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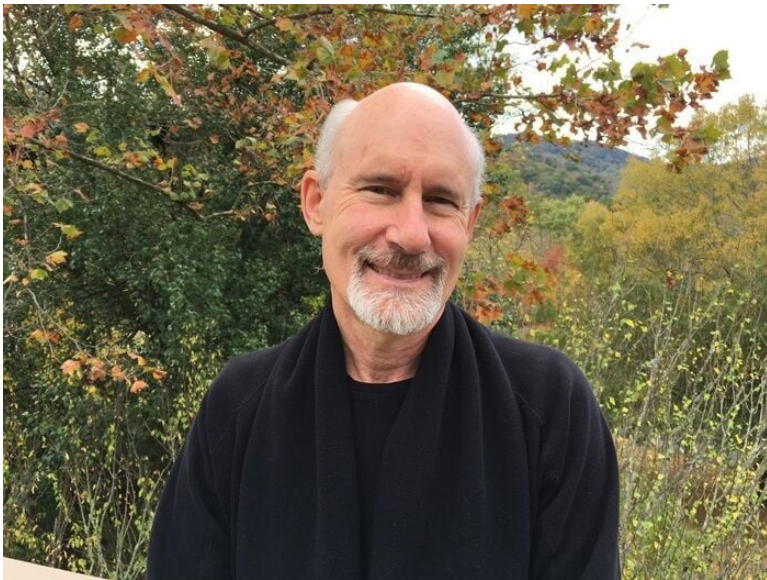


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Friendly Freethinker: Uncommon Wisdom from Unexpected People and Places

By Chris Highland

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As a student of Philosophy and Religion through college and seminary, I was drawn to wise teachings from various sources. I came to see that wisdom can be found most anywhere if we care to search for it, or be open to it. The ability

to use knowledge to live a more fulfilling and fruitful life is one working definition of wisdom. Though I studied the wise insights of ancient teachers like Socrates, Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu, the Prophets of Israel, and Jesus, years of ministry and chaplaincy opened my ears, eyes and mind to new sources of wise instruction. This required a willingness to pay attention to practical wisdom that could be found in the most uncommon places and people.

The following is a selection of insightful words of wisdom I recall from years past:

—“Ceilings are luxurious.” Spoken by a man we called “Lee of the Trees,” since he lived in the woods not far from our chaplaincy office. Lee entered one morning, after another watchful and anxious night outside, sat down on our small couch and looked up: “You know, brother, ceilings are luxurious.” I’ve thought of those words over many years. Do we really understand how luxurious a ceiling really is? Four walls, covered by a roof over our heads—a place to call home. What luxury!

—“The time is Now.” Robin was a talented musician who wandered in now and then. He could be fairly edgy, especially with me as the main “authority figure” around the chaplaincy. When someone would ask: “What time is it?,” Robin would look at his empty wrist and respond: “The time is Now.”

—“The Power of Goodness.” An outwardly weak and powerless woman who lived in her van, sat in her wheelchair and wrote a song called “The Power of Goodness.” How do we tap into that kind of power?



—“I feel more free and more safe in jail.” One of our men, struggling with mental illness and addiction, said these words to me through the bars of his jail cell. With a warm bed and three meals a day, he felt healthier than he had in months. What and where is true freedom?

Wisdom isn't always about words. Wise nonverbal lessons are available for anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear. One afternoon I drove a van load of “street folk” (unhoused neighbors) into San Francisco. Parking along the waterfront, the group scattered in various directions to enjoy the beauty of a summer weekday. Robert, a Native American man, headed straight for the middle of a wide open field of grass and laid down to sleep. Like many of our “outside congregation,” Robert was weary from another night seeking rest in an alleyway, doorway or under the freeway. Gazing across the field I saw a large, black stretch Hummer driving down the avenue. Startled by the contrast of wealth and poverty, I clicked a photo, and stood reflecting.

In more recent days, listening to a frustrated store owner complaining about the “bums” stealing from his store, I tried to focus on the humanity of people “having a difficult time.” He wouldn’t hear it. Having some sympathy for his frustration, I thought of my former congregation of the streets, while feeling that never-ending tension between human compassion and “keeping the peace.” We could use more wisdom.

—“The opposite of EVIL is LIVE.” Malcolm spoke these words to me crouched under a freeway overpass. A quiet, gentle poet, Malcolm became one of our “resident” philosophers.

—“Here, this drawing is for you.” The young man handed the ink drawing on a napkin to the seminary student walking with me. Afterward, the student asked me what kind of work the man could do to contribute to society. I pointed to the napkin image of stars and planets.

—“Walk in the Light.” Frank was another one of our gifted musicians. A prolific songwriter, he joined the circle in the free dining room one evening and sang his new composition: “Walk in the Light.” Those who spent so much time in dark places, trying to stay invisible, sang along.

—“I wish I had a job so I could take a vacation.” Wisdom can be humorous too. Fresh out of jail—released to the streets—Ben said this after I told him I’d been on vacation.

—“I can only get so lost, before I find my way back here.” Mike sat down heavily in a chair, disheveled and discouraged. We hadn’t seen him for a while. He felt lost, then found his way back to a place of belonging.

Wisdom appears in the most unexpected ways.

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