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## Saying Yes to Freestyle Volunteering: Doubting and Believing

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## Saying Yes to Freestyle Volunteering: Doubting and Believing

### Cover Page Footnote

Judy Lightfoot, formerly an English teacher, curriculum specialist, and Founding Head of Eastside Preparatory School in Kirkland, WA, is a Seattle writer. Recently she founded Freestyle Volunteer, a project that encourages Americans to make the simple neighborly gesture of having a weekly coffee with one individual sharing our public spaces who is socially isolated by homelessness or mental illness.

## Saying Yes to Freestyle Volunteering: Doubting and Believing

Judy Lightfoot

**I**n *The Sun* magazine, a volunteer at a Catholic Worker house dedicated to serving people who struggle with poverty reflects on the idea of “Saying Yes”:

Our community includes homeless adults who drop by for food, clothing, and human contact. It’s our policy to say yes to their requests:

Yes, you can look through the clothes closet for some pants.

Yes, I’ll get you some groceries.

Yes, we can talk. What’s up?

I’ve also ended up tacitly saying yes in many situations that no one had prepared me for:

Yes, you can talk to me nonstop for three hours about your sexual liaisons.

Yes, you can get high in our bathroom.

Yes, I’ll get up at 3 A.M. to answer the door because you called 911 when you thought the crumpled banner on the floor was a dead body.

Yes, you can smoke the Frosted Mini-Wheats.

I’m learning how to remain hospitable in such situations and how to say yes to tolerance, patience, and forgiveness. (38)

The writer’s discipline reminded me of Peter Elbow’s believing game, the converse of his doubting game.

Both help us know our world. Playing the doubting game we’re hot on the trail of error, using the skeptic’s tools—logic, reason, empirical experiment—to detect what might be wrong with something we encounter. The doubting game helps us identify harmful or mistaken notions, but unhinged skepticism can lead to paralysis of the will. Even if we don’t freeze up, skepticism reinforces our natural tendency to think No instead of Yes when we encounter possible benefits that don’t fit our existing mental frameworks. The believing game lets us “Say Yes” to something new and seeks whatever could be right, good, or useful in it. We embrace it, enter into it, imagine ways in which it might be true. Often a quiet, open-hearted humor (as in the passage quoted above) leavens the game.

Among other kinds of overlap, humorous moments in the believing game, implying doubt that the thing believed really makes sense, show that no bright line divides believing and doubting. Believing doesn’t require being a true believer, and doubters don’t have to live on the Dark Side.

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My formerly academic interest in Elbow's work revived in a new context several years ago after a member of my family was diagnosed with schizophrenia and decided, as do many with this illness, that homelessness was a consummation devoutly to be wished. Eventually he moved into an apartment, but he remains untreated and in miserable isolation today, refusing medications as well as psychiatric help and struggling, with heroic, futile independence, to build a life. Now he's on my mind when in Seattle's public spaces I see individuals cut off from mainstream society—in cases of chronic mental illness, virtually always through no fault of their own. I used to walk past them as if they were invisible, but now I smile and greet them, stopping to chat if I have a minute. Through the practice of believing that they're people very much like me and the family member I love, I discovered that besides numbering among my more accessible neighbors they're generally articulate, often enjoyable company, capable of a wider social life. I wondered why no humanitarian project existed that provided ordinary personal companionship to individuals sharing our public spaces who are socially isolated by homelessness or mental illness: "Yes, we can talk. What's up?"

Then one day when I was volunteering at an agency for people with mental illnesses, an elderly man got banned from a support group there. The facilitator had often told "Hiro" that his bitter remarks hurt group members, a vulnerable and needy bunch of people. That day, as a woman in the group wept about her daughter's recently diagnosed mental illness, he growled that the daughter sounded "like a real loser" and added that her family was "going down like the Titanic." Curious, I asked Hiro as he packed up to go catch his bus why he attended a support group when support didn't interest him. He replied, "Telling a hard truth supports me."

"But there's a rule here against telling hard truths to people," I said gently, and read it aloud: " 'Speak softly and kindly to others at the table.' Why do you keep coming to a place where the rules don't give what you want, and you get in trouble?"

