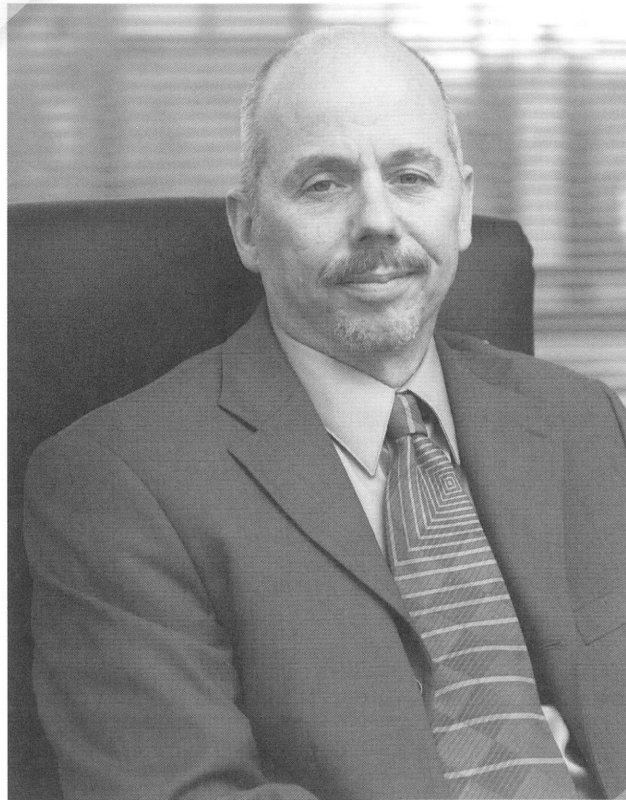


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# Ed Blackburn

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*“All things and beings are interconnected and all acts of compassion flow into a mighty river of effort.”*



When he was five, Ed Blackburn had an epiphany. Lying on his lawn in Hawthorne, California, looking up at the clouds passing by, he felt dampness on his back from the rain the night before. Ed rolled over to look deep into the grass and saw several insects, each existing beyond the realm of everyday perception. "I knew the clouds above and the secret world below were interconnected," Ed says. "But I could also see that the bugs did not know about the clouds. In that moment, I felt what I would now call compassion for them."

Now the executive director of Central City Concern, a nonprofit agency in Portland, Oregon, dedicated to serving those affected by homelessness, poverty and addiction, Ed has made the study and practice of compassion his life's work. He credits a Catholic nun he met as a teenager with stimulating his desire to pursue a life of service. Deeply committed to the social doctrine of preference for the poor, she introduced him to the teachings of Christ and taught Ed to consider the vulnerable and marginalized around the globe as brothers and sisters deserving of love and care.

Later Ed studied the teachings of Thomas Merton, one of the most influential Catholic authors of the twentieth century. A Trappist monk, Merton was a strong proponent of inter-religious dialogue who engaged in spiritual discourse with many teachers, among them His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and the Japanese spiritual teacher D. T. Suzuki. Inspired by Merton, Ed went on to study Buddhism and then Judaism under the guidance of a rabbi. "I learned from all my studies the moral imperative of empathizing with the poor and the importance of the community's role in supporting them," Ed says.

Helping those less fortunate emerged as his calling and in 1992, at the age of thirty-five, Ed accepted a position as director of the Hooper Detox Center, an addiction recovery program operated by Central City Concern. One morning early in his tenure, he came to work and saw a heroin-addicted and homeless man named David being

treated as he lay on the concrete floor. Though David had been to the Center many times before, he had repeatedly refused to participate in an addiction recovery program. He had lost both legs to chronic infections and on that morning was in a state of hypothermia. As a paramedic worked to find a vein strong enough to accept an intravenous line, Ed felt compelled by a higher power to get down on his knees beside David. "I whispered in his ear that if he didn't get sober and into safe housing he would be dead within a month," says Ed. "He opened his eyes to look at me. I told him to remember that God loves him. Our eyes locked for a moment and tears ran down his face."

Visiting the Center a few weeks later, a smiling man in a wheelchair welcomed him. It was David, three weeks into recovery and looking ten years younger. That encounter with David taught Ed never to give up on anyone.

Ed's promotion to the agency's lead role, where he oversees a budget of \$30 million, nearly five hundred employees, thirteen hundred units of housing, a health program that served seventy thousand patients last year alone, and a wide range of recovery programs and employment services — is a testament to his outstanding business and leadership skills. But Ed is quick to point out that his success also requires the kind of discernment and thoughtfulness that comes from a practice of study, prayer and meditation.

"I still reflect daily on my awareness that all things and beings are interconnected and that all acts of compassion flow into a mighty river of effort," Ed says. "That river connects us to all beings through all time in all places and deeply enriches our lives."