

**So You Think You Want To Do Street Ministry**  
**By Pauline Dillard**  
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I've always hated San Francisco. Not anyone in particular, just the whole genre of the city has always given me the creeps. From just a physical, practical aspect it is a narrow, dark, inconvenient place. I had lived in the South Bay Area for sixteen years, and in all that time I had only been to San Francisco, maybe, twice. I made a point of absolutely avoiding going to *The City* at all costs. Then my youngest son wanted to become an actor.

My youngest son, Steven, was nine years old. He hadn't had any focus in his life: not sports, not music, not art, but he loved theater and acting. One day he asked me if he could start going out on auditions. This was not a big surprise to me. I had always known that Steven had been given a special anointing to be in front of large numbers of people, but I wasn't sure if this was the way God would have him develop and express that anointing. After all the entertainment industry is rampant with blatant sin. Yet my husband and I both felt a tweak in our spirits that we should go ahead and look into this option, that it would be a good way for Steven to direct all his energy—of which he had a generous helping—and perhaps it would help him to bring a witness of Jesus into an otherwise forgotten world.

I was nervous about stepping into this realm in which we had no experience, so when I heard a radio advertisement for an open audition to join an acting club I wondered if it was legitimate or not. I went ahead and called, thinking it was going to be located somewhere in San Jose. I don't know why I thought that. Perhaps it was just wishful thinking. At the end of scheduling his appointment the young lady on the phone said, "We're located on Grant Street near Market." As soon as I heard the words my mouth went dry.

"You mean in San Francisco?" I asked with trepidation

"Of course, San Francisco," she answered in a tone that said, where else?

I hung up and immediately had to begin to deal with my "hatred" of San Francisco. The first thing I came to realize was that it wasn't so much that I hated San Francisco, it was more that I *feared* it. *The City* seemed to breath of a life all it's own, and whenever I thought of San Francisco I could practically smell the sin of Sodom and Gomorra. Did I want to expose my son to that spirit? Did I want to expose myself to that spirit? It seemed to be a dilemma for me. Yet a still, small voice urged me on. Like Abraham being told to go into the sin city of Egypt I felt the Spirit urging me to enter the sin city of San Francisco.

And still I trembled.

Yet I always had the hope that Steven wouldn't pass the audition and that would be the end of it. *Sorry, son, we tried, but you just didn't make it.* As soon as I saw him audition I knew I was sunk. God has instilled in Steven a special...something; a spark that can't be ignored when he is performing. So, of course he was accepted into the acting club, which meant we would have to make many trips into *The City* if we chose to enroll him.

My husband and I talked about it and felt that this was what we needed, a safe environment to explore the entertainment industry. A place that would teach us the ins

and outs, as well as give Steven some of the training he needed. So began my relationship with San Francisco.

At first I never strayed far from our set course. Drive to the BART station in Daily City (the Bay Area's equivalent of New York's subway), take BART into San Francisco to avoid parking hassles, walk the two blocks to the studio. Don't look at anyone, and don't look at the tall buildings that blocked the very light of the sun from hitting the pavement. I succeeded very well the first few times.

Steven, however, became impatient with me. He liked the hustle and bustle. It was an exciting place with all its sights, sounds and smells (yes, including urine from the street people).

I, on the other hand, did not want to stray from the beaten path. He, in contrast, wanted to explore the streets and the stores (especially FAO Schwarts). I came to realize that he had no fear of this city. It was as if he knew what I did not: *Greater is He that is in me, than he that is in the world.* To Steven it was an exciting new world, one in which he could learn and give. To me it was a beast waiting to devour us. Yet, with each visit I became a little more comfortable as long as we stayed within the limits of the streets I had become familiar with.

Then one Saturday he had an afternoon class. I had worked all morning and we had to leave immediately when I finished. By the time he got settled in class it was well past lunchtime and I had had no opportunity to eat. I realized that, because of our limited wanderings I didn't know where to find anything to eat. I asked the receptionist. She directed me to a street at least three blocks away. Much further than I had dared to venture with Steven's protection, much less alone. Yet, I knew I had to bite the bullet. I had to face my fear, stretch beyond myself, understand that God would protect me in all things. Besides, it was the middle of the afternoon with people everywhere. What could possibly happen?

When I stepped out of the protective walls of the entertainers' club I was immediately struck by my own fear. I began to talk to both God and myself. I had to fight the urge to turn around and run back into the building crying. Instead I forged ahead. "Just two blocks down and then left. Jest two blocks down and then left," I kept repeating to myself.

I felt six years old again, the time when I had been left by my Brownie troop in downtown Redwood City. I had wandered the streets wondering who it was safe to talk to, afraid to look at anybody directly. I finally wandered into a pharmacy. My mother had been a nurse and I was comfortable around things and people medically related. They were *supposed* to help you. The pharmacist had graciously called my mother while I sat on his chair crying.

