

By now you've had a chance to talk with students from different groups and to find out what everyone has been doing this week and a little bit about what others have been thinking. You have no doubt noticed that people have had a range of responses to their experiences this week. I've heard some people say that they have learned an amazing amount. They have been presented with perspectives and realities that are completely new. Some people say they have a new understanding and compassion for people in the so-called "inner city." Others are saying they feel less compassion for poor and marginalized people than they did before the week began. They are cynical. They are asking questions like, "Why should tax dollars paid by hard-working people go to support others who don't want to work or to pay for health care for people who have no desire to get off hard drugs?"

I want to reassure every one of you that no matter what your experience and your reactions, as long as you are engaging sincerely with those experiences and reactions and making an effort to understand them, this week has been a success. You may remember that at the orientation here I said that we were not trying to indoctrinate you into a particular ideology. Please do not go away from here thinking that people who find themselves feeling less compassion or less willingness to support the social safety net necessarily came to the wrong conclusion or got the wrong answer. Or that people who find themselves feeling great about the service they gave to the community and excited about doing more necessarily got the right answer.

I'm sorry to have to tell you that the cold reality is that, when it comes to the issues you have been encountering in your educational sessions this week, the answers that are either right or wrong are few and far between. I have been working in the Downtown Eastside developing what has become the Learning Exchange for almost five years. When I was asked if I wanted to get involved in this initiative of UBC's, I was a graduate student and I had just finished my comprehensive exams and my first thought was, "No, I don't want to spend my summer in the Downtown Eastside." I had the same stereotypes about the neighbourhood that most people do. I had no particular interest in the Downtown Eastside.

But what did interest me and what has become a compelling question for me is, “How do I and others who think of themselves as caring members of society respond to the problems that exist in the Downtown Eastside?” What do we do about poor kids who can’t learn in school because they are hungry? What is our responsibility for people who are mentally ill who have nowhere to sleep but on a piece of cardboard stretched out on the sidewalk? What do we do when we hear about 12 year old girls being recruited for the sex trade?

If your direct encounter with these and other questions this week has prompted you to feel or think differently about people who are on the outside of the social and cultural circles you travel in, or have made you aware of things you never imagined were happening in your city, that’s great. But don’t stop with that first layer of your experience. Dig deeper.

“If I feel less compassion for drug users or welfare recipients, why is that? What were the beliefs I had that have been unsettled? Why did I have compassion before? What does having less compassion feel like? Has my motivation to engage in particular activities been affected? Have my ideas about social policy changed?”

If you feel energized and keen to get more involved in your community, ask yourself where that motivation is coming from. What made you feel good this week? If you liked the feeling of making a contribution, what exactly is that about? What is it about giving that you found rewarding?

The point is not to try to find the right answer, but to continue pursuing ever more complex and penetrating questions. To keep peeling the layers off the onion. Because if the answers that that are so far on the table were adequate, the problems that we see in the Downtown Eastside and elsewhere would have been solved a long time ago.

But engaging in this kind of inquiry presents a very real challenge. And that is, how do we deal with the discomfort that can arise? When we really connect with the experiences of others who are suffering, what do we do with the pain? Did anybody here ever feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems they heard about this week?

I think this is one of the fundamental problems we, as a society, are facing right now. Not only are there serious and complex problems on our doorstep but, through the media we are constantly made aware of terrible problems around the world: environmental degradation, hunger, epidemics, war, terrorism. It is overwhelming. And at the same time we are being given messages, for example by those who are selling particular consumer goods, that the purpose of life is to be comfortable. So the temptation to turn our backs on the difficulties around us is enormous.

But as Margery Fee said during her talk during the orientation day, “If you are comfortable, you are not learning.” And more and more people are realizing that, given the interdependence of global economies and ecosystems, it is futile to pretend that we can isolate ourselves. So while we may be able to run, ultimately there is no place to hide.

So, how do we engage with the issues without being overwhelmed. This is a question I struggle with every day. So, just as the three students who took part in projects last year gave you their list of top ten tips for getting the most out of Reading Week, I’ll pass on a few suggestions about how not to get overwhelmed based on my experience.

1. Don’t go looking for *the answer*. Go looking for better questions.
2. Talk to other people. Especially people who are living with the issues. Try to understand the issues from the inside.
3. Write in a journal.
4. Work with other people of like mind. Do something useful. Don’t get immobilized.
5. Stop. Be quiet. This may seem to contradict the previous point. But the trick is to find a balance between action and reflection.
6. Learn to recognize when it is time to move and when it is time to be still. This takes practice, like learning to play a musical instrument or play a sport.
7. Learn to be able to tell when you are on the edge, coming to the limits of your capacities, and therefore need to back off and when you are getting too comfortable and need to push.
8. Be gentle with yourself. Give yourself permission to play, to enjoy the beauties of life. Don’t think you always have to be immersed in the problems. Our capacity for holding the pain is linked to our capacity to experience joy.

9. Don't get lost in anger. It is important to say that I am not suggesting you not *feel* anger. Anger can be a powerful motivator. And a force that can lead to clear seeing. But do not set up others as enemies. This is the path to burn-out.
10. Understand that in this process you are cultivating courage. Courage is linked to the heart, to the capacity to expand our hearts in the presence of confusion and suffering rather than contract them.

You may notice that a lot of these things are what you have been doing this week. Working with a team of others of like mind. Doing something useful. Stopping to reflect. Taking time to talk openly with others and to write your private thoughts.

So, no matter what the content of your learning might have been this week, I hope you have learned the value of these ways of approaching the complex problems that we as individuals and as members of both local and global communities must learn to face.

Thank you.