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to bite through to its essence.

Sister Carmen then skillfully hooked me up with Keith Walker, the man who started Zen-sitting at the Faithful Fools and is a talented photographer and artist in his 60s, recently retired from a boring job. Now I had someone with whom to share my knowledge of the Tenderloin.

Our group took the short walk down the hill to the Tenderloin. Keith and I wandered around for a while. I asked him where he wanted to go and he asked me where I wanted to go. It was a Mexican standoff. I finally suggested that we go to Club 21 for a drink, and to my surprise he acquiesced.

"This guy is all right," I thought.

Linda, the day bartender, obscene and salty as usual, poured me a moderately strong vodka cranberry and gave Keith a Budweiser. It was 11 a.m. It's boring having nowhere to go and nothing to do at this hour while pretending to be homeless. Diversion is needed.

So imagine what it's like when you really are homeless.

Keith and I finished our drinks, watching the crack dealers spin their wheels through the picture window of the bar, and then went to eat at St. Anthony's. The line was remarkably fast, the soul food excellent. The service was good, too, with high school girls asking us if we needed water. I can't say that about a lot of cheesy overpriced restaurants I've patronized.

Then we sat down near Civic Center Plaza fountain and discussed the novels of Bill Burroughs and Sam Beckett. Keith knew a man who had been a friend of Burroughs and was now on methadone and had become an excellent artist. The pungent odor of urine added to the ambience. I was having a good time. I've noticed that street people gather in groups, and actually have more friends than those in straight society. There are virtues everywhere, above and below.

After another stop at Club 21, Keith and I homed in on the Fools center at 234 Hyde. Keith showed me the Zen meditation room that he'd started. It had good vibes and was nicely done. I would recommend it anyone in the Tenderloin who wants a quiet place to think, or not think, silently. It's not as formal as most Zen centers, and you are allowed to slump. Just keep your mouth shut and your hands to yourself and you'll be okay.

The other street retreat participants gradually returned to home here, and after more inspirational, uplifting songs, began relating their experiences on the Tenderloin streets.

One young man very insightfully said he understood why someone would take drugs if he was homeless.

A young woman said that at first she was intimidated, but that she was moved by the friendliness and kindness of those who were dissolute. (I might add, though, that when you are in a position of weakness and dominated by a culture that could care less about your life, there's no option but to be kind to those above you, or as aggressively evil and wily as you can be in relation to them without getting busted.)

I was impressed with these young

Buddhists. Nice people. When we had refreshments, I wanted to slip fertility pills into their food. I hope that they'll pass on the insights gathered from this street retreat to future generations and so change society, making it compassionate in a way that will not force control on people who wish to remain free enough to be themselves, or cannot adapt to the majority.

It's a slow process, spiritual practice. Like dripping water, a few people moved by a Faithful Fools street retreat can, if they pass their heart wisdom down through the ages, change the world for the better, like rain eroding iron.

As for my street retreat testimony, it goes like this: What I saw is what I see every day. There were no surprises, yet I am always humbled and amazed by the heroic strength of people who, appearing to have nothing for which to live, refuse, nevertheless, to be defeated, and persevere despite all obstacles. That's why the Tenderloin is the most alive and deeply spiritual neighborhood in San Francisco. Its good and evil are raw and uncooked.

I do not, however, wish to romanticize the carnage. The large proportion of down-and-out elderly and young African Americans reduced to sleeping on the street, eating in soup kitchens, and selling dope in order to survive is an overwhelming sign of this country's continuing racism and ageism.

And that was it. Photographs were taken of the retreat group in fool's caps, but I kept my own hat on. I've made a fool out of myself too much in my life to advertise it now.

This is a nice program. It teaches the innocent to empathize. But society is lucky I'm not God. I'd wave a magic wand over all humans incapable of empathy, dissolve 90% of the human race with bliss, and send them to a land where they would be more comfortable, where the strong dominate the weak, self-righteousness is the king of virtues, money is the bottom line and, when it runs out, no one gives a damn about them, their ambitions or their feelings. They'd feel right at home there. For want of a better name, I'd call the place Hell.

I'm not a nice man.
But I can empathize. ■

Postscript: *A Zen koan all my own for Keith Walker*

I am sitting in my room. I have dimmed the lights. I am going to do Zen mediation to renew my spirit. I begin to sit, and sink into myself. Then a mouse flies across the room and bangs into me. We both jump back, me almost out of the window, and the mouse across the room where I can see him.

When it comes to mice, I am a cat.

I love cats.
Slowly I turn, inch by inch . . .
Now the mouse is no longer in its body.



PHOTO BY CARL ANGEL

Keith Walker Zen-sits at Faithful Fools.

So the question is, who is stronger?
Me or the mouse?
Life or death?
Cats or mice?
If you answer one way or the other
I will hit you with the fist of a homeless
Killer once a sweet baby
Now found dead on the street.

Go deep or else.
This is the Tenderloin.
It is the ultimate zendo.

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