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News that Inspires

If You Want To Be a Rebel, Be Kind
by Nipun Mehta

The police had declared Monday, November 14th of 2011 as the day of the raid on the Occupy Oakland encampment. It was the first Occupy site to call for a general strike that shut down the fifth largest port in the country; it was also the first Occupy gathering to report a shooting and a murder, as police violence also reached new heights. With tensions mounting amidst political chaos, police escalated their violent crackdowns and the narrative of fear. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent in preparation for the raid, police from around the state were called in, and uncertainty filled the air.

The night before, Pancho Ramos Stierle heard about growing tensions in the community and thought, "If police are stepping up their violence, we need to go and step up our nonviolence." So on that Monday morning at 3:30AM, Pancho and his housemate Adelaja went to the site of the Occupy Oakland raid. With an upright back and half-lotus posture, they started meditating. Many factions of protesters were around but the presence of strong meditators changed the vibe entirely. Around 6:30AM, the police showed up in full force. Full-out riot gear, pepper spray, rubber bullets, tear gas. All media was present, expecting a headline story around this incredibly tense scene. Instead, they found 32 people, all peaceful, with Pancho and Adeleja meditating with their eyes closed in the middle of the Plaza. As the police followed their orders of arresting them, people took photos -- particularly of two smiling meditators surrounded by police looking like they're ready to go to war. Within a day, that photo would spread to millions around the world, as Occupy Oakland raid ended without any reported violence.

One such experience can be enough for a lifetime. For Pancho, though, this is just run of the mill. In small ways and big, he is always looking to step up his compassion in the most unexpected places.

Raised in Mexico, Pancho was fascinated by the stars, planets, and galaxies. He would always look up in outer space and admire the border-less cosmos that we inhabit; and he'd imagine looking down at Planet Earth from outer space -- and not seeing any lines across countries. He envisioned a world of oneness and unity, and when he got a full scholarship to study the cosmos at University of California at Berkeley, his vision got a huge boost. He moved to Berkeley to pursue his PhD in Astrophysics.

On campus one day, he serendipitously engages in a profound hallway conversation with a janitor. It opens his eyes to the janitor's incredibly difficult life. Something awakens in him, as he actively starts looking for solutions. "I saw that instead of PhD’s, what the world needs more are PhDo's," Pancho recalls.

As time went on, Pancho realizes that his research supports an institution that actively proliferates nuclear weapons. That tips him over the edge. Not only did he stop cooperating with the university system, he starts raising a dissenting voice.

When his complains fall on deaf ears, he partakes in a nine-day fast with other students and professors across California to request an open dialogue with the UC Regents -- the governing body of the University of California. The fast cultimates at a public hearing of the Regents. When the student request is denied, they lock arms in nonviolent protest and sit peacefully. To disengage them, the police are ordered to make an example of one of them. They lift up this man, slam him to the ground, put a knee on his neck, twist his arms behind his back and handcuff him ruthlessly. Supporters start shouting at the overt show of inhumane behavior towards a fragile student who hadn't eaten a single morsel of food for nine days. That man was none other than Pancho.

The story would end there, except that Pancho's strength resided beyond his body. "It was excruciating pain," Pancho recalls. Perhaps the police officer picked on Pancho because of his small and skinny frame, but the outer force is no match for Pancho's inner might. The injustice is obvious, but Pancho knew that the officer is not to blame. In a completely unrehearsed move of raw compassion, Pancho, with all the love in his heart, looks directly into the police officer's eyes, and says, "Brother, I forgive you. I am not doing this for me, I am not doing this for you. I am doing it for your children and the children of your children." The overflowing love coming from the heart of this man on a nine-day fast is unmistakable. This is not the kind of encounter that police are trained in. Seeing his confusion, Pancho steps up his empathy and changes the topic. Looking at the last name on his badge, he asks for the officer's first name. And addressing him as a family member, he says, "Brother, let me guess, you must like Mexican food." [Awkward pause.] "Yes." "Well, I know this place in San Francisco that has the best carnitas and fajitas and quesadillas, and I tell you what, when I get done with this and you get done with this, I'd like to break my fast with you. What do you say?"