What doorway could I safely wander into now? Who could I call to come and get me out of this dilemma? I knew God was my only answer as people physically bumped up against me on the crowded street. I had never seen the streets so crowded. I had never been there on a Saturday. I made the left onto Powell, the street I was told would contain the cornucopia I was looking for.

I almost froze with fright at the massive number of people on this street. *What is going on?* I thought. *Why are so many people crowding onto this street?* At the same time I noticed a line of fast-food restaurants waiting. I fought the urge to turn and run.

Instead I crossed the street with the crowd, literally being bumped and jostled. *I hate this!* I cried out to God in my mind. *Help me overcome this.*

As I started down Powell towards Market I realized that most of the people were standing in some kind of a line. I wanted to stop and look around but the flow of the people kept me moving, even when I didn't want to. I felt trapped in a rip current. I was swept right past all the restaurants as I came to realize that the line of people were waiting for the cable car. This was where the cable car line ended at the Market Street Plaza, and then transported people over to Fisherman's Warf.

*Well, that's not so bad,* I tried to tell myself as I realized my fear was preventing me from swimming across the current and into an eatery. I felt panic try to take hold of me as faces swam past: Leering? Jeering? It was taking everything I had within me not to start screaming in panic. *No wonder people are wandering the streets muttering to themselves,* I thought, *this could easily drive me insane. God help me!*

Suddenly I heard music coming from the end of the street in the plaza. I looked up and saw sunlight as well. There was just enough space between the buildings in the plaza to allow the sun to actually touch the pavement. I quickly made the decision not to fight the crowd and to simply move down the street with the people until we reached the plaza. There, I knew, I would have enough room to maneuver my way out of the rip current.

When I reached the plaza I saw a few street merchants and a band. I stopped, wondering what kind of music the band was playing. The band stopped playing and a man stepped up to the microphone. As he began to speak my jaw dropped and about hit the sidewalk. He was talking about Jesus! I quickly looked around the plaza and realized that this was a troop of street ministers. Some were in the band, some were performers, and some were passing out tracts on the street and talking to the homeless men who had gathered around.

*Thank you, God,* I prayed as I began to feel His presence, His reminder that He was truly with me wherever I went. I walked up to one of the brothers and asked him where he was from. I shared my fear of the city and he talked to me about not letting the spirit overwhelm me because Jesus is greater than the city. I quietly stood and listened to each person give their witness.

As I looked around I realized I was offended. I was offended by the filth of the street people. I actually took a step back when one came and sat on the ground next to my feet. I hated that I was offended, but my middle class Christianity had no way to process how to help these people. They were dirty—inside and out.

As I was contemplating my own offense and praying for God to forgive me, a fight broke out between two homeless men over a sleeping bag. The demonic that was in control of this situation was obvious. The spiritual side of me wanted to lay hands on them and deliver them from their condition. The fleshly side of me froze in contemptuous fear. I stood idly by and watched as two of the brothers gently broke up the fight and ministered to the men. I don't know why, but I felt dirty just being that close to those street people. And that's when the Lord spoke to me.

“So you think you want to do street ministry.”

I was ashamed at those words. At the same time I knew that God had walked me through these streets to show me my judgmental weakness that comes from cloistering myself with nice, middle class Christian friends. I realized that all the stories I had heard about street ministry had been exciting and wonderful. I had always responded with: that

must be wonderful, I wish I could do that. But, on that day I realized that I could not do that. At least not while I was still so handicapped by my limited circumstances.

Yes, I did make it back up the street. I even managed to grab something to eat to take with me. I must confess, though, that I didn't relax until I was once again safe within the walls of the acting club. After the class Steven wanted something to eat. I found myself having to retrace the steps I had taken earlier. Only this time there were no street ministers in the Plaza. They had done their work for the day and gone home.

As I worked my way home that day I found myself deeply ashamed of my reactions. I had literally felt, as the people in Jesus's time, that the leprosy of the poor was somehow going to infect me. I felt dirty simply by having been within a few feet of them. "*Whoever does for the least of these, does for Me.*" I knew that on that day I had rejected Jesus. Like Peter, I hadn't wanted to, but I had. I had been offended by the least of these. And God's words rang in my ears, "*So you think you want to do street ministry.*"

Yes, at one time I had thought so. Now...well, by the grace of God I grow. I have overcome my fear of *The City*, and like Steven, I came to see it as an exciting adventure, one where God can be glorified, and I can let His light shine through me into the streets of San Francisco.

End Note:

For the next six months Steven and I went to San Francisco regularly for his classes. After that we moved to Colorado. I find now that I can go to the parks downtown and see the street people and not be offended. I have not been called by God to do any street ministry, but I thank Him for showing me my prejudice and judgment.