

Do You Like Rabbits? | By Kathy Curran

It was with the help of an Easter bunny that I learned a lesson about compassion.

As the director of The Healing WELL, a wellness center for homeless and marginally housed people in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, I am regularly inspired and blessed by this community. Whether over-hearing a kind word exchanged between participants on yoga mats, or witnessing a "high-five" after an awesome sharing in a poetry group, or listening to the gentle offering of wisdom in a support group, I know the power of care and compassion. While our participants draw upon tremendous resiliency and strength in facing the trauma and stress in their lives, they also give greatly to one another. With that compassion and connection to one another, healing occurs.

Sometimes that generosity isn't easy to give. Some of our neighbors are plagued by profound mental illness or deep substance abuse addiction.

A couple of weeks ago, "Diane" came through the door. I see Diane a lot. She's the woman on the sidewalk who screams and spits at people. She leaves messes wherever she goes. When I see her coming toward me, I cross the street to avoid her. So when she burst

through the door of The Healing WELL last week, I was challenged.

She immediately ran into the bathroom and locked the door. With 20 people gathered in the adjoining room for the final 30 minutes of the 12-Steps for Healing group, I weighed my potential responses: 1) Give her a few minutes, and then knock on the door and ask her to come out, which would likely result in a very loud and toxic altercation; or 2) Allow her to remain in the bathroom until the group ended, during which time Diane was likely to "trash" the bathroom. I opted for the probable need to snake the toilet and scrub the floor upon her voluntary departure from a lengthy stay in the bathroom.

Waiting in the lobby for her, my only thought was, "How do I get Diane out of here?" I had no conscious thought of what Diane might need, nor how I could best honor and support this struggling woman. On top of ignoring my personal values, I was



failing in the test of applying a principal lesson of de-escalation trainings: "Identify with the full humanity of the person."

Diane came out and, yes, the bathroom was as bad as I had thought it would be. She entered the lobby and greeted me with "you wretched woman!" For a few seconds I watched her anxiously as she eyed some of the displayed clay figures our participants had created in an Art class. The two long ears on a bunny captivated her. As she began to finger them, I ventured a conversation starter: "This morning I saw a poster inviting kids to go to a shopping center to be photographed with the Easter bunny. Do you think it's possible that a rabbit would allow dozens of strange children to hold it?"

Diane put down the figure and stopped in her tracks. "Do you like rabbits?" The conversation began, and the barrier between us started to come down. We exchanged words about fur and pink noses and springtime. She calmed, and took a chair beside me. Miraculously, my mindset slowly shifted from, "at what point can I coax her out of our doors?" to "she wants human connection, and she is fine right here." After several minutes of talking, Diane stood and said, "I'm leaving now. When I come back, I'm going to bring you tulips."

I am not only inspired and challenged by my community here; I must add that I am humbled. Warm and genuine hospitality is a cornerstone of The Healing WELL. So, too, is connecting with the "whole person," especially through their strengths and interests, rather than considering others as the manifestations of their problems which need to be fixed. When Diane crossed our threshold, I thought only about how to "get rid of this problem." How contrary to who and what I am called to be as an individual, as well as what our mission in this neighborhood is.

Even in the most difficult packaging, every person is a divine creation who wants, needs and deserves to be honored. Diane reminded me to pause and acknowledge the whole person before me, regardless of the situation. Truth is, it was Diane who offered me compassion that day. She opened herself up to me by inviting me to connect with the beauty inside her. Thank you, Diane.

Kathy has been involved in social justice and community ministry all of her adult life, especially around the issues of Central America, immigrant rights, criminal justice reform and affordable housing development. She and her husband Jim have 6 adult children. If you would like to learn more about her ministry with the Healing Well, please contact her at kcurran@healingwellsf.org