"Well, I need to be someplace," he replied. I looked at him and finally began to embrace his presence. Heavy bags hung from his frail shoulders. The thick overcoat he wore on this hot afternoon was pinned with a homemade button saying NO MORE LIES. "Do you live with someone, Hiro?" He shook his head, wisps of gray hair floating at the edges of his battered Mariners cap, and said, "I have PTSD and a couple other things." As he stood there swathed in baggage, I thought, well, I'm a volunteer with a few hours to spare, and all of us (including me) "need to be someplace." Doubting gambits faded, and the following week, at the time when the support group usually convened, Hiro and I met over coffee at a cafe. It took several months before he told me that when he was six his whole family had been sent to an internment camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II—not that this explains the person he is today.

My initial weekly conversations with Hiro planted a notion that was fertilized by brief exchanges with isolated individuals I met on Seattle's streets. Why not provide, and encourage other volunteers to provide, casual companionship for some of these folks? Why not develop a model of volunteering that consists of making a small individual commitment to one person, getting interested in this person, and trying to form a durable attachment? Writing about this now, I don't want to cloak what had been a messy organic thought process in a more deliberate method than it actually wore. But it's not untrue to say that I spent

time believing the idea, asking myself, “How can this kind of volunteering benefit the people I’d like to help? Is there an important human truth somewhere in the notion?”

Reports of new scientific research on the emotional benefits of friendship were points of departure in my believing process. For example, Harvard scientists recently showed that “strong social ties could promote brain health as we age,” and a 10-year Australian study indicated that people with friends have a lower risk of mortality (Parker-Pope). Another point was the comment that psychosocial psychiatrist Dr. Mark Ragins made to *Los Angeles Times* columnist Steve Lopez about his having befriended a homeless classical musician suffering from schizophrenia. In Lopez’s book *The Soloist*, which tells the story of how he and Nathaniel Anthony Ayes developed a remarkable long-term friendship, Ragins observes, “It is possible to cause seemingly biochemical changes through human emotional involvement. You literally have changed his [Ayers’] chemistry by being his friend” (210). So my believing self asked,

Why wouldn’t the chemistry of friendship be a healthful addition to anti-psychotic meds prescribed to adjust the brain chemistry of, say, schizophrenia? Good companionship certainly sounds like a universal good. And wouldn’t the regular company of someone living a stable, connected life help stabilize individuals deprived of the sense of structure that comes with felt membership in the wider human community? Friends and neighbors sure strengthen my sense of personal balance and integrity. Nonprofits and public agencies (even if there were enough of them) by definition can’t offer the benefits provided by warm companionship. Who wants to be just a name on a case manager’s client list? We all want to be chosen.

The idea of choosing an individual who is socially isolated by mental illness or homelessness to chat with over weekly coffee (I started calling it Freestyle Volunteering) grew increasingly attractive.

Still, I needed the doubting game to make full sense of the idea. Like most Americans I learned early to fear people with mental illnesses even though, statistically speaking, they’re no more dangerous than people blessed with mental health. Psychiatric disorders make people unpredictable, and we’re wired to feel afraid and guarded around anyone who behaves erratically. I can detach from such feelings, maybe because someone in my family lives amid imaginary voices and delusions, but even so my encounters with others afflicted by these symptoms have included disconcerting moments. The doubting game helped me develop practical structures and limits for coffee meetings that allayed my worries about safety while easing anxieties that the needs of a “coffee companion” could come to feel overwhelming:

Each Freestyle meeting must be in a public place and last just one hour a week. Coffee companions should probably be diverted from sexual topics (“I feel uncomfortable. Let’s talk about something else.”)—pace the inspiring *Sun* writer quoted at the start of this essay, who operates within an organized

institution's walls. Freestyle Volunteers should avoid saddling themselves with ancillary responsibilities such as becoming experts on mental illness and homelessness or founts of information about available resources because their job isn't to solve someone's problems; it's just to listen and talk in a neighborly way over coffee. Volunteers should remember that they're not therapists. They should accept that they'll occasionally misinterpret gestures, blunder verbally, sit there stumped, or get rejected. Finally, they won't be able to "Say Yes" to everyone seeming in need of companionship.

Still, when I say Yes to one, I can hope somebody else is saying Yes to one I don't have time for. So I recruit volunteers through my blog (<http://freestylevolunteer.wordpress.com>) and at Seattle's affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). In conjunction with these believer efforts, healthy stints of doubting help me accept the possibility that Freestyle Volunteering may never become a movement. It may just be my life. ☺

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