

## My time as a carpet cleaner with our church maintenance company in Oakland

Sam Harley  
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When I joined in Oakland, as a spiritually open, vegetarian introvert and empath, I wasn't much use street witnessing in the city. I could not keep my spiritual feet on the ground at all. I was way too sensitive to the energy and emotions of everyone around me, and could barely manage to speak coherently. And liquid breakfast and lunch fast until you found a guest pretty much guaranteed that I was out in the cosmos somewhere.

The solution, it turned out, was to do carpet cleaning with the maintenance company that

Oakland ran out of the warehouse that also housed Project Volunteer. Actually, before I went to my first evening program at Hearst St, I went carpet cleaning to pay for my way to the workshop. I had about \$19 on me at the time.

Mikey Sommers, Alan Jessen, Russel Alan and a few others ran the office, along with my spiritual parent, Larry Bear. I know that's not how you spell it, but there's a good reason for it. And if you ask me nicely, I still won't tell you what it is.

We got in the van, and off we went to the first job, singing all the way. Larry built the tempo up to a fever pitch as we pulled in. Then we prayed, choo-choo-powered and started unloading.

We had a wooden ramp we set up and rolled out the shampooer (a floor buffer with a bristly brush and a tank for shampoo) and the steam machine (beasty wheeled thing with two giant urns, like a huge coffee machine) along with the wand (a huge heavy vacuum head with hoses for hot water and wastewater). Not unlike a football team heading out, each one had an assignment and we hit the ground running.

One person on setup, moving the furniture to one side of the room. Another person edging, using a bucket with a little soapy water and a big brush, scrubbing up the areas where the machines couldn't get to. This while buckets were filled with water and soap and poured into the shampooer, and buckets of hot water were poured into the steam machine's clean tank.

The shampooer went first. The machine was a handle angling down to a disc on the ground, which held a circular rotating brush. Ours was the stiffest kind of bristle, cut short so that it had maximum scrub action. There was an art to shampooing, as anyone who has used a floor buffer can attest to. If you tilted the handle up, the top bit the carpet and scooted rapidly to the right. If you pushed the handle down, it zoomed to the left. If you held it level, it would scrub in place. There was a rhythm to learn: push with your right hip, give a tug on the soap handle, send the brush counterclockwise against where it wants to go (maximum scrub action), bring it around in a circle, half step to the side, do it again. It was a dance you could, and should do all night. Don't slip on the cord, you're walking backwards towards where you're plugged in.

Once the first section is shampooed, the steamer moves in. Waste hose over your shoulder, you drag the heavy wand backwards over the shampooed carpet, releasing hot water that shoots through little jets into

the carpet before the maw of the heavy vacuum head (called the wand, I guess like big guys are called Tiny) sucked the dirty suds out of the carpet.

After a certain point you pause to refill the hot water tank and empty the waste tank. Larry loved to call first time customers over to show the yunk we just pulled out of their carpet. It was truly a murky sludge that came out.

As soon as one section was shampooed and steamed, it was time to put furniture back on that side, and clear the other side of the room. Once the whole carpet was cleaned, we put little foil squares under the tables and chairs to keep them from staining on the wet carpet.

We hit the ground running, and as the restaurants, bars, shops and offices we were cleaning were just closing up when we came in, we had a high energy level compared to the people working there.

I remember coming up to a clothing store in a San Diego mall just as they were rolling the security door down. I trotted up and rolled underneath it, gave them a shock.

There was a crew of four or five guys who were getting extra hours to move the clothing racks. This carpet had never been cleaned, the owners thought they'd just replace it when it got too dirty. Larry persuaded them to try cleaning it.

Once half the floor was cleared, we started shampooing and the store crew attacked the pizza their manager bought for them. I was on steamer, and as I made my first pass with the wand I was astonished. The brown carpet turned out to be tomato red! The other half of the store was brown, then a soapy brown mush where it was shampooed, then a bright tomato red stripe where the wand just went. On I went, turning the carpet a color they hadn't seen in years.

