

Sunday, July 15, 2007

When compassion overcomes robbing.

How infectious that a witness to a robbery in Capitol Hill a few days ago neutralized the situation by inviting the robber to join everyone for wine and nibbles. Soon, the robber had removed his mask, apologized, and said he must have been at the wrong address. He asked for individual hugs, and then a group hug, which he got. Clearly, nobody wanted to spend a millisecond with this intruder. However, the woman who invited the man for wine apparently recognized the hope to avert violence by humanizing the robber. This is not the first time I have heard about a robber being neutralized by showing compassion. As I wrote here nearly five years ago, Buddhist monk Ishibashi-san of Queens, New York, told me in 1999 about being held up at gunpoint one summer evening in Central Park. Instead of fleeing or fighting or fearing, Ishibashi-san profusely apologized to the robber that he had no money on him, since he only had on shorts and a t-shirt without pockets. Ishibashi-san told the robber that the robber clearly needed money more than Ishibashi, so he invited the robber to come home with him, where he could give the robber money. The robber became scared, bowed, and ran away. A perhaps more extreme variation of Ishibashi-san's above-recounted peaceful response to threatened violence is the following story from my teacher and friend Jun Yasuda of Grafton, New York, who is a longtime peace activist and nun with the Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhists, which is the same Buddhist order of Ishibashi-san. Jun-san once told me about the day she joined a protest supporting the land rights of native people in Canada. At some point, an opponent of the protest rushed towards Jun-san and some other protesters swinging a metal pipe. Jun-san expected she would die. Instead of protecting herself, Jun-san prayed for the attacker, because he and all human life are sacred to her. Jun-san did not flee or fight in fear, because she has resigned herself that she will die one day anyway, and she sees death as just another part of life. Somehow, the attacker's pipe never hurt anyone, and he was subdued, clearly not by Jun-san. Jun-san practices caring about everyone else every minute of the day. During a seven-day dry fast -- with no food nor water except for one drink at mid-week -- for and outside the prison of death row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal, she said of the prison staff: "Some of them wave ... and I wave back. Prison guards are also humans. They also need peace. They also need healing." Unlike myself, Ishibashi-san and Jun-san never intend to use physical force to self-defend themselves. Jun-san says: "You know, several times I have had somebody hitting me during a prayer. I do not hit back. That would just make him more angry, more hateful. My way, if somebody is trying to hurt me, is to bow to him and to pray. I try to ask why he is angry, and to listen to him. I want to know why is he wounded inside." In that regard, I once asked Jun-san what she would do if she lived in the 1940's and bumped into Hitler, since I knew her response would not have mirrored my response of shooting him dead first and asking questions later. Whether or not I agreed, Jun-san explained that everyone has several personalities including good parts of their personalities; she mentioned Hitler's having been a painter. Jun-san would have asked Hitler why he was so angry. She said she might have started by offering him a massage, looking at it as soothing the soul of a savage beast, I suppose. Jun-san also exemplifies being fully assertive while remaining fully peaceful. Jun-san told me about the day she was arrested and put in a holding cell -- apparently pending seeing a judicial officer to determine bail status -- dragnetted in with angry opposing demonstrators between whom she was trying to inject some calm. In the cell, she began beating her drum to her chant of the odaimoku/prayer for peace, "Na Mu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo" (which by now is on my license plate as an acronym, having popped to mind while waiting in line at the MVA to get a vanity plate saying "BEHRNOW", which had beaten out AMOMENT). A jailer walked to her cell and shouted "Shut up!" Jun-san smiled, the jailer walked away, and Jun-san resumed her drumming and chanting. The same jailer returned, again shouted "Shut up," and this time took away her drum, and left. Jun-san took off her shoe, and resumed drumming on the floor with her shoe to the odaimoku, which sounds like a better way to rap one's shoe than Khrushchev's 1960 shoe-banging tirade at the United Nations. Jun-san exemplifies the importance of trying to heal the world one person at a time, starting with ourselves: "Gandhi was just one person, and he did very simple things. He walked to the ocean. He fasted. He was one person. But he was very conscientious. We should be too. Think of one person fasting outside the White House. That act has spiritual power. More, maybe, than big numbers." Jun-san has inspired me to be more peaceful and harmonious, particularly in the heat of litigation battle. I have much farther to go, but also have come a long way. Eight years ago, I read an article about Jun-san folding origami peace cranes during an interview about her peace activities. As a result, I learned about the powerful peaceful significance of origami peace cranes, self-taught myself to fold them from an online manual, and have handed out every one of the hundreds I have folded, running from loved ones and friends to total strangers to various stations at the Hiroshima Peace Park, usually soon after the folding is completed. Much more often than not, my simple act of folding a peace crane and handing it with peaceful intentions to another person spreads peace or other forms of happiness to them. I have considered, but thus far declined, handing peace cranes to selected prosecutors and other opponents; then again, consider George Harris's powerful act of placing carnations in the gun barrels of police during a 1967 antiwar demonstration. Here is an article about the 2002 Hiroshima Peace Flame walk organized by Jun-san, which concluded with a ceremony near ground zero, with the flame placed on an altar, along with peace cranes and

lilies. During the Washington, DC, leg of the Peace Flame walk, I drove the two peace flame lanterns a few miles, and recount my experience here. When I first met and re-met Jun-san in Lafayette Park across the White House in 1991 as she fasted on green tea and drummed and chanted for thirty days for peace during Gulf War I, I was seriously out of harmony with my life in numerous ways, including being very upset about Gulf War I, being very dissatisfied with my job, and seeking greater peace, fulfillment, and enjoyment in life. Jun-san has been one of the very positive influences and catalysts to get me closer to harmony and peacefulness than I have ever been. I never was in such dire personal straits -- nor ever in dire financial straits -- that I needed to resort to robbery nor burglary during my turmoil. However, having experienced the healing power of dealing with such caring people as Jun-san, I do not think it is farfetched at all that the robber on Capitol Hill was neutralized by one human being recognizing the robber as another human being, and by inviting him to connect with everyone else there with a glass of wine. So many people crave basic humanity, compassion, and connection from others, that we sometimes read stories about burglars helping themselves to a snack at their target homes (and perhaps some time to peruse family photo albums), to feed not just their stomachs, but perhaps also their fantasies to live the apparently stable lives lived in the homes they target. People crave proverbial and literal hugs. People crave being treated as precious individual humans, and not cogs in the machine. It takes little effort for each of us to show caring and warmth to other people every day (and nearly infinite, but essential, effort to raise children harmoniously and beneficially), to avoid cutting off and tailgating other cars (and to avoid flashing bright lights at drivers for not exceeding the speed limit like "everyone else", blasting horns at them, and flipping them the bird), and to seek for others to rise up with us as we rise, rather than to step on their heads and faces as if they were rungs in a ladder to success. Crime will go down in the first place if people show each other more compassion, caring, and understanding, before problems run out of control. As with medicine, it is more effective and less costly in the long-run to treat the causes of society's ills than to seek cures. The woman who offered the robber a glass of wine was right on target. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 00:05