

**Becoming an Urban Monk: A Personal Integrative Experience**  
**by Joe Colletti, PhD, • July 2011, Pasadena, CA**

Becoming involved in social issues has transformed people's lives. Many such persons have infused their religious faith into these issues. My own life has been transformed by the many urban social issues that I became involved in over the past 25 years and by infusing my Christian faith and spiritual practices into every one of them. This integrative experience has led me to term myself as an urban monk.

Two urban issues were particularly transformative. One has been homelessness. I began my involvement as a social worker in 1987 and over time I became involved in developing programs such as shelters, multi-service centers, street outreach teams, and transitional housing, starting homeless coalitions and related committees, writing public grants for cities and counties, private grants for nonprofit and faith-based organizations, changing local jurisdictional ordinances and land use classifications within zoning laws, and developing affordable housing.

Being engaged in these activities brought me closer than ever before to many social and physical conditions such as chronic homelessness, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, mental illness, physical disabilities, poverty, substance abuse, and underemployment and unemployment. I can vividly remember convincing a mentally ill and substance abusing man, who I case-managed for years, to go into detox in preparation prior to surgery for cataract removal for several months before he did. I can distinctly remember trying to convince elected officials, governmental staff, and appointed commissioners not to further discrimination against homeless people during community meetings as others expressed prejudice and fear.

As a result of being involved in such activities, I turned to various spiritual practices to deal with the hurts, wounds, and pain that these experiences caused in people's lives. Not only were their lives deeply impacted by social and physical conditions such as disabilities and poverty but the lives of their family members and friends were acutely impacted as well. Members of the general public were also heavily affected. Elected officials, governmental staff, businesses, educational institutions, faith-based organizations, neighborhood groups, and nonprofit organizations began to struggle over issues concerning designing, funding, and locating homeless services. Too many county boards of supervisors, city council, business, and neighborhood meetings became contentious over such issues. Even activities such as walking to a store, pumping gas, and using a park or library became emotionally charged for some when encountered by someone who was homeless or seemingly homeless.

The other highly transformative issue that I largely helped initiate in 1998 was the neighborhood revitalization of MacArthur Park which is located in the center of Los Angeles. The purpose of my involvement was to develop a plan that would initiate the city's first sidewalk vending program under a recently adopted ordinance by the City Council. It quickly became apparent that the plan would have to address the many social ills that the park and the surrounding neighborhood were experiencing during the past several decades due to community disinvestment.

After renting a storefront across the street from the park, I was able to get a firsthand look at a deeply wounded park and surrounding neighborhood. The sidewalk in front was filled daily with more than 20 illegal document dealers selling micas or false documents to illegal immigrants who want to work. Among them were drug dealers who sold their goods openly and drug users who visibly snorted or injected cocaine. At times, vans that served as mobile brothels would pull up along the curb letting prostitutes and their customers in and out. At times the vans would remain stationary and serve as the location for sexual acts.

The 32-acre park across the street was also filled with drug dealers and users who openly sold and used drugs. There was a large homeless encampment on the corner and other smaller ones throughout the park. Every day, just prior to 11 am, you could see the number of people increasingly gather to await the 11 am sale of drugs. After obtaining the drugs, users would spread out throughout the park either semi-hidden or not hidden and freely use the drugs. Sexual acts were also performed either semi-hidden like under a blanket or openly performed as couples laid on the grass and one another.

Walking through the park, let alone using it for recreational purposes, was done by the few and not the many. The few were generally made up of street vendors trying to sell foods and merchandise such as jewelry and clothes. Others consisted of preachers yelling and screaming into microphones and volunteers haphazardly passing out food and clothing. Very few individuals, couples, or families strolled through the park. To do so, meant witnessing drug and sexual activity and to catch glimpses of people off to the side urinating, defecating, and at times masturbating. What was hard for me at times was to get a double dose of such behaviors—once in the park and a second time either on the sidewalk in front of my office or in the alley behind it.

Completing and implementing the neighborhood revitalization plan for MacArthur Park and becoming increasingly engaged in so many homeless related activities caused me to seek out various spiritual practices that I had become familiar with while growing up as a Roman Catholic. I first felt a need to deal with all the hurt, wounds, and pains that I

felt from others. During January and February of 1987, I was a case manager at the City of Pasadena's Bad Weather Shelter and worked up to four 12-hour shifts per week during which I had to stay up all night. This type of shelter did not have any entry requirements other than to follow basic health and safety rules. Each night the shelter was filled with more than 100 people who likely had chronic health care problems, mental illness, and/or substance abuse issues. Many of these persons were rejected by other shelters that required residents to work with social workers. Others were released that day from jail, foster care, hospitals, and mental health facilities and had no where else to go. Some were fleeing domestic violence and a few battering boyfriends and pimps.

Getting that close to such woundedness made it difficult to feel or think of anything else. As a teenager, I had heard about St. John of the Cross and in particular one of his writings—the Dark Night of the Soul. I began to equate my experiences to a Dark Night of the Soul. I began to do so more intensely during the next few years while working at the Bad Weather Shelter. My hours changed to evening hours and only an occasional overnight. I would come home each evening around 11:30 pm and sit on my couch and simply could not sleep. Because I could not escape the woundedness, I decided to embrace it more and more.

The more and more that I read about the Dark Night of the Soul the more and more I wanted to enter into the experience. St. John noted that it wasn't the darkness that caused one not to see. It was a brilliant light of "divine illumination" that caused blindness. I began to associate the rays of divine illumination with the many homeless people that I interacted with. Their woundedness at first blinded me until I decided to delve deeper into issues that wounded them such as mental illness and substance abuse. As a result, the rays no longer blinded me but helped me to see and understand the complexity of these issues.

