

# Street Zen

## Bearing witness to life on the streets<sup>1</sup>.

**Manu Bazzano** gives a first-hand account of the first Zen Street Retreat in the U.K.

*Originally published in the Italian counter-cultural magazine Re Nudo*

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I am one of those “irresponsible and foolhardy” individuals - in the words of the Inspector of Metropolitan Police's Street Crime Unit of Westminster - who in June 2004 joined a group of ten people in a Street Retreat, an experiment in bearing witness to the life of the homeless people in London. The organizers had been warned that the enterprise would be risky, to say the least: we would encounter dangerous drug addicts and alcoholics, and could even end up catching some terrible disease. Furthermore, he assured us that we would be arrested if caught begging.

I am not a homeless person. I rent a flat in North London, but on Thursday afternoon I went out of the front door with no money, no change of clothes; nothing, in fact, except a piece of plastic to put on the ground to sleep on. This was the first event of its kind to take place in the U.K. and – strangely for something that would involve a handful of people – attracted disproportionate media attention. Would we be willing to be filmed? Would we give interviews? Would we allow journalists to join us? The organizers declined politely: it would denigrate the very purpose of the event, by transforming it into another piece of reality TV.

The idea of Street Retreats originated in New York. In an attempt to find out what it would take to open oneself to experiencing that homeless people are no different than oneself, and whilst devising ways in which his ministers could do inner city work,

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James Morton, the former Dean of St John the Divine Cathedral, began an experiment in what he called “the plunge”: “an act of diving into unknown waters and getting completely disorientated so you can re-orientate yourself in a new way” as Grover Gauntt, leader of the first London street retreat, explains. Later it became an integral part of Buddhist training in the Zen Peacemaker Order International Community founded by Bernie Glassman, author and Zen teacher of international repute. The practice of bearing witness brings spirituality and meditation into an altogether different dimension. Meditation has been incorporated into mainstream self-help culture as one more way of pampering oneself. At its core, meditation – at least in the Zen school – is *becoming one with*, bridging the gap between *self* and *other*, breaking the artificial boundaries that we create to sustain the idea of self. A traditional Zen retreat is normally held in a secluded place, and it involves a lot of sitting meditation. In a street retreat such as this, we still meditate together as a group, but the emphasis is on embracing, and bearing witness to the life of the homeless.

I have paid £150 to be homeless for 2 days, and the money collected by the group will go to the homeless agencies we have encountered during our journey. We meet on a windy afternoon in a central London square, and from there we move to a nearby park for meditation and *Council*. Council is an ancient way of allowing people to share their deep feelings and views in a safe, supportive environment. We sit in a circle, using a talking piece, which can be any object; when holding it, one speaks from the heart, and receives the full attention of the group. Speaking from the heart, listening from the heart...

We are eight women and three men with different backgrounds and motivations, united by the aspiration to understand more directly the conditions of the homeless in London. Easier said than done. Joining the cue for food at Lincoln Inn’s Fields, I feel

awkward. Over a warm meal of rice and potatoes, precariously sheltered from the rain, I exchange a few words with Bill, 5 years on the streets, long beard, skin a brownish colour due to long exposure to the elements. He tells me that if I am on my own, I can join the two of them, him and his friend, they know a safe place to spend the night, somewhere near the Angel. I am moved by his offer, but explain that I am with a group.

The weather is crazy for late June, it's cold, it rains, and then unexpectedly the sun comes out. "Look – says Bill, pointing up at the sky – a rainbow!" We discuss what makes this strange phenomenon possible, and both admit defeat: we simply have no idea. His friend, clean-shaven, talks and smokes constantly. He carries a suitcase with wheels, "a real bargain, fifteen quid". He shows me a woman's cardigan he just got from a lady who came to give out old clothes. I watch a seriously bearded man trying out a tie: too colourful, he decides. He is a big man with a soft smile, I ask him if he is French by any chance; he says he is from Budapest. We exchange comments on the best shirt-and-tie colour-combinations. I feel touched by the fact that he has taken the trouble to speak to me, a perfect stranger.

Later we reunite as a group; we alternate silent meditation with Council. We must find a place to sleep; after meandering for a while, we find a large sheltered patch of concrete outside an office building where some ten people are already settled for the night. They enquire about us, and are amused by our explanations. They are kind, and benevolently mock our naivety. None of us has brought a sleeping bag; that night no one sleeps: it is freezing cold. As a big-nosed, drunken gentleman named Joe explains to me at 3am, no homeless person worth his salt braves the night without a sleeping bag or a blanket. He has been on the streets for three years and is sad that England had lost to Portugal that night. "It's all Beckam's fault".

There is only a piece of cardboard between the cold concrete and my body; I am wearing a light cotton jumper, a waterproof jacket, and a bin liner around my legs. I've had it. I get up and go for a fast walk to warm up.

Is this a lost cause? Am I being a fool? I reach Waterloo Bridge, my favourite London spot, but this is different, this is a magnificent daybreak. How truly wonderful! I nearly weep in amazement. A lost cause! But this wonderful sky, and the buildings, and the silent dark river... Joe totters by, recognizes me and waves with a big smile.

