. Sustenance for an individual sometimes means we step in to be trustee or disability companion, when that was exactly what you needed. A hunger comes into your body so I run to the garden and start digging potatoes. A hunger comes into your being so I reach for a blanket, a whole book as a gift.

So we support that too: every week you will find community organizers in our living room, enjoying a meal and working to realize a shared vision of equity and justice. Some of them live in single-room occupancy hotels, some on the streets; some work in nonprofits; all of them love this city and are working together to amplify the voice of the community.

And, on any given day, you are likely to find students from around the city or across the country, who come to Fools’ Court to learn with our community. We all participate in learning—students, teachers, Fools, all—who we sit together in the reflective circles that guide our work.

While Carmen and Kay were dreaming and walking the Faithful Fools into being, they didn’t think they were founding an organization; they imagined the building of a community. There is no foreseeable end to the work they started, is there? Community is not a goal to be accomplished and checked off a “to-do” list. There are no end dates attached to the work named in our mission: meeting people where they are, shattering myths about poverty, acknowledging each person’s incredible worth. These activities don’t end, because they are the very substance of community—they are the bread and butter of life; they are sustenance itself.

Stewardship of this community requires provisions for the long haul. It requires pledges and estate gifts and one-time donations. We are both grateful and sustained by your gifts. We invite you to continue growing with this Faithful, Fools community that belongs to all of us.

Peace to you and yours,

Fools learning to juggle which is what we like to do best: juggling what needs to be done and juggling just for the fun of it.

We are grateful to Ade Kroll, OSF, for making the sunshine tapestry that adorns our front cover.

Towards A Sustainable Community

Our Union Is Like This

You feel cold so I reach for a blanket to cover your shivering feet. A hunger comes into your body so I run to my garden and start digging potatoes. You ask for a few words of comfort and guidance and I quickly kneel by your side offering you a whole book as a gift.

You ache with loneliness one night so much you weep, and I say here is a rope, tie it around me, I will be your companion for life.

Hafiz

A Retreat into Community

Loneliness is often present for me. My mind holds me separate, setting boundaries even as I interact with others through service. I analyze what I want to do: Am I available right now? What do I want to share? What can I commit to? How vulnerable can I allow myself to be? How open can I be to another’s vulnerability? These thoughts and questions hold me separate. They keep me from being fully present in the moment.

In April 2016, as I was preparing for my first 7-Day Street Retreat, I felt anxious. Even more questions swirled in my mind. Would I be able to sleep, my face exposed beneath street lights? When I awoke, would I find my belongings still next to me? On a typical one-day Street Retreat, I immerse myself in the Tenderloin for 5 hours, interacting with many people but rarely talking with another Fool. Wouldn’t seven days of not talking with another Fool be lonely?

Yes. Yes I would, I shared my questions with the others and this is what they said, “While we bring intention and presence to the retreat, there are no rules like not talking to each other.” This was such relief to me. My question that felt so serious a moment before now felt a little silly.

Even with these meetings, new fears and questions arose in the days leading up to our retreat. In a culture that admires self-reliance, would others look out for my needs? How could I calm these worries? I thought of the Fools who have made a practice of annual multi-day street retreats for almost 20 years. I thought of my own choice to commit to participating in this practice. I chose to have faith in this community and practice.

On retreat, we circled for group reflection each morning and each late-afternoon. I felt the way others cared about my opinions, observations, and jokes. There was no doubt that this community of Fools was caring for my physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

The deep sense of belonging that I felt on retreat with this community resonated powerfully. Among these individuals, I felt safe and sustained, achieving a peace and connection deeper than usually present in my life. I found a new appreciation for communal living and a little insight into the lives of my friends who live in pairs or larger groups under the highway and in the park. We are one large community, made up of many, many interwoven communities, and we share universal needs such as to belong, to eat, to sleep, and to feel safe.

