

A Helping Incident: Summary

As a Zen coach, I run groups as well as provide individual coaching aimed at helping individuals solve particular problems. In this situation I am working with a 16 year old boy (Richie). He is the younger brother of Jonathan, one of our staff. Jonathan and I also



share an apartment as part of a residential education program. Jonathan and Richie grew up in the South Bronx and were functionally emancipated at about the age of 12. For all practical purposes neither young man went to high school although Jonathan, in a 12 month program provided at his high school, obtained a GED. Jonathan eventually earned an Associate's Degree at BMCC.

Stan

I worked initially with Richie when he was about 14 and was about to be sentenced for stealing a cell phone. At his family's request I went to court and had him released on probation. At that point I began mentoring him and teaching him some meditation techniques. About two years later Richie was arrested again for belonging to a gang that routinely assaulted Mexicans. I again went to court and had him again released on probation. I met with Richie, his brother, our SiFu, and another martial artist that was his friend. I chaired the meeting and directed a non-judgmental inquiry into Richie's activities. At the end of the process, Richie gradually dropped out of his gang and did not repeat the behavior of randomly attacking members of other ethnic groups.

Setting: Peace on the Street is a community agency located in Spanish Harlem. It uses an applied Zen approach in providing martial arts, meditation, conflict resolution and anger management programs. At the time of this incident the program occupied about 4500 square feet at 107th St and 3rd Ave. A meeting was held in the school conference room/library. There are four men sitting around a wood conference table, SiFu Richard, Kris, Jonathan and Stan. Richard is in his early 30s, Kris and Jonathan are in their early 20s, and Stan is ancient. With the exception of Stan, all of the men are Puerto Rican and grew up in the South Bronx. Stan is white and grew up, in part, on a farm in Northern California.

Situation: The person being helped is Richie. Richie is 16 years old and was arrested a few days before this meeting. The purpose of the meeting is to help Richie understand the significance of what he did and to gain the insight necessary to change his behavior. After he was arrested his mother contacted Stan and asked him to talk to the court and see if he could get her son released. Stan did this, the boy was given OR and released to Stan's supervision.

*Richie and The Mexicans: A conversation about evil
Facilitated by Stan Koehler: January 2013*

Richie was arrested for randomly assaulting Mexicans. He belonged to a subset of the Bloods and he and his set would, from time to time, randomly attack Mexicans that they came upon in the South Bronx. As Stan left the court with Richie he asked him why he attacked Mexicans for no particular reason. Richie said, “I woke up one morning and saw them on the street.” This was the clearest statement of nativism that Stan had ever heard.



Richie

The meeting started when Richie was invited into the conference room. He knew everyone at the table and at one point when he was younger he was a student at the dojo. After everyone exchanged greetings Stan begins interviewing Richie.

Stan: So what happened?

Richie: I was walking down the block with my set and we caught up with this Mexican and...

Stan: Wait, just a second, what street were you on?

Richie: We were around 149th St, I think around Gerald Ave.

Stan: Isn't that over near Garrison Playground

Richie: Pretty much

Stan: Who was with you?

Richie: Just some homies from my set

Stan: How many were there?

Richie: me, and two of my boys

Stan: What are their names?

Richie: Names? Why you need their names?

Stan: To be real – nobody's going to snitch on anyone, it's just our crew in the room, beside all of you were arrested.

Richie: ight, ight Carlos and Tommy

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Jonathan: Is that the same Carlos that used to hang with you at the crib back in the day?

Richie: Yeah, he my right hand; I knew him since 4th grade.

Stan: Go on with what happened

Richie: So we was walking down the street and this Mexican was walking on the other side

Stan: You and Carlos and Tommy were walking down 149th St, I want you to use real names of your set when we talk.



Richie: ight, so me, Tommy, and Carlos were walking down the block, but I'm not sure it really was 149th, it was close 149th St.

Stan: That's cool, you and Tommy and Carlos were walking down the street.

Richie: Yeah and we saw this Mexican, he was crossing the street and then got scared cause he saw some other Bloods over there and he crossed the street to our side and came towards us.

Jonathan

Stan: He walked towards you?

Richie: Yeah, then he saw us and turned around and started walking away.

Stan: Who was the he again – what was his name?

Richie: I don't know, he was just some Mexican

Stan: What did he look like?

Richie: Like a Mexican, he was about my height, skinny, black hair

SiFu: Stan, isn't his name in those court papers they gave you.

Stan: Whose?

SiFu: The Mexican's dawg, that's who we are talking about.

Stan: You're right – Let me look in my file (Stan begins looking in his book bag.)

Richie: Why we gotta get his name – and say the names of the boys in my set?

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Stan: To make things real – your boys are real people they have names – Carlos and Tommy. The Mexican is a real person – oh here it is – his name is Miguel.

