

Linda Atkins
Action Reflection #2
1/7/15

On Thursday, 12/11/14, I was volunteering at a lunch shift at Martin de Porres soup kitchen, where I am not explicitly in the role of chaplain, but where I see myself as a stealth chaplain and have a lot of contact with our guests. It had been a rainy, windy night, after several rainy days in a row, and it was still raining off and on. Many of our guests sleep outside in the elements, on the sidewalk or under a freeway overpass, and they were huddled under an overhang at the soup kitchen, trying to stay dry. It was definitely a gloomy day (or so it seemed to me, anyway) and I felt some conscious sense of wanting to be a source of good cheer or comfort. My assumption is that sleeping outside, in a city, in public, is lousy, and that doing it in cold, wet weather is *really* lousy. I felt sympathy for our guests, or empathy, in that everyone, including me, has had some sort of experience of feeling physically lousy. I assumed that our guests were feeling sort of miserable, emotionally and physically.

I smiled at one person, and then at another, and after a while, I noticed that my smile had become fixed and frozen. My assumption is that a smiling expression can potentially cheer others up, or at least advertise the intention to be open and friendly. My assumption is that being around someone who seems friendly and/or receiving friendly treatment can uplift the spirits. I wanted the guests to see me as friendly. I was holding an image of myself as The Comforter or The Friend, and assuming that this would be helpful. I assumed I should appear to be unflappable and in charge. However, my frozen expression very likely expressed tension rather than warmth (though I don't know this for sure).

Once I noticed that my smile had become frozen, I noticed the physical tension that was involved in holding that expression in place. I noticed a reluctance to let go of the tension—a fear that my face in repose might look stern or sad. However, being very conscious of the tension in my face almost automatically led to its relaxing—once I saw it clearly, the next thing could happen, or perhaps getting in touch with the actual physical discomfort encouraged letting the tension go.

As soon as I let my face relax, I was surprised to find that I immediately felt sad—just as I had feared, or worse! I had feared I might look sad, and possibly I did, and I also felt sad. Next I felt aversion toward the sadness: alarm, as if there was something wrong with being sad while at the soup kitchen.

I felt as if I should be in control, a beacon for others, and that this meant not appearing sad, angry, anxious, stressed out, or overwhelmed. I noticed the thoughts, “It’s not OK to be sad here. I shouldn’t be sad.” What the sadness was about specifically, I didn’t know and didn’t investigate. Instead, I turned toward the sadness: how am I experiencing this in my body? I noticed my physical experience, particularly in my chest and stomach.

Then, out of the blue, a guest I’d never even noticed before, let alone spoken to, said as I happened to be near him, “I just had surgery. I have a lot of pain.” I wasn’t busy with other duties, so I pulled up a chair and sat down with him and heard about his surgery and how he is in pain, but doesn’t like the side effects of pain medication. I told him I also dislike that feeling of

being pulled underwater. He said he was also feeling hopeful about a new chapter in his life, about the chance to be a different person. Remembering Jennifer's quote in one of our books about making observations rather than interventions, I said, "You're feeling optimistic about a new life" and he agreed. It was a satisfying, simple, heartfelt exchange, or so it seemed to me, anyway.

A bit later, another guest I'd never noticed before or spoken to said, "My mother died two months ago. I'm so sad." As with the first guest, I pulled up a chair and sat and listened, and responded in ways intended to keep the conversation focused on the guest. We talked for five minutes or so, and he wept several times, and he said something like, "Thank you for listening. It really comforts me."

It was interesting to me that once I noticed the tension inherent in my facial expression, my face relaxed almost on its own, and then that relaxation led to feeling an emotion, and then once I was feeling my genuine feeling, without having to know or analyze the cause, suddenly others wished to tell me their genuine feelings and experiences. It stood out to me that soon after I directly used a feeling word to myself ("I feel sad"), someone else used a feeling word to me, the same one: "I'm so sad."

Prior to volunteering that day, I assumed it would be as on many other occasions. That was disproved. Something different happened. I am often mindful while at the soup kitchen, and I very often chat with our guests, sometimes at length, but I don't think anyone had told me anything so heartfelt prior to this day, and certainly not two people in a row.

I assumed our guests were miserable, due to the weather. That was not proved or disproved; I didn't get any data on that.

I assume that sleeping outside in any weather generally is lousy, but can't say for sure. I gather that there are some longtime homeless people who actually find it preferable to any other option.