I so wanted to move from the "state of beginners" that St. John talked about to the "purified soul" that I eagerly sought to climb the "mystic ladder of divine love" that purified the soul rung by rung through prayer, love, and forgiveness. At the same time, I began to fashion my own ladder of service to homeless persons based upon my deeper understanding and experiences of compounding complications such as mental illness.

I could see how the homeless mentally ill were self-medicating with drugs in order to deal with their daily debilitating experiences while taking their medications or while refusing to take their medications. They were permanently disabled and unemployable. Their income was generally derived from public assistance that amounted to less than \$1,000 a month which was not nearly enough for rent, utilities, food, clothing, and other

daily necessities. They were seemingly threatening to property owners and managers and even seemed more threatening to people who walked along sidewalks and drove along streets and saw them flailing their arms and murmuring to themselves or shouting to no one in particular. Over time, too many of these individuals became chronically homeless.

The ladder that I fashioned consisted of several rungs that stemmed from a growing compassion to be helpful for homeless persons such as the mentally ill. In order to help put an end to people's homeless experience, I began to design homeless programs that were based upon the research of others and my own that were proven to work. Such programs were residential and non-residential. Another rung led to the formation of several coalitions and committees that I either initiated myself or with others. Another rung led to grant writing. I began to write public agency grants that helped secure millions of dollars for several counties and cities and private agency grants that secured thousands of dollars for nonprofit and faith-based organizations. Another rung led to eliminating discriminatory practices in zoning codes that prevented the development of homeless services and led to the adoption of other practices that encouraged the development of professional homeless services. Still another rung led to writing strategies for jurisdictions to end homelessness that were filled with "best practice" recommendations and guidance to implement the recommendations.

I continue to climb each of the ladders today. The dark night of the soul continues. In some ways I feel like I am still a beginner but I know in other ways my soul has experienced at least some purification and I have climbed high enough to experience divine love. I also continue to use my homeless services ladder to improve the lives of homeless persons and the lives of the larger community as well.

When I first began to climb these ladders, I turned to another spiritual practice which I also heard about as a teenager called the Examination of Consciousness. The Examen, which was shaped by St. Ignatius of Loyola, encourages a lot of reflection which I was already doing naturally. However, the Examen encourages one to focus on certain questions during reflective times that includes asking yourself how God was present in your day and how did God speak to you today. One question that I shaped out of this practice that I used over and over as I sat on my couch after leaving the shelter was "What did God say to me today that I did not hear?" Another was "What did God do that I did not see?"

To further this practice I coupled it with the spiritual concept behind Lectio Divina which is to create a dialogue with God. The four traditional steps that make up the practice of Lectio Divina are reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating. While reading

scripture, one is to listen to what you are reading and to meditate on any particular sentences, phrases, or words that you feel God is using to communicate with you. As you read, the idea is to allow the words “to awaken your heart” which both St. John and St. Ignatius would agree with. The idea is also to let the words penetrate your heart so that it results in hearing God in the innermost core of ourselves. The third step, prayer, creates an inner dialogue during which we speak from the deepest part of our inner being. The fourth step of contemplation moves us away from thinking and talking into an area of *feeling* as a result of coming to terms with one’s inner dialogue. Such feelings may be love and compassion towards God and those persons you want to help and other feelings may be disappointment and outrage towards those persons who do not want to help those you want to help.

The experience of Lectio Divina began to evolve for me as I wanted to take more and more action to help heal the brokenness around me. I would not only use scripture as a means of reading and meditating but newspaper stories, magazine articles, and books. As I read, I hoped that I would discern any specific words or thoughts that I felt were being communicated to me by God. I even reflected on the words that I heard from others during a coalition or committee meeting to see if God was saying something.

These practices helped me bridge Lectio Divina with the Examination of Consciousness. Late at night when I would ask the questions—What did God say to me today that I did not hear or what did God do that I did not see—I thought back to what I read or heard from someone for an answer. I would reread a story or reflect on what I heard someone say during a meeting to discern whether I missed something that God was trying to communicate to me.

Combining these two practices led me to add two steps to my own practice of Lectio Divina. The two steps were compassion and action. Becoming compassionate meant to enter into and embrace the woundedness of others or an entire community as against avoiding the hurts and pains. This step followed by the four traditional steps gave birth to powerful emotions that yearned for personal and societal transformation. Such yearnings lead to the next step which is action.

For me, such actions lead to the creation of another ladder that related to MacArthur Park. One rung consisted of creating a task force of representatives from public and private organizations that were willing to help change the park and surrounding neighborhood. While meeting monthly, I chaired the meetings that focused on the next two rungs, which were “weeding” the area and “seeding” the same area. The first of these two rungs was built upon the law enforcement idea of weeding out the illegal and undesirable activities such as drug sales, drug use, illegal document sales, and

prostitution. The next rung was developed upon the idea of having various segments of the community seed in desired activities such as concerts, legal street vending, picnics, public art displays, and recreational games. If the seeding did not happen, the weeds would grow back after law enforcement weeded them out. The next rung was to acquire the necessary resources to keep seeding desired activities through volunteer efforts and funding from public and private agencies.

Becoming an urban monk is a life-long process that involves a continuing process of integration. It is an initial process that involves embracing activities that we may want to passively ignore or actively avoid. There are many spiritual practices that help us incorporate these activities. Thus, the Urban Monk is not just an individual person but an increasingly collective group of persons that increasingly practice and share integrative spiritual practices as a Society of Urban Monks which is described on the Urban Monk web site: [www.urban-monk.org](http://www.urban-monk.org).