Richie: ight, so Miguel is coming towards us and then turns around tryna walk away but then we started pressing him.

Stan: You and Carlos and Tommy begin closing in on Miguel.

Jonathan: Is Miguel going to press charges?

Stan: The DA is lucky if he shows up as a witness – but the DA prosecutes the case.



SiFu Richard

Kris: He's probably illegal.

Stan: Miguel's probably illegal? – I don't think Richie's set were checking papers on who to stomp. Moving right along – go on with what you were saying, Richie

Richie: So we, I mean me, Tommy, Carlos walked up behind Miguel and I elbowed him in the back of the head, then he went down and Carlos and Tommy started stomping him.

Stan: Stomping Miguel?

Richie: Yeah, stomping Miguel.

Stan: Then what happened?

Richie: When we was kicking him, someone saw a cop and we was out.

Stan: Someone?

Richie: Carlos or Tommy, maybe Tommy. It wasn't me.

Stan: Did you rob Miguel?

Richie: Nah, we had gwap –and anyway he didn't look like he had shit.

Stan: (looks at Richie) Huh?

Richie: Miguel didn't look like he had nothin.

Stan: Thanx - How did it feel to stomp Miguel?

Richie: Good, it's better when they try to fight back

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Stan: They?

Richie: Mexicans

Kris: Stan, that's a valid pronoun.

Stan: You're right; Richie what happened after you saw the cops – wait first why does it feel better when the target tries to fight back?

Richie: Cause it's more live to beat them down.

Kris: Target??

Stan: In case Richie's set attacks non-Mexicans. Richie do you only go after Mexicans?

Richie: Pretty much but we jump Crips or Kings if we get a chance.

Stan: Do you ever fight one-on-one?

Jonathan: Stan, wassup with that – my brother fights one-on-one all the time; he's not a pussy.

Richie: Word!

Stan: Jonathan, chill, I know he fights but I want to know about the feeling. Does it feel different when you fight one-on-one instead of stomping someone?

Richie: Yeah, it's a whole other thing.



Jonathan and Richie

Stan: Which feels better?

Richie: Well one-on-one is ight but going out for fun with your crew is what's poppin.

Stan: What happened after you saw the cops?

Richie: We jetted. I separated from Carlos and Tommy but we all got caught a couple of blocks later. There was some lady who saw us and told the cops.

Stan: Did you see Miguel afterwards?

Richie: I think he was in one of the cop cars but I don't know.

Stan: Richie, what happened next?

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Richie: They booked me and sent me to Straford. Then I called my moms and she got you and said that you would go to court on Monday and get me out.

Stan: Get you out?

Richie: Try and get me out.

Stan: What else?

Richie: That I had to write 1000 lines

Stan: Which were?

Richie: ‘What I do to others I do to myself’

Stan: How many have you done so far?

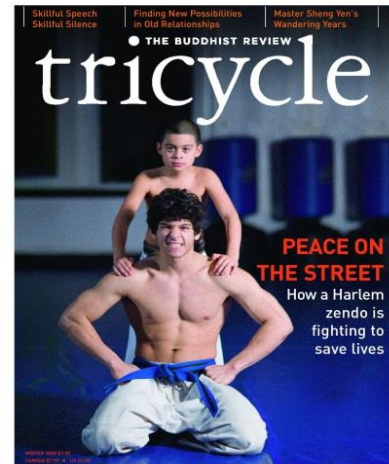
Richie: I did like 800, you want them?

Stan: Yeah

(Richie hands Stan a bunch of lined paper with writing.)

Stan: Any problem with finishing the last 200 by tomorrow?

Richie: Nah I’ll do them.



Kris with Brandon, SiFu's son

Stan: So we have what happened. What did you get out of this, what was your profit.

Richie: I said we didn't rob him.

Stan: Come on Richie

Richie: That's my word we didn't rob Miguel.

Stan: I didn't ask if you got money; what did you get? Whenever we do something we do it for some sort of a reward.

Richie: ...I don't know, I didn't get nothing

Stan: You had to get something, otherwise you and Tommy and Carlos wouldn't have stomped Miguel.

Richie: No nothing, I didn't get nothing.

Stan: You had to get something - they were about to send you to Rikers for the next six months.

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Stan: (Turns to the other guys at the table) What did Richie get?

(The other guys begin laughing)

Kris: Street cred!

SiFu: Excitement, breaking up the boredom

Jonathan: Getting close with your boys

Kris: Gang rep – more respect for Bloods on the street



Richie: ight, ok I got it.

Stan: You got all that Richie but you got something more.

Richie: What?

Stan: You got the pleasure of being evil.

Richie: Evil?

