“The more helpless I felt, the more I just loved her; what else could I do?” / How Can I Help? - Ram Dass

Family Services is the name of our department. People come in, I direct them to the appropriate office: food, shelter, child protection, welfare, legal services, your basics. My job is to get a sense of who someone is and then find the right place for them. Not simple.

For a long time I found this an uncomfortable assignment. I don’t like sizing up someone according to their problem. It may help them get to the right office, but it also reduces them somehow. Reduces me too. I’ll find myself resisting this way of going about things. But I had an experience which changed my way of thinking about it.

There was this woman who was living on the street, one I used to pass on my way to the bus. She was homeless, alcoholic; later it developed she had had a cancer diagnosis. For some reason I decided to take up with her. I liked her smile. Enough of sending everyone elsewhere. I knew the whole maze of social services; I’d take her around myself – clinics, shelters, Medicare, whatever. I guess I wanted to know you could help one person yourself. She was very uncomplaining. Viola. She was willing, even funny about it.

“Well, Marie,” she’d say, “what are you going to do for me today?”

Oh, the scenes we went through! They called me once from the Women’s Shelter. Somehow she’d brought in three pints of Seagram’s Seven that night, and a group had gotten drunk. That was against the rules, and I had to take her out.

“You told me you’d be good,” I said. “You were warm there.” She said, “Well, we got warmer.”

Or I set her up once with a counsellor. After a while he called. “Look, she shows up irregularly, and she always wants to argue with me when she does. What’s she here for?” And I’d tell Viola, and she’d say, “Sure, I love to argue with these people. He wanted to talk about my childhood all the time. But he doesn’t even remember what childhood was like himself. Trust me, Marie.”

And I did. I’d have to laugh. She was so insightful and honest. Oh, I really did love her, that one – I really did...

How Can I Help? Cont.

But the problems went on for months. Nothing seemed to work out. She kept going back on the street, drinking, getting sicker, all the rest. *The more helpless I felt, the more I just loved her; what else could I do?*

And I'd try again. "Look, Viola," I'd say. "Look where, Marie?" she'd reply. It became a kind of joke between us: "Look." "Look where?"

She moved to a park near my house, and there she started to really go downhill. One evening I went to see her and she was sitting under a tree. She looked awful. I had this powerful feeling that she was getting very close to death. So I went through everything with her one more time: her drinking, her health, her eating, her shelter. She could come live with me. I'd reached that point of willingness.

She just listened, and finally she said, "You know, dear, there's nothing you can do for me any more." And I say she was right, I just saw that. And I heaved this big sigh, just let go.

About then, it started raining lightly. I finally said, "Well, it's getting late and wet. Shall we go get some coffee?"

She said, "You go, Marie. I'll be all right here."

I said, "Yeah... well... I'll see you later then." But somehow it felt to both of us like I wouldn't. I went to the bus, and I was crying on the bus. I felt just broken-hearted. I felt there was something else, I didn't know what. Then this thought came to me that she was out there alone in the rain. Just that. So I got off and took the other bus back and went into the park with a newspaper on my head. I must have looked pretty funny.

She was under the tree. She looked up at me. I sat down. She said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Nothing, really. I just felt like being with you a little more." She said, "Okay."

So we sat in the rain. There we were. It was relatively dry, because this was a big sycamore tree. I told her about how my father taught me to identify trees by their bark and how I loved trees and nature and felt happiest there. She told me about the desert. She used to live in Arizona. Her favourite place was the desert; it was so peaceful there.

How Can I Help? Cont.

We watched the rain.We watched how the squirrels ran around and the last few people scurrying out. We watched how the park looked with no one in it: some birds, a stray dog... some mist beginning to appear. And I felt finally at peace, and we were both at peace, and we stayed silent a long time.I felt such love.

She walked me to the bus.She said, “Thanks.” I said, “For what?” She said, “For nothing.” We laughed.“You’ve been very good to me,” she added. We were teary. We hugged.Then I got on the bus, and we waved good-bye. I never saw her again. I’ll always love her.

When our models of who we are fall away, we are free simply to meet and be together. And when this sense of being encompasses all – one another, the park, the rain, everything – separateness dissolves and we are united in compassion.