This process pulled at my self-image and my sense of differentness. I second guessed my interactions less because of my faith in the people and process to which I had committed. I still asked many questions, but they were less analytical. I did not question myself. I did not question my worth. I did not question my merit.

On retreat, I ventured out with others and on long walks, alone, and laden with all my belongings. I felt purpose. I felt community. I did not feel lonely.

Bianca Huerta & Hy Carrel

Seven-day Street Retreat Reflection
Nov. 1939—On the heels of the Nazi invasion of Poland, Camus wrote:

I can understand you, but I cease to agree when you try to base your life on despair, maintain that everything is equally pointless, and withdraw behind your disgust. For despair is a feeling and not a permanent condition. You cannot stay in despair. And feelings must give way to a clear view of things.

You say: “Besides, what is to be done? And what can I do?” But the question doesn’t start by presenting itself like that. You still believe in the individual because you can feel what is worthwhile both in those around you and in yourself.

There is something for you to do, have no doubt about it. Every one of us has at our disposal a certain zone of influence, which we owe as much to our defects as our talents. But whichever is the case, this zone is there and can be immediately used.

We turn to Albert Camus (1913–1960), author of The Plague and The Stranger in these hard times. As a witness to social injustice and global violence of nearly unimaginable proportions, he was and remains an inspiration. His call to action resonates with us, and so does the call to cherish each person’s worth which Camus reminds us is due to both our defects and our talents. Our active resistance to despair and injustice is rooted in both reflection and action.

### Times are Hard: Resisting Despair & Injustice

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### Speaking Out

Faithful Fools sponsored this argument (below) against Measure Q in the November 2016 San Francisco Voter Handbook. This measure (which we are sorry to say passed) further criminalized tent encampment, which is one way for people living on the streets to build safe communities. We included our voice in the voter handbook because it is, in Camus’ words, one zone of influence at our disposal.

**Faithful Fools argument against Measure Q:**

This measure is an expression of frustration, not a meaningful response to the growing crisis of homelessness. Tent encampments are symptoms of a severe housing crisis as well as a lack of resources including mental health beds and emergency shelter. Even when encampments are disrupted by police sweeps, the problem doesn’t go away; the people just get moved from place to place. While the measure does require that the City offer shelter or housing before a sweep begins, it doesn’t specify the number of days shelter must be available. This means we will only be seeing police engage in the frustrating exercise of moving people on just to see them reappear elsewhere within a few days. We urge you to vote NO on this measure—resist the urge to express frustration with a law that is punitive and expensive, but not helpful.

“I don’t have any money. I don’t own a gun because I won’t be violent. So the only real power I have is to organize.”

Jesse Johnson, Community Activist & Artist
Sometimes when someone from this circle of Faithful Fools is heading out to far away places or needs a long-lasting reminder that they are not alone, we take a little piece of purple yarn and tie it around their wrist. That little bit of purple yarn is a reminder that we are all connected within this whimsical and committed community of Faithful Fools.

Alex Darr (who has participated in so many Street Retreats) takes not just a bit of yarn around his wrist, but a BIG ball of yarn, which does not even begin to express the Fools' gratitude that goes with him wherever he is. No doubt his life as a full-time father is as foolish as foolish can be.

There is a community of the spirit. Join it, and feel the delight of walking in the noisy street and being the noise.

Rumi

And sometimes new people arrive. Here Nicole Fusco (our Mercy Corps Volunteer for 2016-17) celebrates arriving in San Francisco with her fellow Mercy Volunteers, Marissa Gonzales and Frisco Gonzales (from Las Vegas, NM—on the left) and Lupita Avila (from Chicago on the far right).

Sometimes the purple yarn brings people back, too. We are so glad that Mary Ganz (left) came back to us two years ago (after 8 years on the east coast). And Jackie Hider, who has been making the Fools Court her home a few weeks at a time for the last 5 years decided to spend an entire year with us. These two are fine examples of what happens when the purple yarn tugs on you and brings you home.

