

When the leader isn't who you expect



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Do you ever wonder what happened to the women or men who stood in the shadows behind the famous people in history, who didn't get the spotlight. What do we know about the families and friends of the "Big Names," those who kept them honest, who knew what they were really like behind the scenes?

Take a look at the "saints" of history. Not only Christian "heroes" but the exemplary women and men of all faiths. Who were the people just behind them, who didn't get the headlines, the adoration or applause?

I suspect we've overlooked layers of human history because we rarely hear the unheard voices or even know the names of the hidden faces, who may well have been the true heroes of the moment.

Imagine what would happen if we knew something about those shadow folks. I wonder if a more essential message was lost with them-maybe they were the ones we truly need to remember and listen and learn from.

Is this what the Big Four - Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad - had in mind all along? It wasn't just about them-others would lead the way forward.

Might it be that our adulation of the Great Names

and personalities, making it all about believing in them above all others, has deflected our attention from the true intent of the original teachers?

Maybe we could use some "belief relief."

During my years as a chaplain among the poorest people in Marin County, California, I depended on assistants who were my "backup." Now, as I think back, it's possible I was their backup - they were the actual leaders. I had the recognized "name" and the title (reverend, chaplain) but when it came right down to relevant ministry, relating one on one with the "people in need," those I hired to "help" were in reality the leaders, my teachers, and I was there to help them do the work.

That thought has a humbling effect.

Robert was an older black gentleman with a "heart for others" who were "on the edge" in terms of housing and mental health. He could sit quietly with someone who dragged their pain in off the street, share a cup of coffee and detect what they needed most - and often what people needed seemed to be just what Robert was doing.

Rosie was a petite Asian woman who practiced Tibetan Buddhism. With her gentle presence she was very good with people who felt vulnerable and afraid on the streets. Living in her car, she could empathize with each human being with whom she interacted.

One afternoon I returned to the office to find the door closed and locked. In the dark room I flipped on

the light and found Rosie asleep on the floor. She apologized, but I had to reset my expectations. She worked for the chaplaincy, but she was surviving outside-frightening, exhausting "work" in itself.

Liz lived in her van with a good-natured but protective doberman. Spending most of her time in a wheelchair, Liz could walk short distances with special crutches. In her weakness, she was a strong support for many who lived with disability every day. I never found her unable, and any weakness was balanced by an inner strength that sustained many in the "community of the streets" including, quite often, the chaplain.

Suzanne was a gift from the start. Emerging from her "camp" in the bushes outside the church, it was natural to bring her on as an assistant. The way she listened to her peers in distress, offering practical assistance along with hugs of encouragement, was remarkable.

No one was surprised when Suzanne joined the leadership in a large social service agency. I don't mean this in a patronizing way, but I was proud, and continue to admire Suzanne's strength and "heart" for the work.

Then there were associate chaplains, seminary interns and volunteers who walked alongside. I valued each of them and learned along with them, discovering that "seeking home" and "finding sanity" are human

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