The police officer is completely flabbergasted, his humanity irrevocably invoked. He accepts the invitation! Dropping eye contact gently, he then walks around Pancho and voluntarily loosens his handcuffs. In silence. By now, all of Pancho's comrades -- twelve of them -- are also in handcuffs, so the officer then goes around to loosen everyone else's handcuffs too.

There are those who use anger, sarcasm and parody to confront unjust action. Pancho does it with just the simple -- and radical -- power of love. If he had a superpower, that would be it. He is a fearless soldier of compassion, unconditionally willing to hold up a fierce mirror of love.

For Pancho, the whole World, every moment, is his field of practice. When he was recently asked what nourishes him, his response was clear: meditation and small acts of kindness. Meditation deepens his awareness while small acts of kindness deepens his inter-connectedness. Or as Pancho would sum it up, "Meditation is the DNA of the kindness revolution." Ever since he first went to a meditation retreat, he has continued to meditate everyday. "Pancho 2.0" is what he calls himself since then. It was as if he discovered a new technology to battle our burning world.

Spirituality often sees activism as unnecessarily binding, while activism often sees spirituality as a navel-gazing escape. For Pancho, though, the two paths merge into one. Meditation is internal service, while service is external meditation.

In Arizona, when Pancho is arrested for protesting immigration laws that President Obama called unconstitutional, he smiles peacefully for his mug shot. The Sheriff yells out an order: "Stop smiling." Immediately, it mirrors the ridiculousness of the request. Several

years ago, some of Pancho's friends lived in a tree to ignite a conversation around "chopping down 300 year old trees in 30 minutes". When the authorities put a barricade around the tree to starve the tree-sitters, Pancho shows up to meditate and spread "metta" (loving kindness) to all those around him. While sitting peacefully under the tree, he is arrested. His offense quite literally read: "Disturbing the peace."

Ultimately, it was in Gandhi that Pancho found his greatest role model for social change. Perhaps for the first time, history had seen someone manifest seismic systemic shifts in the world solely through the power of inner transformation. Gandhi opposed unjust action, not just without violence but with radical love for everyone including the person doing the harm; and for every act of resistance, he advocated nine more actions for constructive social change.

"Nonviolence isn't just a philosophy of resistance. It is a way of life. Nonviolence is the thoughts we have, the words that we use, the clothes that we wear, the things that we say. It is not just an absence of violence, not even just the absence of wanting to cause harm. Nonviolence is a state when your heart is so full of love, compassion, kindness, generosity and forgiveness that you simply don't have any room for anger, frustration or violence," Pancho describes.

When Pancho stopped cooperating with the University of California system, he lost his student visa. In light of his courage, more than a dozen people offered to help reinstate his status. He appreciated the gesture but chose to stay undocumented. More than being in one geographical location or another, he was more interested in blooming wherever he was planted. Now, all of a sudden, being "undocumented", he got an experiential insight into what that meant for 11 million people living in the United States; he couldn't work, he couldn't have a bank account or a credit card, he couldn't own anything and he'd have to work low-wage labor jobs, without any insurance, just to survive.

Here is someone capable of being a rocket scientist, whose father is an Economics scholar and author in Mexico, who chooses to live without any financial currency -- just so he can be of service to his struggling brethren. He is sustained purely by social capital. His tendency to constantly seek to be helpful earns him many friends, who would host him one day of the week. And on days that he didn't have a host, he'd just live out in the woods ("Redwood Cathedral" as he calls it). Such details don't matter much for Pancho. All his possessions fit into one bag pack, as his life organizes around doing acts of service.

When Pancho learned about the troubled situation in his neighboring East Oakland, he was quite moved. Rife with gang warfare, it is an area that most people have written off. Every week, residents hear the sounds of gun shots being fired -- and that's no exaggeration. It’s a community with 53 liquor stores and no grocery stores. The tensions between the police and the community have continued to escalate, while traditional civic programs haven't made much of a dent.

