

SHARED VISIONS

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Volume Ten, Number One

— A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers — presented by the people who bring you *Connections* —

"Why Am I Here?"

by Keith Thomas

Marianist Voluntary Service Communities (MVSC)

"What makes a person want to volunteer?" I was repeatedly asked that question while serving as a Marianist volunteer in Cincinnati, Ohio. I served for a year, working at People Working Cooperatively (PWC), a non-profit construction company that provided emergency home repairs to low-income homeowners. To be certain, I worked with exceptional people at PWC. But everyone that I got to know there, no matter who they were, what their background was, or what department they worked in, asked me the question: "Why do you volunteer?" A short time into my year of service, I realized how exceptional volunteers/lay missionaries are to everyone else. The concept of living with the poor in spiritual communities is foreign to many who share our culture. This however, does not make the question that others so frequently ask any less legitimate. Let me explain why I became a volunteer.

During a lay missionary year, challenges come in many

forms — learning to find fulfillment through meeting your own needs and not wants; learning to share community with someone who is really a good person but who simply has a different view of life than you; the difficulty of fighting against injustices that you know you just can't change, etc.... These challenges are inherent to a volunteer year, and they have a powerful impact on its meaning. It's my experience that how one faces these challenges is tied to how the volunteer answers the question others are so wont to ask: "Why are you volunteering?" I say this, because ultimately, every volunteer asks the same question, "Why am I here?" In that vein, allow me to share my own experience, and perhaps, just perhaps, a little insight.

My story begins with my final semester of graduate school. My graduate experience was solitary, tiresome, draining, and in a very personal sense, dark. But during that last semester I discovered Bruce Springsteen's *Ghost of Tom Joad*. Tom Joad is an album of stark, dark, social justice ballads where migrant workers, drug dealers and illegal immigrants from the Southwest tell their stories. Normally, one might think that such grim tales would not be recommended listening for someone already in a depressive situation. However, the more I listened to Tom

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Welcome new volunteers! As you settle into your service placements and communities, we hope the stories and activities in this issue and the theme of listening bring you closer to one another, to those you serve and to God, during this transitional time in your life.



Former volunteers Megan and Keith share stories of struggles and triumphs as they learned new ways of listening.....pp. 1-3
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Learning to Listen

by Megan Radek

Salesian Lay Missioners

When I came to Ecuador to work with street kids as a Salesian Lay Missioner, I didn't really know what I was getting into. I think I had some vague images from TV of barefoot, hungry kids running around shantytowns. But by the time I arrived in Guayaquil, I had started to realize some of the challenges we would face. We were two North American women, whose skin color and accents stuck out a mile away. The kids we were working with were boys and young men who had come from extreme poverty. Many of them had grown up on the streets,

where for years they dealt with hunger or cold by sniffing glue, which literally put holes into their brains. Each had a story of how he had arrived on the street. Some had begun working at a young age to support their families, others had been kicked out by parents or stepparents, and for others the danger of life on the street was a price they were willing to pay for freedom from abuse at home.

Some of the kids won our hearts immediately with their smiles and their obvious desire to be loved. But other ones were much more difficult. They weren't the cute faces we had envisioned. They had had to be tough to survive. They were not about to trust anyone who just walked into

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Joad, the more I was drawn to the music. I was amazed at the power of Springsteen's ballads, and captivated at the ability of a man, who lives in a 14 million dollar Beverly Hills mansion, to speak for those in our society who cannot speak for themselves. Indeed, Sister Helen Prejean, whose book inspired the film, *Dead Man Walking*, observes that in the *Ghost of Tom Joad*, Springsteen put the Gospel of Matthew, Ch. 25 to music. In that light, it is fitting, I guess, that listening to Tom Joad was what first led me to think of volunteering.

But the decision whether or not to volunteer was a difficult one. When I visited Cincinnati to interview for the MVSC, I sat up one night, unable to sleep, being kept awake by the sounds of gangster rap and drug dealing from the street below. I realized then that the underclass of Tom Joad was right outside my window. Once this was clear, my decision to volunteer was made.

"The reason 'why' I volunteered was that I was listening to that inner voice."

But why? I'm not 100% sure except to say that many factors influence our decisions. However, there are times when we encounter things, be they people, spoken words, music, pieces of art, or experiences that resonate with something deep within our souls. When at peace, I have found that this resonance acts as a sort of 'inner-voice' of faith and emotion. God's will, I believe, is made known to us through these inner voices. The reason 'why' I volunteered was that I was listening to that inner voice.

Most people probably would not describe their decision to volunteer in such a dramatic fashion. But, in some form or fashion at some point, hopefully, everyone can hear this sort of inner voice. A volunteer year is difficult. There are challenges and struggles, sometimes on a daily basis. And there are times when you wonder "why am I here?" When you confront moments like these, and you're unsure what to do, let me offer this advice: Listen to your inner voice. +

Questions for Keith's article:

- Many people don't understand why a person would consider volunteering. Why did you decide to volunteer? How did people, art forms, or experiences in your life influence your decision? Give a brief, two-sentence response to share with others; take time later to write a longer journal entry for yourself.
- Keith thought that how one deals with the challenges that one faces during the volunteer year powerfully impacts its meaning and helps the volunteer to understand why he/she is volunteering in the first place. What challenges seem to be facing you? Your community? What are some ways you find yourself addressing these challenges?
- Recall an encounter or experience that resonated deep within your soul. How did listening to your 'inner voice' in that situation affect your life? How might you use this listening process to open yourself to others around you?

