

Section 1:

On June 17th 2016 our small group of aspiring chaplain students went on a field trip to St. Anthony's, an organization providing essential support to San Franciscans living in poverty. I picked up two other students from the train station in San Mateo and drove them to the Tenderloin area of San Francisco. I started from my home at 7:30AM and returned from the trip by 4PM. It was an interesting day.

The car parking cost approximately \$20 in a garage about 3 blocks away from St. Anthony's. The three blocks walk to St. Anthony's gave me a glimpse of the Tenderloin area – dirty, smelly, shuttered windows, four or five (maybe more) liquor stores/mini markets within three blocks and people who certainly were not going to any office type white collar work. I certainly did not see any Starbucks or fancy coffee shops. Even though it was about 9:30AM I saw several people (hard to tell if men or women) lying on the sidewalk against the walls of the buildings. Some were sitting; some were shuffling about aimlessly; some were poking into garbage cans. The streets were busy with cars and buses and cyclists.

I had come across articles and in conversations with people I had been advised that this area was not safe. However, I felt no qualms about it. I was curious, aware and of course alert to my well-being but not scared.

I recounted to my two fellow students, S and B, that the very first time I had visited the Tenderloin district was in mid 1986 (I remember the time period because I had just started my training/work at a local Mail Boxes Etc. store on Geary and Spruce) without being aware that even at that time, it was a rough neighborhood. I had walked up and down some streets looking for a print shop someone had recommended. The small print shop was tucked away behind a dirty broken building with rough-looking men hanging about. I had observed the miserable condition of the area and being a new legal immigrant I was appalled that even America had pitiable and dirty places! But I had walked, even at that time, without fear as I did now. I was not without fear as an arrogant person but without fear because I have usually believed in the goodness of all. So on this fine morning on June 17 2016 as we walked to St. Anthony's and made a right on Golden Gate Avenue I was busy matching up my past experiences with the present ones. The streets were so much busier and more people seemed about. As I turned the corner the brand new buildings of St. Anthony's seemed like a rude shock to me!

On each side of the Golden Gate Avenue at Jones stood St. Anthony's Diner and St. Anthony's Foundation buildings. St. Anthony's diner is on the ground floor of a nice looking, almost new, multi story building. This building also offers residences to low-income folks. St. Anthony's Foundation is housed in another newer building. It offers conference rooms, medical facilities, addiction treatment center and a host of other services to the poor of the Tenderloin area. It serves about a 30 block area within the Tenderloin area.

Section 2:

The young man who met us within the St. Anthony's Foundation building had the responsibility to brief us about St. Anthony's and its structure and work. We sat in a large room where he proceeded to tell us that St. Anthony's is an organization providing essential support to San Franciscans living in poverty believing that supporting people in need makes the city a better place to live. He stated that every day, with dignity and respect, his organization, St. Anthony's offers thousands of the most vulnerable among the people on the Tenderloin area, the basics: a hot meal, fresh clothing, an opportunity to connect with the world around us. He said, "We bring people together in this work because we know it takes a community to break down barriers and create a society where all people flourish especially within the 30 blocks of St. Anthony's." He explained to us the 3,000+ meals they serve everyday of the year at their dinner across the street.

I had checked their web site and it said the following,

"JUSTICE

We seek ways to eliminate injustice and to educate and empower people so that all may claim their rights in society. We believe we have a prophetic role to play in addressing the power structures of society, and seek to be advocates for and with people who are poor, disadvantaged, and outcast. We strive to work toward a society in which the world's abundant resources are made available to all according to need."

It sounds noble and high and so full of compassion. I can't argue with it. But to a trained ear it does sound like pure socialism or utopia. The heading of the paragraph is JUSTICE. How can such a mighty word be used so slovenly? Justice? What justice? Anyway more about this some other time.

My initial sense that St. Anthony's was providing great service to the local community was enforced while listening to the young man. He made a list of the types of people who frequented the "diner" across the street – immigrants, elders, Veterans, homeless, at or just above the poverty line, mentally challenged and transients. Besides the Diner, St. Anthony's also has a medical clinic, free clothing program, technology lab, Father Alfred Center for recovery programs and a social work center. Later on the day a recovering addict, under the Center's program, shared his tough story with us, which also proved to be thought provoking.

The young man further mentioned that in San Francisco one in four households cannot afford to provide for their basic needs such as housing, food, health care, and clothing. In the Tenderloin a major percentage of residents earn less than \$20,000 a year and are locked in a cycle of homelessness and poverty. St. Anthony Foundation's Social Work Center utilizes the network of programs within St. Anthony Foundation and connects clients with other salient available services to support, stabilize, and improve quality of life for more almost 2000 low income and working poor individuals and families each year.