Margaret Cloudfeather greets you!

A little foot washing and massage for Ed Bowers from Care Through Touch

Kasey Russ-Asberry and Greg Moore being the noise of the streets

Robert-Harry Rovin has returned after recovering from a serious fall. He and Kay Jorgensen chat before a Thursday afternoon session of WRITE ON!!!

And where would any of us be without Nieves Moreno? He’s the one we turn to when we need a laugh or some help with just about anything. He IS a Fool—through and through, and better than that he is OUR Fool!
It has become all too common in our community to pay little to no attention to our surroundings; we have been conditioned to pay little to no attention to those we walk by. We were afflicted by this “disease” prior to our Immersion trip to the Tenderloin. Coming from the privileged setting of St. Ignatius College Prep, the 10 of us (8 high school seniors and 3 staff/faculty) were strangers not only to the community of the Tenderloin, but to each other as well.

When we began our Tenderloin Immersion, the “disease” that had afflicted us for so long came into full force and made us weary even before we began confronting our illness face-to-face. We saw ourselves as being on a mission to help “fix” the most neglected part of our city. Our curiosity about the true nature of the community was the only thing that kept us from running in the other direction.

Faithful Fools taught us that we had it wrong the entire time. These two weeks taught us that we were not here to “fix” the “Tender Zone,” but instead be with it. In our time here, we not only learned that our previous understanding of “Tender Zone,” but instead be with it. In our time here, we were not here to “fix” the TL was flawed, but that our desire to fix was what was truly flawed. The Tenderloin isn’t longing to be saved, but rather be with it. In our time here, we were not here to “fix” the TL was flawed, but that our desire to fix was what was truly flawed.

These two weeks taught us that

There are many forms of separation, and when they are enforced by social or legal norms, we experience them as segregation. Segregation is most notorious (and rightly so) when it is racist, but other forms of segregation reinforce social injustices. When we segregate by age or income or race or gender, we lose sight of just how much our wellbeing and our humanity are bound up with one another. In June, just in time for the primary election, a group of University of San Francisco students with their professor, Dr. Brandi Lawless, studied and worked with us. In the process we all found a deeper understanding of why we must work so deliberately for social justice.

University of San Francisco students also participated in precinct walking (organized by TL resident voter mobilization organizations) in both June and November, helping to knock on more than 1,500 doors for each election. Student/TL resident teams knocked on doors together, handing out information on ballot issues and where/when to vote. Through these and other efforts we are seeing a steady rise in Tenderloin voter turnout.

In this gathering there is no high, no low, no smart, no ignorant, no special assembly, no grand discourse, no proper schooling required.

There is no master, no disciple.

This gathering is more like a drunken party, full of tricksters, fools, mad men and mad women.

This is a gathering of Lovers.

Learning

Just a year ago, when I was a freshman entering the University of San Francisco, I had no idea how being part of the Martin-Baro Scholars (MBS) Program—a living-learning community at USF focused on examining issues of poverty, social justice, and diversity—would change me. MBS students live together in the university’s tightly packed dorms and take classes together. Last year we also worked on a collaborative documentary with the Faithful Fools for a year. Living with the people that I went to school with every day taught me a lot, including how to grow up and be mature about problems instead of just bottling up my feelings.

Ordinarily, when you go to school with someone and then say goodbye at the end of class, it’s naturally easier to avoid confrontation. However, when you live with the people that you go to class with, things get harder: you now have to be open, honest, and communicative about your feelings and thoughts in order to avoid making your living environment toxic. As a result, I had to learn how to be more open and honest with the people around me if I wanted everyone to get along and have fun!