There was a beach house in Malibu, one Sunday morning, where we had to pound on the door for several minutes before someone came to the door. "What y'all want?" "We're here to clean the carpets." "Say what?" "We're here to clean the carpets. Here's the order." "Can y'all come back in 3 or 4 hours?" "We have to do it now, we've got other jobs lined up." "I don't live here, but I guess y'all come in. Help yourself to drinks." The place was covered in ashtrays, empty bottles, the tables were covered in half consumed drinks. It looked like quite a party. The man went into a bedroom and closed the door. We got to work. As we cleaned, people started stumbling out of rooms and into the kitchen or bathroom. Carl, who was a roadie for Robon Trower before he joined the family, told us that some of the people there were the cast of 'What's Happening?', a tv sitcom.

We were cleaning a bank in LA on a Sunday morning. I was in the lobby and asked Carl to push the button to open the gate to the teller's area. He fumbled around and found the button. Minutes later I glanced outside to see a man in a black uniform, black ball cap, dancing sideways across the parking lot with a shotgun in his hand. He flattened himself against the wall by the front door and was followed by several other men in black.

They burst in. "LAPD! Freeze! What's going on here?" I said, "We're just cleaning the carpets here." Carl was frozen in the tellers' area with a vacuum nozzle in his hand. "Drop that! Right now!" "It's a vacuum!" "DROP IT! DO IT! RIGHT NOW! DROP IT!" with several shotguns now pointed at him, Carl put the vacuum nozzle down.

"We got a silent alarm the place was being robbed." "What? We're just cleaning.....oh..... hey, Carl? Did you hit another button when you opened the gate for me?" "Yeah, nothing happened when I hit the first one." "Oh."

The contact person for the bank had showed us how to buzz the gate open, but they hadn't mentioned the silent alarm button. The one that summoned the LAPD bank holdup squad. Who arrived full of adrenaline, ready for a shootout with some heavily-armed carpet cleaners.

Other highlights: cleaning office sofas with a hand wand in the IBM office on Wilshire, late one night. Only one person could work at a time, so we decided one would read something inspirational while the other worked. I was scrubbing away and Serge Brosseau, a brother from Quebec like me, was on his knees leaning over the couch reading from Victory Over Communism at the top of his voice, to be heard over the roaring of the steamer, in his French Canadian accent. Some hapless IBM employee who hadn't seen the notice about carpet cleaners coming in at 11 pm, wandered in to ask why we were shouting about communism in strange accents while he was trying to work.

I said something lame like 'We're studying. He's just keeping me from getting bored while I work.'

We usually had permission to help ourselves to sodas when cleaning restaurants at night, so we'd take a soda break halfway through the job, usually around 1 or 2 am. My crew boss at the time, Bill Starr, was a tall, sleepy looking guy with a dry and slow manner. One night he had prepared a tray of drinks for us, and was praying deeply before blowing on them three times. His tall frame was bent way over, his nose almost in the fizzing soda, his eyes reverently closed, his lips murmuring, when one of the restaurant night crew came out and caught sight of him. I watched his 'what the heck is this?' look, knowing that I couldn't say anything to break Bill's concentration.

The Chinese restaurants didn't miss anything if we nibbled some almonds or cashews in the kitchen. We'd take our lunch break around 3 am, sitting on the floor eating our PBJs. I wrote my mom to tell her I was eating in some of the best restaurants in San Francisco and LA.

One hotel in Palm Springs was truly heartbreaking to work at. We were under strict orders never to witness on the job or give out that we were connected with the Creative Community Project or the 'Moonies'. This motel owner sat around the pool drinking with his friends, but as soon as we showed up he started following us around. "What are you guys into? You always have this look of love in your eyes, and him, he's always smiling. What's your secret?" "We just like cleaning carpets." "C'mon! You can tell me! Why're you so happy? What, are you gay? I don't care, I just want to know! Really. What are you guys into?"

The carpet cleaning weekends were quite the challenge. The sales team would try to pack in as many jobs as possible. back to back Sometimes there'd be breaks of an hour or two between jobs, but some weekends you'd start Friday night and work straight through till Sunday morning without a break, driving between jobs. One time we were coming across the Oakland Bay Bridge on a Sunday morning singing an Oakland song, and the brother in the shotgun seat blinked out and sang, with his eyes shut, a whole new verse of the song that I'd never heard before and have never heard since. It fit perfectly, but for the life of me I never could remember it because I was too busy pounding the dashboard to stay awake long enough to drive us back to the center.

This was perfect training for MFT, as I found out when I started fundraising in Kentucky the next January. The schedule was more regular than carpet cleaning, the song sessions were shorter and the product was lighter than a steam machine or a bucket of soapy water.