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Street wise: how to find answers to life's questions by going for a walk



Street Wisdom founder David Pearl leads a walk on London's Southbank

CREDIT: STREET WISDOM

by [Tomé Morrissy-Swan](#)

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People have always searched for fresh answers to life's nagging questions. Today more than ever, in our hectic, stressful modern lives, we are turning to the likes of mindfulness and meditation, in search of peace and contentment. It might involve travelling to a retreat or festival (somewhere in Southeast Asia ideally); paying for time with a spiritual guru; or living hermetically in monasteries, searching for a Beatles-esque enlightenment.

But what if you could find all the answers you need on your doorstep?

Well, you can, according to David Pearl, author, speaker, and the man behind Street Wisdom, an initiative that blends "psychology, mindfulness and cognitive science" to help people find inspiration on the very streets they live among – even if those streets are concreted and clogged with the pollutants of 21st Century life.

The premise is simple: participants join Pearl or one of his many volunteers (the 'Street Wizards' – I know) for a saunter in an urban area. The only thing asked of the walkers is to bring a burning question – not too big ('what is the meaning of life?'), not too small ('what should I have for lunch?'), but something between the two ('how can I find more fulfillment at work'). Over the course of three hours, a series of exercises and short walks are designed to provide you with at least the acorn of an answer.

Ahead of my meeting with Pearl, I decide upon my question: 'How can I stop getting angry and stressed on my commute?' It's not the most earth-shattering issue, but I've noticed of late that I'm succumbing to the London commuter stereotype, and I figure if I can find a way to stop the rot it will make a tangible difference to my life.



David Pearl guiding Tomé Morrissy-Swan through a snowy London CREDIT: JEFF GILBERT

Pearl, a tall, engaging, and likeable man with a background in the arts – theatre and opera, mostly – sets me and my fellow participants our first task. We're told to "be drawn to what attracts you"; walk wherever the hell we want, basically – which isn't the easiest decision, given that we're standing in Spitalfields Market in London's East End and surrounded by interesting

urban topography. "The reason we do this first is that in cities people are selling you things all the time, I want people to notice that," explains Pearl. "The other reason is, we want people to be more intuitive, following their feet, rather than their head. It's designed to make you literally move towards what you like." For me, that seems to be the history of my surroundings: I found myself walking towards old shop signs, relics of the Jewish East End.

Next, Pearl asks us to "slow right down". And he means it: we walk in slow-mo, like mime artists in drying concrete. We're even asked to blink slowly. Most of the 10 or so members of the walk confess to feeling silly; I for one feel like I'm being monitored for loitering in the market. But as the minutes tick by, I find that seeing pedestrians, cars and buses haring past opens my eyes to how hectic and stressful a simple walk on a street – and modern life in general – can be. "A hidden purpose", Pearl reveals, "is to understand that you don't know what others are thinking, you just think you do. Once you realise that it can be freeing."

If this sounds a little, well, hippy to you, then Pearl says all sorts of people get involved – particularly business leaders. "It's interesting to see what used to be treated as flaky, fuzzy, hug-a-tree stuff has now come smack bang into the mainstream. Life has become complex, very demanding and stressful. Leading today isn't what it was 10 years ago, sitting in a room and giving orders." Google are among the businesses using Pearl's methods to improve employee wellbeing, and Street Walks have so far taken place in 35 countries around the world.

We do two more short exercises, designed to tune up our senses, and then it's onto the main event: a long, solo wander through the streets, during which we're each encouraged to grapple with our personal question. With my moody commutes in mind, I embark on that rare and beautiful thing: a stroll with nowhere to be, and no maps, taking in the sights, smells and sounds of busy high streets.

Primed to be 'in the moment' by those earlier exercises, I find myself focusing intently on everyone around me (hopefully not staring too intensely), creating backstories for the people I see, giving life to anonymous figures. It's a wonderful, relaxing, and ultimately very powerful experience to spend so much time without once glancing at a screen, and without the fear of getting lost. "A lot of people say it's a little bit trippy," says Pearl. "Amsterdam has been mentioned here today. It's quite a blissful feeling". Indeed, I feel like I'm on holiday, with time to relax and breathe in my surroundings, to connect with the city I live in. It may sound hippish, but the walk certainly seems to be calming my attitude to moving around in London.

How does Pearl explain the ease that I'm feeling, compared to the stress I experience on my commute? "When you get present, when you really look at other people, it's hard not to be appreciative," he says. "And when you get appreciative, there's not much room for judgement."

Pearl says his favourite stories from Street Wisdom involve people finding inspiration to take a big step in life. There's the man who was depressed for two years after his mother's death, who found his mood lifted by the walk. One woman who knew her marriage had to end managed to

pluck up the courage to call her husband. Others have decided on new career paths, or retirement plans.

For me, the takeaways from my walk are evident. I've since ditched my smartphone when walking – no checking emails, no listening to podcasts – and instead try to appreciate the life around me. And, despite the best efforts of the Beast from the East, my commutes have been less stressful for it. "That's really what I want," Pearl beams, "that people can do it anywhere, anytime, and turn ordinary situations into powerful situations."