I assumed it would be best to look friendly, by having a smiling expression. While some guests may certainly prefer a smile to a neutral expression—though I don't know for sure—letting go of my friendly expression brought surprisingly good results. The assumption that it would be best to look friendly was disproved, or at least not proved. I actually have no idea if a smile cheers people up or not, though it can tend to cheer me up, so maybe it does cheer some people up.

I assumed it would be inappropriate to have my own sad feelings at the soup kitchen. This was disproved. It didn't cause any kind of problem, and in fact seemed to be helpful.

I assume that listening and presence are helpful to those experiencing challenges, and I think that was proven, once again.

I am assuming that it was my emotional availability to myself that made others want to tell me things, but I don't know that for sure. While I had never talked to either of these people before, maybe they had seen me and on this day, had seen me enough times that they felt like talking to me.

I assume that the second guest spoke to me for the same reason the first guest did, but it's possible that the second guest spoke to me simply because he saw me listening attentively to the first guest. That assumption was not proven or disproven.

At first, I was drawn toward putting in place the image I wished to project and toward maintaining that façade once I had it in place, but once I noticed what was happening, there was a definite pull toward seeing and feeling what was really true: there is a physical strain in maintaining this facial expression. My face wants to relax. Right under the surface, here is sadness.

When our guests spontaneously shared their woes with me, I was drawn toward engaging with them and being present with them. I felt a pull toward doing a good job as an ad hoc chaplain. At that point, I was neutral toward everyone else in the room, including the other guests and other volunteers. I was for the most part unaware of my own experience beyond a general sense of my body, once I started engaging with the two guests, one after the other. I was neutral about other sensory aspects of the room, which faded out of awareness once I was in conversation: how things looked, smelled, sounded.

When the first guest said he was in pain after surgery, that made total sense and was consistent with what I would expect; ditto what the second guest said about his terrible sorrow over the death of his mother. I was a little surprised by the first guest's linking of his surgery with ideas about embarking on a new life chapter, though in retrospect, that makes perfect sense, especially if he perceives that something about his way of life led him to the point of having to have surgery, with its corresponding pain.

I felt very grateful later that I had simply noticed the tension in my face, because that set in motion a chain of events that led to my being able to offer something more explicitly like chaplaincy. It seemed like a serendipitous gift, because, as mentioned, I had had the assumption that it would be best to seem cheerful. Totally the opposite, it seemed!

(However, I did not take from this that it would be good to make a point of reviewing sorrowful events from my own history each week when I'm at the soup kitchen. In fact, I think it was precisely not getting into the story of why I might be sad and what I might do to fix it, but rather noticing my visceral experience and accepting it, that somehow wordlessly advertised to our guests that it would be safe for them to tell me their deep concerns.)

I was grateful that I knew to turn my attention to my physical experience rather than analyzing why I felt sad. (I never did get back to that.) I was grateful for things I have learned in our class: not to stand over someone speaking to me, but to pull up a chair and sit down. To encourage the conversation to be speaker-centered. To maintain a posture of tranquility, as in Jaku Kinst's words. In conversation, to be relaxed and present and allow silences. I was grateful that I had some fledgling chaplain skills to offer when the opportunity arose.

I realize in retrospect that I can also be grateful that I, too, have had surgery and been weakened and in pain; I, too, have suffered the anguish of an unthinkable loss. While our guests'

experiences were of course utterly unique to them, I had a pretty good general idea of what they were going through, making it easy to empathize. I was grateful that I remembered what Jennifer said about offering observations instead of interventions; this seemed to be an effective thing to do with the guest who had just had surgery.

Dharma talk:

With the best of intentions, we can drift from reality into a story about who we should be or how we should be or how things should be. [Summarize events at soup kitchen.] In my experience at the soup kitchen that day, we get a quick tour of the Four Noble Truths. My tense face was suffering, albeit of a mild variety. The cause was clinging to an idea about what expression I should be wearing, and thus it was also possible for this particular bit of suffering to end, using Right Mindfulness to notice the tension, then notice the emotion of sadness, and then notice the physical experience of sadness, and finally discern how I might be of service to the soup kitchen's guests.

