

Solidarity, not just charity for street community

Joshua Goldberg



Badi Shams recently wrote a beautiful piece in the Times Colonist about the spiritual roots of economic disenfranchisement – [“Spiritual solutions needed for economic problems”](#). (Published May 16th). I was inspired from his work to share what I’m learning from the street community about spiritual balance in pandemic times.

When the COVID health emergency was declared, survival services abruptly closed or reduced spaces. In Victoria, 500+ people were left with even less than usual -- no access to shelter, bathrooms, showers, laundry, handwashing stations, drinking water, or a way to stay in touch with loved ones.

None of the root issues are new; people who are homeless experience injustice daily. But COVID has intensely exacerbated the situation. I have been doing work on homelessness for 30 years and have never seen so much harm done in such a short period of time.

Unsheltered people in multiple cities are currently living under constant threat of displacement, without access to basic survival necessities. People are being pushed from park to park, having tents and belongings destroyed, constantly vilified by housed people who don't want homeless people living anywhere near them. Distressingly this was normalized pre-COVID, but it has reached fever pitch in recent months.

I am ancestrally Jewish, and a convert to Buddhism. Both paths are ones I am grateful for and love deeply. Both have similar teachings.

In Buddhism we talk of three poisons that are the root of all evil. Our distorted misunderstanding of the nature of inter-being (ignorance) gives rise to two polarized reactive states. One is aversion -- fear, hatred, dehumanization, or otherwise pushing away something that we don't want to have to face. The other is avarice, a state of greedy clinging or grasping.

All three are very human experiences. And each of them, when combined with power, can cause profound harm.

Over the past two months I have seen incredible harm. That is not to say that the people causing this harm are evil people, but their actions are evil, violent, and devastating.

And I wonder, in the face of such evil, where are my Buddhist and Jewish people?

Individually there has been tremendous outpouring of generosity, kindness, and compassion. These are the beautiful qualities I love about Buddhist and Jewish teachings. We must always be heart-centred and firmly grounded in the aspiration for liberation of all beings -- including those causing harm.

But we must also access other aspects of our teachings that point to the need for fearless, bold willingness to say no to violence and abuse. It is not enough to cultivate beautiful qualities like generosity, kindness, and compassion. Out of balance, these qualities become cloying.

Even with good intention, a lot of harm can be done in the name of helping. Generosity can become a malformed paternalistic kind of charity that positions poor people as weak or broken, and wealthier people as saving them. This has particular painful impact in the context of colonialism which has made many Indigenous people homeless, largely due to ideas around saviorism which so profoundly shaped residential schools, "Indian hospitals", and the child welfare system. These distorted ideas continue to shape how housing and health services are

approached today, where homeless people are assumed to be incompetent and in need of police, social workers, and others to control, contain, and assimilate them.

A Jewish teaching is *tzedek tzedek tirdof*: Justice, justice shall you pursue. In these times of grave injustice we must support: but from solidarity not charity. We must open our hearts in all directions, including actively blocking government harm, and lifting up street community power. I hope you will join us.

Joshua Goldberg is a volunteer with Poverty Kills 2020, a network of people who came together in mid-March to address the crisis of COVID-19 and the street community. We share a common solidarity / justice orientation that recognizes that while COVID-19 is new, the harms that are happening are not. For more information: povertykills2020.ca

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