So Pancho decides to do something about it, with an altogether different framework. Instead of helping from the outside, he wanted to become one of them; instead of just receiving external aid, he wondered if the community could not only discover undiscovered gifts but then share them freely with others.

With a few like-hearted friends, Pancho rents a house right on the border of two gangs. They call their home “Casa de Paz” -- house of peace. The shared values of the house

include 2 hours of daily meditation, no drinking, and a vegan diet. And no locks on the doors -- anyone can come in any time.

Every Tuesday and Thursday morning, they meditate and do yoga at the local Cesar Chavez park (which has been home to several shootings in recent months). People have all kinds of reactions to their public meditations. One time, a mildly drunk man with bloodshot eyes is roaming the park with his girlfriend. Initially, they smirk and make snide remarks but then as they approach Pancho and his two housemates sitting in crossed legged meditation, Pancho opens his eyes with a loving embrace. As Pancho reaches to grab something from his bag, the man instinctively reached for something (possibly a gun) in his pocket. "Brother, here's a fresh, local, organic strawberry for you," Pancho said while holding up the edible, red-colored gift from Nature.

On another occasion, their neighbor's teenage daughter attempts to commit suicide, on a Friday afternoon. The sounds of sirens create a mild panic in the community but for Pancho and his housemates, it is another opportunity to spread love. They show up to comfort their neighbors, with a kettle of hot tea, as the family shares their troubles. Over the next month, that same teenage girl becomes a friend and gets interested in the farming projects at Casa de Paz.

Almost everyday, they facilitate these transformations. Another time, a few young boys boisterously smash empty alcohol bottles on the streets, just as a prank. Instead of cringing in fear, Pancho runs outside, barefoot. The boys could see him and vice-versa, and instead of anger, Pancho humbly bends down and starts picking up the pieces of broken glass. Something about that act took the kids by surprise, as they slowly returned back. "Brother, you see that house over there? They have a young one, and when he walks out on the street, we don't want them to get hurt," Pancho explains to them in fluent Spanish. One thing after another, the kids themselves start helping pick up the broken pieces -- and make role models of these love warriors on their street.

In isolation, these are small stories. Yet, collectively, its impact adds up. It binds the community, it creates new connections, it fills the gaps. Its like the silence in between the notes that allows the music to be heard.

"A lot of people talk their talk, but very few can walk their walk. Living in that community is hard, but living at Casa de Paz is even harder. They simply refuse to compromise their values, even in small ways, when no one else is looking. One time, I told them that perhaps their precepts were a bit too tough, and Pancho opened up a book and showed me 11 observances that Gandhi upheld at his ashram. I couldn’t say anything to that," remembers Kanchan Gokhale, a long-time friend.

One of those observances is Silent Mondays. In the tradition of Gandhi, Pancho is silent every Monday. Even on that November 14th, the day of the Occupy Oakland raid which happened to be a Monday, Pancho stays silent on principle. As the riot police arrest him, he writes a comment on a piece of paper: "On Mondays, I practice silence. But I'd like you to hear that I love you." The officer smiles. How could you not?

"On the face of it, Pancho doesn't own anything. Yet, he is one of the most generous people I've ever met," says another friend, Joanna Holsten.

How can you give, when you don't have anything? That paradox is what makes Pancho shine. When a friend asked him about service, he took her to a local Farmers Market with two chairs. She sat on one chair, and put a sign on the other chair: "Free

listening." When Pancho and his friends saw unused fruit in their neighbor's backyards, they requested to "glean" the fruit and then gift it to strangers: "This is a gift from East Oakland." On a recent Sunday, they gave away 250 pounds of fresh, organic oranges that way.

That creative generosity, a kind of “giftivism”, takes all kinds of forms for Pancho.