He continued by giving the history that The Dining Room has served poor and homeless Tenderloin residents since 1950; through six decades of growing demand they have never turned a Dining Room guest away for lack of food. More than one-third of their guests rely on these meals as their only source of food each day; many must decide between paying their rent and purchasing medicine before budgeting for food. This year St. Anthony's will serve more than 2,000,000 pounds of food, 75% of that food is donated or provided free by our community partners. Whether in a residential hotel room or on the street, almost all their "guests" live alone. Alongside regular volunteers, student, church and business groups volunteer daily helping prepare each day's meals relearning the routine of employment

and seeing the positive impact they can have on others. A “guest”, according to St. Anthony's, is any person who enters their Diner to have a meal.

After about an hour-long presentation we were guided to the Dining Room across the street. The first thing I noticed was the numerous men and women, employees or representatives of St. Anthony's wearing T-Shirts loudly proclaiming “Security”. Some of these were seriously huge men and women and I would not want to pick a bone with them. So safety was a big issue here. Was such heavy security justified? Where was the justice in this?

Our group was quickly and efficiently instructed on the procedure and routine of the dining room. We were given burgundy colored aprons on which we stuck our name badge. There were about 40 other volunteers as well to help out with the food distribution. As is my habit, I invoked the name of Lord Buddha in my mind, paid homage, “checked” my mind and hoped that my service would be of benefit to others and followed the instructions as stated by the staff member.

At about 10:30AM the doors opened and the guests started to trickle in. First it was the families, elderly and the handicapped. Once they were done, the younger guests were allowed in. Each guest was given a yellow ticket for a meal. Guests could have as many “seconds” as they desired. A cadre of volunteers put the meals together in plastic trays which have compartments and another small army of volunteers took the meal trays to the guests as directed by the Dining Room staff members. The entire process was well orchestrated with a minimum of disruption or confusion.

As I bussed the tables, I deliberately eavesdropped to get a sense of what the guest were talking about. I heard many talking politics. Every tidbit I heard reflected the pro-left and liberal ideology and a lot of anti-Trump rhetoric. One or two conversations were about jobs. Families with little kids dined in a separate area and were more concerned with their kids eating and behaving properly. But most people ate quietly. One table was having a conversation where one of the guests was using strong language and within seconds a security guy was there warning him off and the guest immediately apologized and continued with his conversation with a more civil tone and vocabulary. Another thing that I observed was many of the guests asked for seconds and many had no hesitation in taking any left overs from other guests.

Whenever I was bussing the tables or delivering the food trays I made eye contact and smiled at the guests and wished them. I was free of any inhibition, fear or reservation. I was there to serve and I served selflessly. This was nothing new to me. Growing up in Kenya, it was very common in our household to serve others. In my teen years I, whenever possible, would serve at the local Sikh Temple bussing tables, serving food, cleaning and generally helping out. It was nothing unusual. My parents encouraged this and they themselves would serve by preparing and offering meals to hundreds within the local community. The teaching and experience of “seva” (service above self) was strongly encouraged in our family. So I was quite happy at St. Anthony's serving the guests. It also reminded me years ago when I had taken my wife and teenage kids to Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco to serve in an early morning Thanksgiving breakfast to the “guests”. It also reminds me when I had invited a venerable monk to our home and where our entire family silently served a meal to the venerable monk as he mindfully ate.

And then the dining room staff directed me to take a break and partake the same meal that was being served to the guests. Eagerly I took the meal tray and sat down. The food was simple, wholesome and

nutritious. All of the food was vegetarian and since I am a vegetarian I was happy with it. I sat with one of the guests who was also eating on the same table. After I had eaten I approached this guest and struck up a conversation. My conversation led me to discover that the man was 66 years old. Had been to Stanford University. His parents were middle class with the father being in the US Army. Because of that he travelled with his parents to Europe and Africa or wherever his father's postings took them. He had a good education and later joined the US Army. I asked him what brought him to his current dire circumstances. I almost fell off my chair when I heard his answer. He said, "Bad choices." I was expecting a litany of blame driven excuses but he simply held himself responsible for his actions and consequences. I asked him where he slept at night. He replied, "Wherever." We talked some more. I wanted to offer him some money but something held me back. I examined myself but somehow I had a deep feeling that if I offered him cash he would not like it. I listened to my inner voice and refrained from reaching into my wallet. Perhaps I was right. Perhaps I was wrong. But it does not matter. At least I had a respectful conversation with a man who did not have much and who was indeed trying to survive under tough circumstances.

Another lady guest I was serving looked up at me and told me, "I have no money to tip you. But I have a smile." I paused and looked at her. She had a beautiful smile and I smiled back at her. We exchanged a few pleasantries. This warmed my heart and I once again paid homage to Lord Buddha for my experience and the opportunity. (I wish to thank you, Paul Sir for arranging the field trip and giving us the chance to experience service/giving.)

