

# From Hell to Heaven

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A number of years ago, my wife Karen, and I were on a trip to Spain and found ourselves in a spectacular coastal town called Viviero. We were surrounded by great beauty as we strolled through medieval streets and around the calm, peaceful bay. We dined on roquefort pizza and drank in the moist sea air which also carried to us whiffs of eucalyptus from groves of those healing trees. We did not have a care in the world, no financial worries, no health problems, no stress of any kind and best of all we were newly in love. The native people were uncommonly friendly and there were no annoying American tourists (aside from me) around to spoil our immersion experience. We felt as though we had found heaven on earth. And yet we both grew aware of a gnawing inside...a discomfort, an existential, subtle suffering that escalated into a dark heaviness that became even more powerful than our idyllic setting.

Neither one of us could shake this uncomfortable feeling. We engaged in all kinds of strategies to alleviate the heaviness: things like more pizza, more ocean, more mindfulness of the beautiful surroundings, and then even more pizza. However, nothing we tried brought us relief from the dark mood that seemed to be ruining our dream trip. We became frustrated. How could we be in "heaven" and yet feel like we were in "hell"? Unfortunately, that realization only added to the negative cloud following us around the village. If only we could point to some outer problem that was the cause, so that we could do something to fix or change our circumstances, but sadly (and fortunately for our growth) there was nothing we could blame.

Then one of us had an inspiration, a flash of insight, one of those moments of grace that although seemingly small and insignificant, would change our lives. If you ask Karen she will say it was her idea and if you ask me I will tell you the truth (it was me). But in all honesty, it was Spirit coming through a local shop owner who planted the seed that eventually ripened into the insight that led us out of hell and back to peace.

Earlier in the week we had inquired about renting bikes from a local woman who ran a little ocean-front shop. The "shop" was really more of a closet, with all of the wares displayed out front on the sidewalk. Karen, being the language enthusiast that she is, did her best to communicate with this friendly native, and explained that we wished to rent bicycles. I just stood there dumbly shaking my head at regular intervals pretending to understand the conversation as Karen procured our fun rides. After a lot of discussion, this kindly woman told us, in a very Italian-sounding dialect, to return at 4pm for our two-wheeled treats.

Promptly at 1600 hrs we dutifully returned only to find that the woman's enormous array of trinkets, water toys and beach accessories were now neatly stuffed into her "store" while she was absorbed in the process of locking the door. At that moment it dawned on us that Karen had misunderstood "come back *after* 4" as "come back *before* 4". We quickly turned around hoping to escape embarrassment and avoid a potentially awkward situation. Too late! The woman called out to us and ran over with such joy that an observer might have easily mistaken us as this woman's long-lost children. She grabbed us by the arms and dragged us back to her store despite our apologies and protestations.

The woman then proceeded to slowly dig items out of her store in order to clear a pathway to the back, which was apparently where the bikes were stowed. As she did so, she explained that she had been on the way to the funeral of a good friend who had suddenly passed away. This, of course, only increased our discomfort and embarrassment as she further delayed her funeral attendance by insisting on getting us those bikes, no matter what the obstacles. However, at the same time that we were feeling uncomfortable, we were also deeply moved by the fact that she treated us as if we were the only and the most important people in the world.

After what seemed like an eternity, she finally liberated the bicycles only to discover that they had flat tires! Undaunted and with the same great enthusiasm and kindness, this woman then painstakingly dug through her store to find the pump. Again rejecting any of our attempts to assist her, she singlehandedly pumped up the four flat tires. At last, triumphantly and with a big smile, she delivered the bikes, waving off our money and passports, and simply informing us that she would look forward to seeing us the following day.

Although on the surface not really that remarkable, this interaction had a deep impact on us-- much deeper, in fact, than we realized at the moment. However it is fascinating that as impactful as that experience was, we soon forgot all about the kind woman and the love she had shown us. As we pedaled on, we quickly slipped back into that dark mood again.

A few days later, as Karen and I again were discussing the heavy negativity we were struggling with, one of us had the realization: *“Here we are in paradise and I keep thinking about ME, what do I want to eat, what do I want to do, where do I want to go, what are my needs? Me, me, meeee, meeeee! What if we stop thinking about me and my happiness and start thinking of making ourselves available to be of service to All? What if we choose the intention to be of loving service the way that store owner was?”* We both stopped and considered that idea for a moment. But how could we be of service in a place where we were tourists, didn't know anyone and could barely communicate? Then we received the inspiration: *“What if we start picking up the garbage that has blown up on the boardwalk?”*

After only a few minutes of collecting papers, bottle caps and bits of plastic we glanced up and caught each other's eyes and connected. We were both grinning! This was the way out of hell! *Let go of the intention to be of service only to oneself, of trying to get only one's own needs met and instead choose the intention to be of service to All and allow Spirit to work through us.*

Even though later on during that same trip we spent some valuable time in a Buddhist monastery with a well-known Zen master, it was actually this anonymous Spanish saint who affected us more deeply. We still remind each other of her and speak of that experience, now more than 15 years later. It was not her words, it was not even her actions, it was her loving presence that awakened something in our hearts. We are so grateful for her teaching, even though we continue to forget and then remember, again and again, what she taught us about heaven that day.

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