It is naturally our tendency to want to think about what has caused our current problem, and then, as Ezra Bayda writes, after having analyzed the problem, to think some more, about how to fix the problem or who or what to blame for it. It's possible to never get out of the realm of our thoughts at all. Teacher Howard Cohn says some people remain there for decades without ever realizing it. However, once we have started to be interested in noticing what is actually happening rather than the story spun off from it, we have the opportunity to do something very peculiar in our society, but very powerful: we can drop the story, even for just a moment or two, and turn directly toward our experience, noticing what is happening in our bodies and what is happening in our minds, rather than being swept away by the stories.

This is revolutionary because it allows us to directly see many things we might otherwise miss. We can notice what thoughts we are having and believing, and we can notice that when we stop telling ourselves the story over and over, it's kind of hard to maintain the emotional distress! The story is a major cause of the distress, and when that cause drops out of the picture, there is a lot less to prop up the misery. We also have the opportunity to notice how our experience is shifting moment by moment. It is not a monolithic, unchanging thing. With even the most horrendous physical pain, we might be able to notice a throbbing quality: on, off, on, off, which we might naturally translate, though these are concepts, as worse, better, worse, better ...

One time on retreat, I was having a good deal of physical pain that arose during sitting after sitting. After a day or two of this, it dawned on me that, while my body wasn't at all happy, my mind was entirely so. My mind had ceased to object to the physical experience, and had even found a place of contentment. One might reasonably assume that you have to be upset if you're in significant physical pain, or have some other undesired situation, and it is a revelation to realize they aren't necessarily connected. This is one gift of Right Mindfulness.

Additionally, while during that period the physical pain was a given, the initial unhappy, frustrated or angry thoughts were merely unnecessary extra suffering. Once my mind became peaceful and even happy, the mental part of the suffering was gone: a net decrease in suffering.

Letting ourselves be aware of our true experience, of what we're actually perceiving via the various sense doors, is an act of generosity, to ourselves, and also to others. When we are fully available to ourselves, we are automatically more available to others. In some odd way, I think the soup kitchen's guests picked up that I was tuned in and present, which opened the door for them to share with me and receive the gift of being fully and kindly heard.

I was able to respond with generosity to their needs because I wasn't in the bathroom sobbing over the sad thing that happened to me in the past, which is not to say there isn't a time for that, but we can use our wise discernment to notice what action might be helpful in a given context, what practices might be most effective. If I am volunteering, and considering the question "Whose need is being met?", I will probably want to choose practices at that moment that keep me available to others.

Two things that seem to me always to be worthwhile are to explicitly notice thoughts, and to notice physical experience. Therapist and meditation teacher Tom Moon, in San Francisco, suggests going one step farther and adding "Having the thought." Let's try this. Think about a recent situation where something seemed difficult or overwhelming, and consciously think, "I can't do this." [Pause.] Now say it to yourself this way: "Having the thought that I can't do this." Do you notice any difference? Does anyone want to say how the two were different? [People share, possibly.]

Adding "Having the thought" is quick and easy to do, and I find it to be powerful and helpful in really making it obvious that a thought is just a thought. Any time we notice we are having a thought, that is a moment of awakening and liberation. This week, see if you can notice five thoughts per day.

(End of dharma talk.)

While I think being in good cheer can also be an act of generosity—I myself prefer to be around people who are in good moods rather than bad, at any rate—I learned from this experience that it's perfectly safe to relax my face, perfectly safe to have a "negative" emotion, and perfectly safe to experience that emotion. I now trust myself to practice with it appropriately in the context of being at a volunteer commitment.

I found myself thinking, "Wow, I'm going to tune in to my emotions every time I'm at the soup kitchen, and I'm going to be knee-deep in people wanting to tell me things!" Well, maybe not so. Impermanence applies here, as well. It was that way on that occasion, and will probably be other ways on other occasions.

It might be interesting to conduct some experiments at the soup kitchen, or at the hospital where I volunteer as a chaplain: What happens if I never once smile during an occasion of volunteering? What happens if I let my face be relaxed and neutral the entire time? Or what if I smile fixedly throughout? How do I myself respond to someone who is smiling or not smiling? Do I assume a smiling person is friendly and that a non-smiling person is unfriendly?

(I find Paul inspirational here. His expression is often neutral or he might even look stern at times, but when responding to another person, his warmth, kindness and sense of humor become immediately and overwhelmingly obvious. Would he be more welcoming if he maintained a half-smile at all times, or even a toothy grin? Or do the two balance each other, relaxation/repose at some times allowing an easy warmth and kindness at others?)