

JOURNEYS Even When I Want to Care

by Sophia V. Schweitzer

IT'S A TUESDAY MORNING in downtown Honolulu. I join a group of commuters gathered around the bus stop on Liliha Street to catch Line 54. Traffic drones past our toes. An elderly man wearing rags shuffles across the median strip between lanes, holding a cup in his hand. Folded into himself, dirty hair hanging from his scalp. Nearby lie his belongings in plastic grocery bags. Neither the commuters at the bus stop nor the drivers passing by look at him.

In his poem "In This Passing Moment," the Zen priest Hogen Bays writes, "If there is pain, I choose to feel. Whom I encounter, I choose to meet." I try to apply these lines at the bus stop and fall short.



Honolulu does not hide its homeless people. It cannot. Its unfortunate denizens sleep on the sidewalks of world-famed Kala-kaua Avenue in Waikiki and congregate near Liliha Street, where Chinatown offers the comfort of narrow alleyways. Those in the world who have fallen out of favor—people out of work, with mental health challenges, or without enough money to pay the rent—find in Honolulu spacious parks and beaches. With temperatures that seldom dip below sixty degrees, one can survive without freezing to death.

On his median strip, the crippled man trudges toward the cars that pass him. He

half falls toward their closed windows like an ailing Lazarus. Some drivers hastily switch lanes. Almost all turn their heads.

I know that no one would ever deliberately choose this kind of life. We all wish for ease and happiness. For a moment I imagine this man as a baby, imagine his mother, who gave birth to her child, and the hopes and dreams that have risen and shattered. I feel my body contract.

If I were a driver this morning on Liliha Street, what would I do? I dismiss the question too quickly. I tell myself, I am not behind the wheel, I am exempt from making choices. But just ten minutes earlier, while waiting at a pedestrian crossing, I stood, uncomfortable, beside a couple of other homeless folks and made the same choice as everyone else, pretending I didn't notice them.

Care is a universal quality. I like to think that the mere fact that we turn away with discomfort at all reflects the stirring of our caring consciousness. I can numb it. Or I can investigate. I do have a choice.

Investigation is risky and inconvenient, taking me to inner places that scare me, where I cannot so easily scurry off. Like many, I maintain solid walls around my heart. But I see that the walls have outlived their usefulness. I do want to care. I want to know what a compassionate response might be.

And so I practice what I have learned from the Buddha's teachings, from my sangha: my sole task, when faced with discomfort, is to care. To care for the darkness that is my own just as much as my capacity for compassion. And to stay present so that caring may unfold. These are the sore spots that I face as a human. Tender and okay. In meeting whom I encounter, I meet myself. ^{BD}

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