Excerpts from...

*The Ghost of Tom Joad**

by Bruce Springsteen

Shelter line stretchin' round the corner
Welcome to the new world order
Families sleepin' in their cars in the Southwest
No home no job no peace no rest

The highway is alive tonight
But nobody's kiddin' nobody about where it goes
I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light Searchin' for the ghost of Tom Joad

Waitin' for when the last shall be first and the first shall be last...

Now Tom said, "Mom, wherever there's a cop beatin' a guy
Wherever a hungry newborn baby cries
Wherever there's somebody fightin' for a place to stand
Or a decent job or a helpin' hand
Wherever somebody's strugglin' to be free
Look in their eyes Mom you'll see me."

* A lead character of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*

Mexican

Hmmmm... Ice cream or a carrot stick? Vegetables or Sweets? What kind of foods have you or your community been eating this year? Well, here's an idea that's both healthy and delicious...

We bet you didn't know how easy it is to make...

Salsa is easy and fun to make, inexpensive, healthy and delicious. You'll be chopping a lot of vegetables, so this might be a good dish to make with your housemates.

Ingredients: 2 lg white onions, 3 12oz. cans whole peeled tomatoes, either 5 serrano or jalapeno peppers, half a bunch of cilantro, 1 lime, 3 cloves of garlic and 2 Tbsp of salt. **Preparation:** Peel and dice onions.

Drain away juice from tomatoes and dice thoroughly. Chop 5 of either type of hot pepper into very small pieces, a bit more or less depending on how spicy you want your salsa. Serranos are a bit spicier, but have a more unique flavor. Rinse and chop cilantro leaves. Combine everything in a bowl. Mince garlic and mix in. Slice lime and squeeze juice into salsa. Pour in leftover tomato juice. Add salt to taste. Stir. (This authentic Mexican salsa makes a great addition to all sorts of foods. Try it with pasta, tacos, tortilla chips, pizza, soups, burritos, burgers, rice ... you name it!)

Homemade Salsa!

¡Buen Provecho!



their lives, no matter what good intentions we had. During my first few weeks, in between playing soccer and teaching classes, I spent much of my free time trying to decipher the colorful new Spanish phrases I kept hearing and trying to talk kids out of fights. It felt like we were always busy, constantly doing something, jumping from one crisis to the next. At times it was exhilarating, but there were moments of incredible frustration when a kid with whom we had spent hours working left to return to the street, and it felt like all the time and energy we had spent weren't worth anything. At those times I often struggled to find ways to get a few minutes away to sit in silence or play the guitar until I felt a little more at peace. Although I needed the time away, it was hard to give myself permission to leave the kids, even for a little while. It was hard to remember to take the time out to pray when so many needs seemed so urgent. Often, it wasn't until I was worn out and totally discouraged that I would remember to take the time to sit in the chapel and rediscover the strength and hope I was supposed to be sharing. It was so hard to be still when there was so much work to be done. But the crises and the hurt that we saw each day reminded me how important it was to have that time to be with God and to remember why I had come to Ecuador in the first place.

In my work teaching, I sometimes felt that I wasn't connecting with the teens at the shelter. I would ask them about themselves, and answer the questions they had about America. But no matter how much I tried to start up conversations, I felt like things often remained on a superficial level. The kids weren't quite sure what to make of us, or if we could be trusted. I was frustrated by how little I could do. I kept trying to see some evidence that our work mattered. I could teach basic math and I could play games with them, but was any of that really going to make a difference? I wanted to be doing more to help.

One of the boys in a class I taught was a sixteen-year-old named Fernando. He had spent much of his life on the street, struggling with glue addiction, and had been in the shelter for the past few years. He was doing much better but still struggled to overcome the hurt from his home life. When vacation time came, all the kids went home for brief visits with their families as part of an attempt to reestablish contact and prepare them for life after the shelter. Fernando was not willing to go home, but also didn't feel that he could tell anyone about his problems there. After most of the kids had left for the week, word came back that Fernando was sleeping at the bus terminal, where many of his old friends spent their time.

On my way home that night, I decided to stop by the bus terminal and see how Fernando was doing. After wandering around a bit, I found him. His new clothes had gotten pretty dirty, and he looked rather ashamed to see me. Now that I'd found him, I didn't quite know how to reach out. Still on the run from a fast-paced day, I

wanted to be able to do something. I couldn't bring him back to the shelter. I couldn't offer him any concrete help. I couldn't think of anything to say, though I desperately wanted to make him feel better. So I just sat down on the floor next to him. I didn't say much at all. Gradually, he started talking. He had spent the past day with his old friends. He had been sniffing glue again, and felt awful. He opened up and told me the reasons he didn't want to go home. He described how tempted he was at that moment to sniff some more. I didn't know how to make that temptation go away, so I told him I would stay until the need to sniff had passed. We sat, mostly in silence, for the next couple of hours.