So I discovered that the Dining Room is a place to share stories and smiles, a place where someone would notice if they did not show up; the Dining Room is more than a meal service; it is a community.

Section 3:

It is said and I quote from Bhikkhu Bodhi, "The practice of giving is universally recognized as one of the most basic human virtues, a quality that testifies to the depth of one's humanity and one's capacity for self-transcendence. In the teaching of the Buddha, too, the practice of giving claims a place of special eminence, one which singles it out as being in a sense the foundation and seed of spiritual development."

I fully understand this and have imbibed this in my daily life. Dana is so deeply ingrained in Dhamma. In fact Dana is one of the first Paramis in the list of high virtues.

Serving, selflessly, the needy and the unfortunate is, I consider very important part of my spirituality. As far as I can make out dana/service/giving does not show as an independent element in the Noble Eightfold path. I am not sure even if it is a precondition of Liberation – at least I have not come across any commentaries where it is established that dana or giving is something of a requirement to one's Liberations. I might be wrong.

But I think my sense is that giving is necessary in creating a sort of a launching pad or platform from which one could build towards his or her own Liberation. From personal experience, I know that when I give my heart delights. The heart delights for me and it delights in seeing that another being, creature, individual, plant, tree, animal etc. has benefited.

I remember a story about Anathpindika, a devoted follower of the Buddha. Anathpindika used to be a

very rich man but by some events he lost all his wealth and properties and became very poor. It is said that when Anathpindika used to be rich it was his habit that whenever he used to visit any monastery or meditation center he would always make a donation or offer something or the other. But when he became very poor he had no money or anything to take with him to the monastery. But since he wanted to go to pay respects to the Buddha at the nearby monastery he wondered what he might take. So Anathpindika went to the back of his dwelling and gathered a handful of soil. He entered the monastery and went to a tree within the compound of the monastery. He offered the soil to the foot of the tree thanking the tree for giving shade and comfort to all.

I like this story a lot. It makes me feel good and purposeful. The power of giving should not be disregarded or underestimated. Giving and serving are meritorious deeds as it caters to welfare of others. I also feel that giving is helpful in cultivating the good quality of generosity in a person. It certainly helps me in doing that.

When we used to live as a joint family (my wife I along with our two sons and their wives) I often used to mention in our regular Dhamma talk evenings, that the two – Jealousy and stinginess are very responsible for ill-will and disharmony in family and human relations. To get rid of these two we need to invite two friends into our lives. Which two? Sympathetic joy and Generosity/giving. I know from experience that when the friendship of these two friends is cultivated then suffering is reduced. And for me, as the suffering is reduced my walk along the path of Dhamma is made that much easier.

As I reflect on this, I feel that just giving or serving is not the full picture. There is more. I usually try to “see” what is the state of my mind when I am about to serve or give. Am I calm? Am I in a balanced mental poise? Is my breathing natural? Would I have any reservations after I have given? What and how I think affects the quality of giving. The more wholesome and in an equanimity state my mind is, more powerful and effective would be my giving and the merit generated would be of a higher quality.

Also, I feel, that my sila and samadhi certainly affects my giving.

In other words what is my volition at the time of giving or serving?

Sometimes, I feel that I give just because my elders used to give and I have to carry on the tradition without much idea of why or its implication(s). But when I know the why and significance of giving then it makes all the more sense and probably generates even increased higher quality of merit.

The real benefit of giving comes, as far as I can understand is also from the consistency in giving. In other words more regularly one gives/serves/shows generosity the more beneficial it becomes and more the acquisition of merit.

Giving also affects the mind in a way that it makes the mind more supple. I am told (I was reading an article by a Buddhist scholar) that a supple mind greatly helps in the development of samadhi and Vipassana meditation.

It was thus I served the guests at the Dining Room that day – with as pure a volition as I could muster. I was careful and respectful, with a wholesome state of mind.

During my serving the guests, I did hear countless “thank yous” but I also received many “Bless you.” To me these are so important and valuable. Receiving blessing from others goes a long way in adding to one's baskets of merit and good kamma. It felt good because another who also probably had a calm mind and actually meant what they said appreciated my selfless service. So wonderful!

Even though giving is or can be a simple action, its karmic consequences are complex and ripen over time. But giving is not that easily adopted by people. Why? Because Giving means giving-up something one has. And when something is attached to the heart and mind it is very difficult to give away or give up. That is why this action and act of giving is so powerful and recommended by the Buddha. Above all, the act of giving is a Universal one. One does not have to belong to a particular class, caste, creed, religion or dogma. Anyone can give and reap its benefits. Anyone.

*May the merits of my service
be shared by all beings!*

And I express my infinite gratitude to all the Buddhas present, all the Buddhas past and all the Buddhas future for their teachings and direction.

The picture was taken by me when I visited Bodh Gaya. It is the seat of enlightenment where Lord Buddha meditated under the peepal (Bodhi) tree.

