



AMI SOMMARIVA

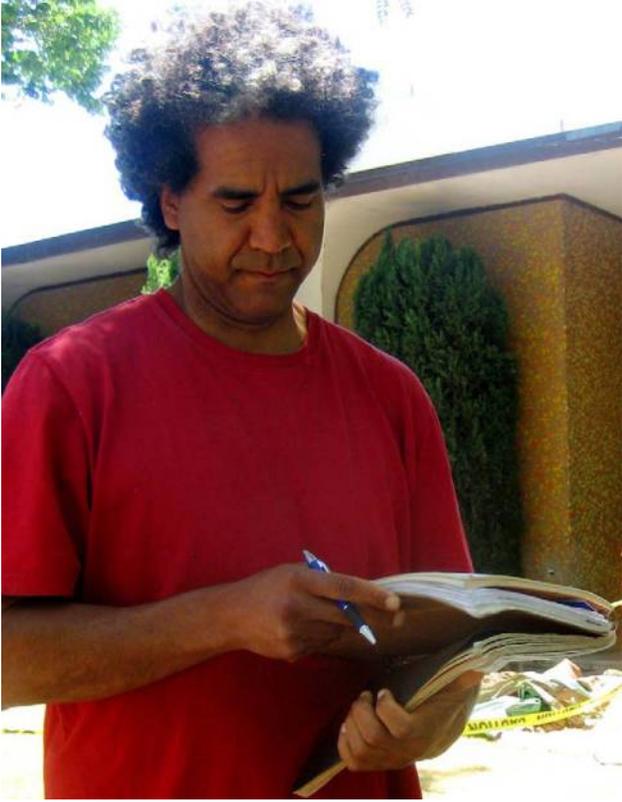
David H. Breaux: Action for Compassion

Holy foolishness and
street-corner activism

Since 2009, David H. Breaux has stood for compassion, literally, on the corner of Third and C streets in Davis. This six-foot-two man of color stands there six days a week, up to eight hours a day, holding a notebook and a pen, inviting passersby to write down their thoughts about the concept of compassion. He is known locally as “The Compassion Guy,” a moniker that elicits a smile from his lips simply because it means that people are saying the word “compassion.” Breaux is neither independently wealthy nor a person without the formal education and resources to make a “regular” living. Raised in Duarte, about five miles east of Pasadena, this former screenwriter holds a degree in Urban Studies from Stanford.

What leads a person to take on this sort of vocation, independent of any institution? Some seekers might choose to join a religious order, work with a nonprofit, or pursue

Boom: A Journal of California, Vol. 3, Number 2, pps 17–21, ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2013 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/boom.2013.3.2.17.



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a career in the social services sector. David Breaux did not. He chose a strange, perhaps even crazy, thing to do.

As has happened in the lives of many Californians, Breaux's life hit a pothole. His father died. He and his sister went through the process of selling the family home. A long-term relationship ended. Mired in depression, he viewed Karen Armstrong's award-winning TED talk on YouTube, in which the renowned scholar of religious history calls for the creation and propagation of a "Charter on Compassion." Armstrong's talk inspired Breaux to draft his own definition of compassion. After working on it for a few days, he found that he could not reach a satisfactory conclusion about what the word meant. Taking a notebook and pen, he left his apartment and began to ask people in the Lake Merritt area of Oakland to share their definitions of the word.

"I was discovering a virtue that was unbreakable," he told me later, "indestructible, incontrovertible. I wanted to do something, but the ideas were only in my head and they needed to be acted on." After spending a few days working on the street in Oakland, he turned to meditation, waiting to be moved by "something greater than myself." For three

weeks he moved only to use the bathroom, purchase food, and eat. When the something greater came, he divested himself of his possessions, made a vow to spend his life spreading awareness of compassion, and moved to Davis, where he had a friend who would put him up. After initially being asked to leave a few locations where he tried to do his work, David Breaux was welcomed at the corner of Third and C, diagonally across from the Davis Farmer's Market.

At the corner

Because I live in Sacramento and commute to Davis for work, I pass Breaux on the street less often than residents. At first, in 2009, I thought he was looking for people to sign a petition or give money to a cause, but he never approached to ask for my signature or cash. I asked a colleague if he knew what this guy was doing everyday on the corner. "Isn't he a homeless person?" he conjectured. "Maybe," I said, "but he doesn't have a bunch of stuff with him and he's always standing in the same place." I started to wonder if he was some kind of performance artist, and after a few months I got up the courage to approach the stranger.