I came to college wanting to be more open about who I am because I spent a majority of my life closed off and introverted. I was scared of trusting people and becoming attached to those around me, so I avoided it all. However, MBS taught me that there are people in this world who genuinely want to get to know me and be a part of my life. Being around people who pushed me to be myself, explore my dreams, and learn how to laugh and enjoy the moment taught me to be more comfortable with who I am and with the people around me. In the end, there was a most remarkable thing about my community-engaged learning experience with the Martin-Baro Scholars and the Faithful Fools: I genuinely felt a sense of community throughout the entire process. The entire MBS cohort became a second family, and the Faithful Fools became a home away from home. And that is what makes community-engaged learning so unique.

Vivienne Pismarov
The front doors of Fools Court are open for the music to reach the sidewalk. People look in and smile; another guy offers to join in and play the Conga drum; little kids and even grownups dance on the sidewalk; another guy stops by to ask “What is this place?” and learns there is a free writing class tomorrow. DJ notices the sandwich board we put up on the street inviting all into our morning meditation, he comes in, meets fellow meditators, feels encouraged to seek healing for his addictions; two years later he joins our Bible Study; meeting still more folks who support and respect him. R.V. connects with Fools through Bible Study and three or four years later, he has full-time work, having parlayed his compassion into a city job helping people sleeping on the streets get housed.

Melissa Fafarman

You are Cordially Invited

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Remembering Marsha Campbell

We remember our dear Marsha Campbell, who passed away on February 9, 2016, when she read one of her poems at the release party for vol. 4 of Living in the Land of the Dead back in July 2011. Marsha was a poet who taught us so much about insight, courage, and love. One of our favorite memories is of Marsha singing Christmas carols at our annual holiday party. Marsha’s life was not easy, but the world is so much better for having heard her voice in song and poetry. Here is her poem:

On the Death of Whitney Houston
by Marsha Campbell

Heart’s knowing is how to recover from loss how to believe and how to balance one’s energy when another being has been run out of breath drained of heartbeats claimed by an early sleep for a star to enter darkness

Heart’s knowing is a confession of drugs mixed with alcohol an early sleep a lesson in how to dream with awareness how to dream in sleep in and sleep in dream so that the soul becomes articulate.

Thomas Atwood

Discovery

In December of 2015, I went to the Faithful Fools community in Nicaragua with Carmen and Alex. When I got off the plane, I was greeted with a lot of hugs and kisses from people I did not know. It was like right away I was family. Oh, how I was immersed in the culture. The sense of community is inspiring and great being there—from the local school run by Heidi to education in the Fools Court. It was a hard trip for me physically, and when I got sick people cared for me like I was one of their own. I never had that kind of care at home. I just felt how everyone was interconnected with each other.

Andrea Dolin

From the Streets of Managua to the Streets of the Tenderloin

Thank you!

www.foolsmission.org
Kay and I said early on, “Faithful Fools is a community of people from all walks of life working together for personal and social change.” We knew that our actions would be stronger if rooted in community. To live and work intentionally in community, adorned with our egos and blind spots, requires a radical willingness to be constantly challenged and changed.

We Faithful Fools come together, some people living securely inside and rarely having to question security or privilege, while others are struggling to find housing and some vital anchor of stability, but human beings all. We seek to have space for our own humanness and everyone else’s and know that sometimes we just don’t act or communicate as skillfully as we’d like.

It means creating a place where people who are feeling isolated in their lives and in their work can come and feel enlivened with others and at times say literally to one another, “You don’t have to go it alone.” It means not only doing something because it’s important or necessary for me, but also doing something because it is important to another, or simply because it needs to be done.

We are here working together for social change and for individual change. We don’t make vows or pay membership dues. We don’t profess a common creed or set of ideologies. What does connect us is our genuine care for one another and a deep commitment to be actively engaged in the larger community of which we are all a part.

Carmen Barsody, OSF

**Faithful Fools Mission Statement**

We are called to a ministry of presence that acknowledges each human’s incredible worth.

Aware of our judgments, we seek to meet people where they are 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.

**Challenged & Changed**

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Carmen Barsody, OSF

Fools see the world in all its glorious absurdity and act on what they see.