Of the 32 people arrested at Occupy Oakland, 31 were sent home on the same day, with a misdemeanor charge. Pancho, however, is held for deportation. Very quickly, he becomes an iconic symbol for all that is wrong with the dominant paradigm. Within two days, twenty thousand people sign a petition to free Pancho. At his court arraignment, a large group of people show up to meditate -- which has never happened in that courthouse, and again confuses all the police in riot-gear who are themselves drawn to the circle. People from around the world call the sheriffs and congress representatives. Media everywhere reports the story. Vigils are held by many around the globe. By the end of the four days, Alameda County D.A. drops all criminal charges and ICE (Immigrations and Customs Enforcement) releases Pancho from jail, without any bail. No one can really explain the unprecedented move by the authorities. "It was truly a miracle that he was let go," Marianne Manilove posted on her FaceBook wall.

Francisco Ugarte, Pancho's pro-bono laywer, happily reported, "They really didn't know what to do with him." He would relay Pancho's notes from various jails that he was being shuttled to. "Tell them that I love them all. (It’s a) great place to meditate!" was his first note to friends and supporters. Francisco's second note conveyed this message: "Pancho wanted me to convey to folks that he was, for some reason, identified as a particularly dangerous inmate, wearing a red clothes in jail, and shackled so that the movement of his arms was restrained. The shackles were metal, and surrounded his waist. Apparently, this treatment is reserved only for the most "dangerous" inmates. It is unclear why Alameda County have done this. But after a short conversation, we agreed that, without a doubt, Pancho was the most dangerous person in Santa Rita Jail -- dangerous to the whole system. As Pancho said, 'The most effective weapon against a system based on greed and violence is kindness.'"

Kindness is indeed Pancho's go-to weapon. When in doubt, be kind. Even otherwise, be kind.

As Pancho is shackled up in solitary confinement, he creates a makeshift cushion with his shoes and starts meditating. The guards themselves start taking photos to post on their Facebook walls! Moved by his equipoise under conditions of extreme stress, some guards even inquire about the specifics of meditation. One of them befriends him and gifts him an extra "package" -- a toothbrush, a toothpaste, a piece of paper and a pen. Pancho then cleans up his cell of all the litter, toilet paper and other waste; on the piece of paper he writes, "Smile. You've just been tagged with an anonymous act of kindness!", and leaves that extra toothpaste and toothbrush next to it. "I wanted to beautify the cell for the next person after me," he would later say. Jails didn't have any vegetarian food, so he smilingly fasted -- having two oranges in four days. He gifts away his ham sandwiches to other inmates, and connects with them in the spirit of generosity too. In transit, when he has more contact with other prisoners, he educates them about their rights. With the ICE agent who shackles him, he smilingly says, "Sister, your soul is too beautiful to be doing this kind of work." To which she smiled back and responded, "Thank you."

Really, there’s not much else one can respond with.

When he is released from jail, lots of media houses are frantically looking for him. Pancho, utterly uninterested in the games of fame, is unreachable. The man doesn't even have a phone. That weekend, like every weekend, the best way to find him was to meditate at Casa de Paz, or volunteer at Karma Kitchen, or farm at the Free Farm Stand. "Let's replicate constructive programs," he would say, while retelling stories of Gandhi.

From anarchists to administrators, people love Pancho -- not just because he fiercely stands up for his values but because he is genuinely and constantly moved by love. Whenever you meet him, he pre-emptively warns, “Hello, my family calls me Pancho. I’m from the part of the planet we call Mexico and in Mexico, we like to give hugs,” before enveloping you in his trademark embrace.

Former US Marine Jason Kal recalls, "When we first met, I just casually told Pancho that I liked his t-shirt that said 'ahimsa' (meaning nonviolence) on it. The next thing you know, he just takes off his t-shirt and gives it to me. I was totally speechless. I've never seen anyone do that." Today, Jason is Pancho's housemate at Casa de Paz and a dear friend.

As Pancho often signs off his emails, "If you want to be a rebel, be kind."