

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts 4

There's Got to Be Some Light

When dealing with the struggle of addiction on a daily basis, we often feel like there has to be a moment of "light" in our day sometimes. Gabor Maté has to admit that in the Downtown Eastside there are also moments of reprieve, moments when the truth of a person arises and insists on being recognized despite the sordid past or grim present.

"One afternoon while I was working on 'Josh,'" Maté reveals, "he had a large abscess on his leg, and I was preparing to incise and drain it. He spoke one disparaging word too many! It was not a good day - I was irritable and fatigued. My reaction was unrestrained and aggressive - to say that I lost it would be an understatement. That afternoon, ashamed, I trudged upstairs to Josh's room to make amends. As he listened to my apology, he looked at me in his customary intent and unblinking way, but with kindness in his eyes. Then, this man whose hostility causes others to cower in his presence and whose rampant, drug-fuelled paranoia can see ill will everywhere, said, "Thank you, but I meant to apologize to you. I see what it's like for you. You visited me in the hospital last week and you were calm and attentive, an image of the good doctor. It must be hard for you in this place, all the negative energy down here and some of it comes from me - I see you absorb it, and I wonder how you hold it and still do your job. You're human, and something has to give sometime."

It's days like this that help me enjoy the work I do. There are days that have no end of grief and tragedy that can even end with a role reversal. The days when the junkie can sooth the doctor. The moments of reprieve at the Portland come not when we aim for dramatic achievements - helping someone kick addiction or curing a disease - but when clients allow us to reach them, when they permit even a slight opening in the hard, prickly shells they've built to protect themselves. For that to happen, they must first sense our commitment to accepting them for who they are. That is the essence of harm reduction, but it's also the essence of any healing or nurturing relationship. Unconditional acceptance of each other is one of the greatest challenges we humans face. Few of us have experienced it consistently; the addict has never experienced it - least of all, for himself.

In writing about a drug ghetto in a desolate corner of the realm of hungry ghosts, it's difficult to convey the grace that we witness - we who have the privilege of working down here: the courage, the human connection, the tenacious struggle for existence and even for dignity. The misery is extraordinary in the drug gulag, but so is the humanity. Primo Levi, the insightful and infinitely compassionate chronicler of Auschwitz, called *moments of reprieve* those unexpected times when a person's "compressed identity" emerges and asserts its uniqueness even amid the torments of a man-made disgrace. In the Downtown Eastside there are many moments of reprieve, moments when the truth of a person arises and insists on being recognized despite the sordid past or grim present.