

Reflection from Deborah Carlson-Doom at Huether Conference 2019

When I was asked to share my reflections from my volunteer time at this morning's prayer, many memories from 25 years ago came flooding back. I was a volunteer for 2 years and lived and worked in the South Bronx.

There were many themes that encompassed my volunteer experience including community, growth, humility, lifelong friendships, and social justice. I keep remembering, however, one of the first days of morning prayer in my community. I can't recall who led prayer that day, but they reflected on seeing Jesus in the people we served, worked, and lived with and being Jesus to those same people. This concept is not necessarily novel or profound, but it influenced me deeply and continued to do so over and over throughout my years as a volunteer and for the subsequent 25 years.

I think when I was a volunteer and first heard this prayer, the idea of the divine in every person was part of what moved me. This relationship that we have with all the people around us is how we see and share God. And in moments of struggle, I returned to this concept of Jesus in each of us, his divinity a part of us, over and over again.

Melrose Community was attached to the Immaculate Conception church and school. We lived in an old convent and there was a new convent and rectory next door. One afternoon in the early summer, a man knocked on our door. He lived in the neighborhood and was having some troubles in his marriage. He had gone to the rectory which had three priests living in it and had about 10 bedrooms. They were not able to help him and suggested he come talk to us. Ironically, our community was packed full as we had students from a college program, several volunteers, and several brothers living in every bedroom. After meeting with the man, Brother Ed and Brother Bill realized the man left very early for work each day he could sleep in our chapel on a mattress we moved in at night and then moved out early in the morning before prayer. He ended up staying with us--sharing meals and a home--for a little over a week until he was able to return to his home.

One of my jobs at Highbridge was teaching GED classes. I had one class that met every Tuesday and Thursday night. The class was large and

almost all students came every night. One student, Archie, was in his late 50s, was HIV positive, and was determined to get his HS diploma. Archie was hard of hearing, and consequently spoke very loudly. He also had a lot of opinions that he shared with the class and sometimes other students teased him or rolled their eyes at his monologues. As students advanced in the class, it became clear that many students would soon be ready to test, and there was a great testing spot at the College of New Rochelle. Many students didn't have a way to get there, so we I checked out a Highbridge van and we all drove to the together. I waited for the students to complete their tests, and when they came out they had a story for me. The testing proctor was not kind to these adult students from the South Bronx and gave the directions tersely. For the essay portion of the GED, you had to hand write the essay in ink. When the test ended, Archie went to turn in his tests in the pile and the proctor exclaimed, you can't turn this in--you wrote the essay in pencil; you didn't follow the directions, etc. There were many people testing besides my students and, for once, Archie was silent and shamed. Then all the rest of my students spoke up. They explained that Archie couldn't hear well and he hadn't heard the directions and she wasn't being fair. After some convincing, she accepted the essay from Archie. Although Archie did not pass the test that particular time, he was able to turn in his test and leave with his dignity and the support of his classmates.

Long after my time ended as a volunteer, my husband and I ended up living and teaching in Bemidji, MN for several years at a public charter school. Another teacher and I led a trip with 12 students to the Brother David Darst Center in Chicago. High school students like to do work and help people--to feel like they are making a difference and giving back; they want to be active and cook, or hand out food at a food bank, or work in a school. A part of the program at the David Darst Center was to recognize how much our own lives are enriched and transformed by doing service work. One night we went to a men's homeless shelter. When we arrived, the director explained to my students and to us that our job was not to cook, or serve food, or clean, or check people in. It was to bear witness and get to know the men who stayed at the shelter. As the men started to arrive, our students stood together in a few clumps looking terrified and uncertain how to begin their night. I am confident that some of them thought this was going to be the longest couple of hours of their lives. And then one guest, who was used to volunteers being around, started talking to one student. And fifteen minutes later, we had 12 students and 2

teachers spread around the gym, sitting next to men's sleeping spots, talking and learning from one another.

And now, I live in St Paul with my family and serve as an assistant principal at a school for special education students. And I find myself considering that I haven't worked in a Catholic or Lasallian institution for 25 years. My children attend a Catholic school and we belong to a Catholic church, but much of our family conversation about religion and spirituality happens outside of the confines of the church environment. And yet I return over and over to the Jesus in each of us. Only now, at 46, the grace and gift of that analogy is not the divinity of Jesus in each of us, rather it is the humanity of Jesus in each of us. Nearly every memory or story from volunteering includes messy and complicated situations and details. If divinity were the essential component of these stories, the priests would have allowed the man from the neighborhood to stay in one of their extra rooms, Archie would have miraculously heard the directions and passed the test; and my students would have not felt terror at meeting a group of homeless men. But in each of these stories, humanity wins out--and while it's uncomfortable, uncertain, doesn't follow all the rules, and feels overwhelming, it is authentic and deep and real.

When my messy and imperfect human self is present to another person's messy and imperfect human self without pretense or judgement, that is seeing and being Jesus. That is grace. And so when I sit across a table from a parent who is suffering so deeply because their child can no longer attend a regular school, or when I sit with a staff member who is brought to tears because one of their students was taken away strapped down in an ambulance and they don't know what's going to happen to them, I allow myself to be fully human and fully present. I do not have the answers. (I don't need to have a convincing answer.) I cannot conjure a miracle or resolve the situation. But for those minutes I can share their pain, create a place where they are heard and loved, and we can be Jesus to each other. This knowledge is one of my most precious gifts from my time as a Lasallian volunteer and I am so grateful for it.