"You want me to write my definition of compassion in your notebook?" I squinted at him with suspicion, but took the notebook and began to write. Ten minutes later, I was still writing, and then scribbling out what I had just written. Becoming frustrated with my inability to find adequate words, I started flipping through the pages of the notebook. Reading what others had written made me realize how differently people thought about compassion. Lots of the definitions referenced religious figures as icons of compassion. Others talked about wars as evidence of compassion's absence. Some entries were lengthy treatises and others consisted of a single word. They were variously poetic, academic, ironic, and earnest: "Compassion is the color, sweetness, and fruitfulness of a peach;" "me that is also you;" and "Compassion is a word that contains ass, which I love." Some I didn't understand: "Compassion is nothing," "no taxes," and "contempt." It was painful to read: "Compassion is me and my shotgun." Turning back to my own entry, I settled on something about interdependence and sharing another's suffering, and then I handed the notebook back. Breaux smiled and wrapped the notebook in his arms, holding it close to his chest. He thanked me and then looked away.



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I felt a little unsettled. Some of the definitions I had read disturbed me. I worried about how little compassion there was in the world if so many people seemed to have definitions so different from my own. If compassion meant contempt to someone, did that person have a different word to represent the meaning that I had for compassion, or did that person simply not think of individuals as interdependent or capable of sharing each other's suffering? The whole significance of compassion began to appear much more complicated and troubling. Years later, I asked Breaux what he thought about people writing that compassion was "me and my shotgun." Quietly and with an earnest tone he responded, "That's what compassion is to that person."

I was also uneasy about the strange conclusion to our interaction. After spending so much time with the notebook, it felt odd for the encounter to end so quickly. I thought, "Is that all? Don't you want to talk to me or at least look at what I wrote?" The feeling of incompleteness made it difficult for the experience to leave my mind. When I asked

Breaux about it recently, he told me that he didn't want to associate any particular definition with any particular person and that getting people to write was an end in and of itself. It mattered less if the definition was read, though Breaux did self-publish a book containing the first six months of notebook entries. I bought a copy at the nearby café.

The holy fools

In addition to Karen Armstrong's TED talk, Breaux takes inspiration from Mildred Norman Ryder. On 1 January 1953, assuming the name Peace Pilgrim, Ryder left Pasadena for a twenty-eight-year walk across the United States and Canada. Like Breaux, she began her work independent of any formal institution. Also like Breaux, she began her work with a vow that may seem romantic until you think about how physically taxing and repetitive it would be. Peace Pilgrim vowed to "remain a wanderer until mankind has learned the way of peace, walking until given shelter and fasting until given food."¹ Again, I wonder what could possibly bring a person to make such a decision. For both Peace Pilgrim and David Breaux, it was a period of psychic conflict and depression. Although she said that the inner conflict of her spiritual development was "about average," Peace Pilgrim described the journey toward her vow as a series of peaks and valleys. Of her pivotal breakthrough, she said,

I sat high upon a hill overlooking rural New England. The day before I had slipped out of harmony, and the evening before I had thought to God, 'It seems to me that if I could always remain in harmony I could be of greater—usefulness—for every time I slip out of harmony it impairs my usefulness.' When I awoke at dawn I was back on the spiritual mountaintop with a wonderful feeling. I knew that I would never need to descend again into the valley. I knew that for me the struggle was over, that finally I had succeeded in giving my life or finding inner peace.²

Breaux, too, describes his new life as filled with peace and joy. It almost makes me envious, and I wonder if I will ever descend into a valley so wide or deep that climbing out of it would lead me to that sort of enduring happiness. Is it a special kind of horror or heartbreak that calls a person to a vocation of independent, ascetic activism?

One might consider David Breaux, Peace Pilgrim, and others like them to be working within the "holy fool"



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

tradition, which has a history reaching back millennia and spanning cultures across the globe.³ Holy fools are characters that reject the conventional wisdom as part of a commitment to what they view as a higher law. Literary scholar Dana Heller puts it this way, “If the wisdom of the world is but folly to God, and if God’s own foolishness is the one true, divine wisdom, then the worldly must renounce all worldly wisdom in order to become truly wise.”⁴

Like holy fools of the past, Breaux has rejected key commandments of the society in which he lives, mainly the commandment to earn money. For those of us who do work for money, this can seem like a condemnation of the choices that we have made for ourselves, a sort of judgment rendered upon us by some guy standing at the corner. Or if one’s socialization to capitalism has managed to stay relatively intact (and, for some, why wouldn’t it?), his work may seem completely senseless. What difference does it make to ask people to write a few words about compassion? Realistically, could it reduce the prevalence of violence, whether we mean physical or spiritual violence? And anyway, if a person wants to devote his or her life to promoting compassion,

His work may seem completely senseless.

isn’t there a more practical way to do it, or a place in greater need than Davis, California?