Our plunge into the streets is a lost cause! Can we ever understand homelessness through our feeble attempt? Of course we can't. In the meantime, I am exposed to a wealth of humanity and compassion that threatens to overwhelm me. Maybe I am lucky, but where are the dangerous people among the homeless? Could that be a misconception, a misinterpretation, a sign that, although money is given to charity, although a great deal of humanitarian talking and writing is spent on the "big issue" of homelessness, not many perhaps meet a homeless person and fully acknowledge his or her human dignity? Among the homeless, even the most rough-looking, seemingly hard-edged individuals have a soft interior. But I need to make that first, difficult step of approaching them in order to find that out for myself.

Tired, cold, and hungry, our slight regiment now staggers to the public toilets, then to a walk-in centre a few miles away. En route, I avidly drink every particle of sun offered by the moody London sky. I never loved the sun so much in my entire life. And – strange thing for me to say – never did the words of the Bible sound so sweet as now, read out by a young woman in a Walk-in Centre. I sit opposite a young man from Zimbabwe. We chat for a while and when I miss my chance for a second helping he offers me half of his beef burger. I refuse politely, and quickly make a joking

remark to hide my tears. He is so young, and has been in London only a year. After sipping his coffee, he immerses himself in the reading of the Bible.

On Friday we miss lunch, having walked for miles to a place in Lambeth that apparently has shut for weeks already. We walk to another place at St. Martin in the Fields, only to find it shut as well. We do not beg, as we do not want to incur the wrath of the Metropolitan Police.

Sitting on the ground with an empty stomach near the beautiful market at St Martin's, I contemplate the taboos of begging and vagrancy. Is there a greater taboo in our modern, proudly solvent western world?

I recall that in one of his studies of the Jewish question, George Steiner argues that it is not racial hatred, but loathing of the vagrant, of the refugee, and the itinerant that throughout history fuelled the irrational hatred against the Jews. It is what he calls "this commitment to transience, even where it is imposed, this companionship with the winds" that inspires "a visceral distrust". Another thinker, Theodore Adorno, comes to mind. In a statement which seems paradoxical at first, he says that to be at home in one's home is *immoral*. To think we own anything in this fleeting world is not just foolish: it's fraudulent. In Neapolitan and Southern Italian dialects people say *tengo* – I hold – instead of *ho* - I have - when referring to possessions. An empty stomach, it seems, is a great stimulant for all kinds of philosophical musings.

Unlike the socio-political tourism of George Orwell, who never strayed from the relative solidity of his lower-upper middle class milieu, a street retreat is a conscious journey of disorientation and re-orientation. In other words, your life will be changed if you ever attempt it.

The common case against our small endeavour is that we are voluntarily - and for some idiotically - embracing a condition that the homeless person desperately tries to

escape from. This act of relinquishment is itself a great taboo. Without raising one's voice or resorting to violent protest, to deliberately hand over the solidity of the self undermines the very foundation on which rests our idea of a civilized society.

At Charing Cross Station I recognize by her clothes and the bag that she is carrying the unidentified person who had slept through the whole night enviably wrapped in warm blankets. A woman in her late fifties, whose husband had died suddenly last year, whose sister had attempted suicide. She had lost her admin job, culpable of not having caught up with the latest innovations in Information Technology.

Halfway through the retreat, two of our group give up. One, as it turns out, to write a damning report for a Sunday newspaper, the other with serious doubts about the validity and authenticity of the exercise. Maybe it's because I'm not rich, or maybe because I don't have a proper home – I am a foreigner, and my last ties to Italy have been severed for good. Maybe because mine is a fragmented life in a fragmented, wonderful city, but only 24 hours later I find it unthinkable to look at homeless people as “them” out there, separate from me. In other words, I am the other, the one “out there”. It is a frightening step to take, but it is worth the effort. I feel my solidity – imagined or real – beginning to crack. Sure, you could say my nerves did it – lack of sleep, dehydration, tiredness, vulnerability to the outside world. The second night in fact turns out to be much better: I manage to sleep for four hours, and it's so much warmer. The wind has calmed down, and I have found extra cardboard boxes. By then, however, something has already broken inside. Meandering the streets – and how magnificently wonderful and threateningly sublime the London buildings seem when you walk and walk and walk... – this time I cannot avoid acknowledging the presence of some homeless person sitting on a pavement or passing by. I feel the urge to stop and chat, or at least offer a smile, a sign of recognition and acknowledgment.

Giving to charity is a good thing, but perhaps not enough, as long as the giver still regards the homeless as “the other”. Supporting political action is also a good thing, but still an indirect way of assuaging one’s guilt whilst avoiding direct contact.

In one of Boris Vian’s plays, I think *Builders of Empires*, there is an invisible character, *Schmurtz*, dirty and unkempt, seemingly invisible; everybody thoroughly ignores him, and he gets beaten up for no reason. As the play progresses, the characters gradually move one floor up their building, but also, one by one, seized by anguish, jump out of a window, until only one is left, desperate and terrified, for he can no longer fail to acknowledge the presence of Schmurtz. The tension mounts unbearably until, unable to strike up any kind of conversation with the dirty vagrant, and falling prey to his own paranoia, the last character also jumps out of the window.

On Saturday morning, we sit together in meditation for the last time and then we hold our Council. Each one of us makes a final dedication: we dedicate our retreat to Edward W. Said, who greatly contributed to the understanding of exile. We dedicate it to the homeless people encountered during our journey. To those whose heart is closed to the suffering of the homeless. To the great Zen Master Taizan Maezumi. To the homeless agencies, for their generosity and sheer hard work. And to the soft heart hidden in the recesses of this dirty old town.

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