Kris at Kid's Belt Promotion

Stan: Yes, evil brings a particular high, a feeling that is pleasurable. I want you to stop a second and get in touch with the feeling you had when you're actually kicking Miguel. Let's give Richie some space.

(About a minute passes as the group sits silently.)

Richie: Yeah, I got feeling.

Stan: Is it pleasurable?

Richie: Yeah, sort of.

Jonathan: Are you saying my brother is evil?

Stan: No Jonathan, people are not their behavior. I'm asking your brother to get in touch with a type of high, a pleasurable feeling that comes from evil behavior.

SiFu: Stan, are you going to define evil?

Stan: I'm going to talk about feelings and behaviors associated with being evil. Defining evil is harder, it's like some Supreme Court Justice who said that he couldn't define porn

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but he could recognize it when he saw it. So Richie can you hold that feeling, describe it a little.

Richie: Yeah I feel you, it felts like being right, like Mexicans deserve being stomped.

Stan: Did Miguel deserve being stomped? Feel that

Richie: (after a few moments) no, the feeling changed.

Stan: I suspect you've had this feeling before.

Richie: Yeah.

Stan: Have you ever had this feeling when you were by yourself, getting into a fight, beating down someone by yourself.



Stan, SiFu and Zen Master Kelly

Richie: Not really

Stan: So it's mostly with your gang.

Richie: Yeah

Stan: That makes sense. We call it mob psychology and when a gang or a group forms it opens us to doing things we wouldn't do by ourselves and to highs or intoxications that pretty much is only available through doing things with your set.

Richie: Yeah

Stan: Let me give you an example of what evil looks like.

(Stan reaches in his book bag, pulls out some photocopies of pictures and hands them to Richie)

Stan: Look at these and pass them around. These are photos of lynching of black men in the South during the first half of the 20th century. I want you to look at the faces of the white people.

(The pictures are passed around and all of the guys looked at them)

SiFu: Yo, who took these – they're really outrageous?

Stan: They were taken by people at the lynching who then sent them to friends as postcards.

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Richie: Postcards? Like the picture with Mickey Mouse at Disneyworld, yo this one has some dude that looks like he was set on fire.

Stan: Yeah postcards. Richie stop for a moment and get the feeling of stomping a Mexican, I want you to get in touch with the feeling of doing something virtuous, of somehow doing the right thing to people who deserve it.

A minute or so passes

Richie: ight, I got it.

Stan: See when we look closely the evil feeling is connected to doing something good – beating up Mexican’s for your set or killing the Brothers for these white people. Jonathan, can you get in touch with how this works.

Jonathan: Stan, this is fucked up, this is white people shit. Look at these people, they are all smiling and laughing, even the little kids.

Stan: Yeah, this is what that feeling looks like on people. Richie is this making sense to you?

Richie: Yeah, I can remember Tommy looking sort of like the guy in this picture when we jumped some Mexican in Jeff last week – and I don’t know the Mexican’s name.



The lynching of Rubin Stacy.
July 19, 1935, Fort Lauderdale, FL



May 16, 1916, Robinson, Texas

Stan: Exactly, it’s not as pleasurable when we know the names.

SiFu: Stan, this is really heavy, what are we supposed to do about all this.

Stan: We don’t do anything other than making ourselves really conscious of what we do and why we do it.

Jonathan: What about my brother; he did the shit, what sort of punishment should he get?

Charred corpse of Jesse Washington

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Stan: Richie didn't do anything more than a lot of people have done – and he and Carlos and Tommy didn't take pictures of Miguel and send out postcards.

Kris: Or post them on YouTube

Stan: Exactly, as far as punishment, this will all play out with the Criminal Justice system – but remember we're Buddhist not Christians – we're not concerned with offending a supernatural being. We're concerned with alleviating pain. Right now, Richie has done everything he is supposed to do. He sat in this meeting and was honest and sincere in this conversation. He knows what he did and what he gained

Richie: Whatchu mean?

Stan: You increase or decrease the amount of pain in your life by things you do – which is pretty much based on what you are conscious of or unconscious of at any moment. Richie did you get some insight about what you are doing when you and your set go Mexican bashing?

Richie: Fuck yeah!

Stan: That's really all there is. Hopefully these insights will cause you to not do this sort of thing again. If not, well we'll see how it plays.

Kris: But suppose he wants to keep stomping unnamed Mexicans for the fun of being evil.

Richie: Yo Kris you wilden.

Stan: Then there's a good chance that Richie will end up sharing a cell with someone twice his size and a taste for young gangbangers. For that matter, it's my job to get the current charges dropped so Richie has a chance to see where he goes with these new insights. But we don't need to add any punishments to Richie; he'll take care of that himself.

Richie: Is that all?

Stan – For this situation you know what you need to know. Take it where you take it as long as I get my 200 lines.