From this perspective, it can be particularly vexing to note that Breaux has developed a significant local fan base. Not surprisingly, however, arousing one’s audience this way is, in fact, a generic element of holy foolishness. As literary scholar Svetlana Kobets observes within Russian folklore, the “holy fool’s inherently cryptic discourse is largely rooted in a spectacle . . . allowing her actions to be witnessed and interpreted by the people.”⁵ Typically, this spectacular rejection of norms results in the holy fool’s social marginality. The degree of marginality characterizing Breaux’s life in Davis, however, is not clear. As “The Compassion Guy,” he has become a hero to many, the subject of local newspaper articles and a short documentary. Yet every so often, naysayers make their way to his corner and attempt to pick fights. Perhaps Breaux seems like a “safe” target to these folks. Perhaps the idea that a person would dedicate his life to promoting compassion is deeply threatening to them. Perhaps compassion is dangerous.

Persons and egos

Last summer, Breaux and I talked in depth about the relationship between compassion and humanity. He quoted Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber, who wrote that “Egos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos. Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons.”⁶ Breaux paused, letting the meaning sink in a bit. “I want to engage with persons,” he explained. I thought that made a lot of sense, but then I wondered if “The Compassion Guy” could be a person, or if the title framed Breaux as an ego. I asked him how he felt about being described this way.

“I would be happy if people were to see me as a symbol of compassion,” he explained, seemingly surprised by the question.

“But a symbol isn’t a complete person. If people see you as a symbol, even if that is a symbol of the highest ideal, how can they be recognizing you? How can they be treating you with compassion?”



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

He was silent for a bit. “I hadn’t thought about it that way before,” another pause and then, “but I do feel good if I can be a symbol.”

After more reflection, Breaux observed that the moniker might be troubling from different perspective: “The term ‘Compassion Guy’ does diminish who I am. I think of the era when people of color were called ‘boy’ and during the Civil Rights Movement when men of color wore ‘I am a man’ signs to remind others of their full humanness. I feel the term ‘guy’ lays somewhere between ‘boy’ and ‘man,’ and since I just turned 40 recently, I consider myself a man. I am ok with being referred to as ‘Compassion Man,’ [but] simply being David H. Breaux [is better].”

As one person I know observed, replacing “guy” with “man” seems to transform Breaux into an unlikely comic

book superhero, a notion that makes me wince as if I’ve heard an awful pun. But it occurs to me that the more we try to locate Breaux in a succinct descriptive title, the more we are in the practice of distinguishing egos rather than entering into relationships with persons. To know David H. Breaux, to know anyone, you must ask who you are in relation to that person. You must consider the you that is also someone else. In that act of reframing identity, compassion emerges. **B**

Notes

- ¹ Friends of Peace Pilgrim, eds. *Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words*, <http://www.peacepilgrim.org/book/index.htm> (accessed 8 February 2013).
- ² Friends of Peace Pilgrim.
- ³ Dana Heller lists the following antecedents to the holy fool, or divine idiot, figure in American literature: “the philosopher fools of ancient Rome; the professional fool tradition, traceable back to the courts of the Egyptian pharaohs and the Mexican Aztecs . . . the secular fool imagery which developed out of Renaissance Humanism . . . the natural and/or rural divine idiot of Romanticism, such as that represented by Dostoevski’s Prince Myshkin in ‘The Idiot’ and Wordsworth’s ‘Idiot Boy’; and the folkloric and oral narratives of African American tradition and Native American tribal cultures (for example, the coyote or ‘trickster’ figure who bears a resemblance to the holy fool).” Dana Heller and Elena Volkova, “The Holy Fool in Russian and American Culture: A Dialogue,” *American Studies International*, vol. 41, no. 1/2, *Post Soviet American Studies* (February 2003): 152–178.
- ⁴ Dana Heller and Elena Volkova, “The Holy Fool in Russian and American Culture: A Dialogue,” *American Studies International*, vol. 41, no. 1/2, *Post Soviet American Studies* (February 2003): 152–178.
- ⁵ Svitlana Kobets, “From Fool to Mother to Savior: The Poetics of Russian Orthodox Christianity and Folklore in Svetlana Vasilenko’s Novel-Vita ‘Little Fool (Durochka),’” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 87–110.
- ⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. Charles Scribner’s Sons. 1937.; reprint Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004