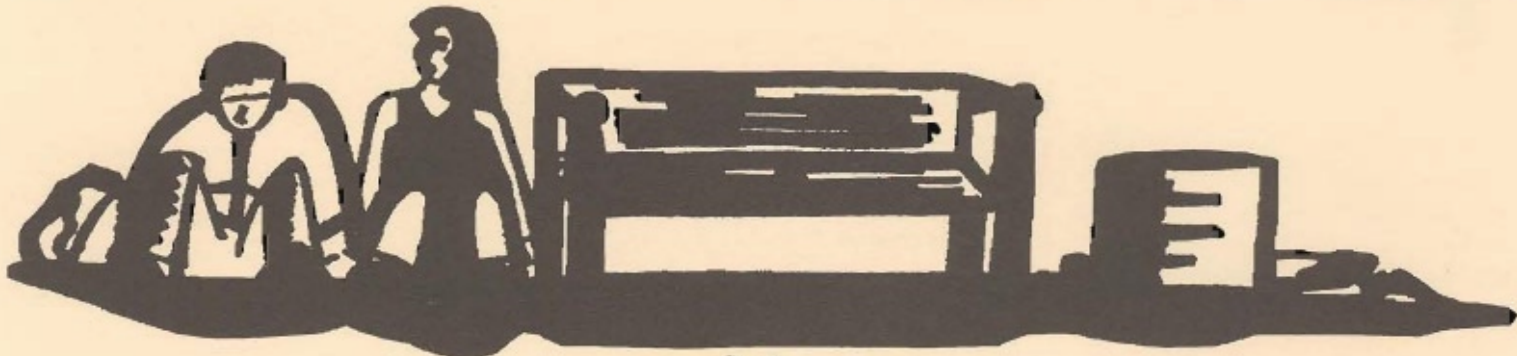
During my training, one element of the Salesian spirit was repeated over and over again: be present. We kept hearing that somehow, just being there, day in and day out, was perhaps the most important part of our mission. That idea sounded so reassuring: our work didn't depend on specific skills, but on a commitment to be with the kids. But somehow, in my day-to-day work

volunteering, I'd gotten so caught up in getting things done for the kids I worked with that I'd forgotten to just be a part of their lives, and to take time to listen to them. That night with Fernando reminded me how important that could be. I didn't have any services to offer him, no great advice on how to make things better. All I could do was listen, and be with him. But for that one night, it was enough. +

"I'd gotten so caught up in getting things done for the kids I worked with that I'd forgotten to just be a part of their lives, and to take time to listen to them."

Questions for Megan's Article:

- Megan often felt she wasn't really helping or connecting with the children in the shelter where she worked. Think of three or four clients with whom you do not easily communicate. List different ways you may be able to connect with them more closely.
- Paying attention to the needs and feelings of those in your community can seem next to impossible at the end of a busy or frustrating day. What efforts do you, or could you, make to listen to the needs and be present to those in your community? In your workplace?
- Sometimes dedicated volunteers/missioners may be reluctant to give themselves permission to take care of themselves physically, emotionally, intellectually or religiously. When you listen to your own heart, what needs come to mind? What steps can you take to meet these needs while volunteering?
- Megan occasionally provided herself with a few moments of peace, sitting in the chapel or playing her guitar. Where are some of your hideouts or safe harbors where you can drop anchor and rediscover your sense of peace?



Listening to... your fellow volunteers

The Great Volunteer Permission Slip Giveaway



In listening to those around you, what have you learned about them? What might your fellow volunteers need? Consider each person in your community. What is one "permission slip" that would help each person in your group?



Sometimes, by being given special "permission," a person becomes more open and goes beyond his or her present limitations.

Instructions:

- ✓ Use the slips below and make copies as needed. Fill out at least one for each volunteer in your community.
- ✓ If you are not sure a particular volunteer actually needs what you're thinking of, make the permission slip conditional. Try saying, "You seem to me to be..." and, "I wonder if you could use...?"
- ✓ Either anonymously or during a community meeting, deliver the slips to the appropriate persons. In a spirit of respect and light-heartedness, allow each person to reflect on the new permissions he or she has been granted. Share reactions to the slips as desired.
- ✓ On your own, write a permission slip for yourself to help you go beyond your present limitations.

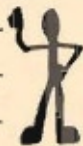


Volunteer's Guilt-Free Permission Slip

A fellow volunteer hereby gives you,

(name) _____,

one guilt-free permission to: _____



Volunteer's Guilt-Free Permission Slip

A fellow volunteer hereby gives you,

(name) _____,

one guilt-free permission to: _____

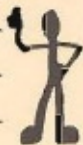


Volunteer's Guilt-Free Permission Slip

A fellow volunteer hereby gives you,

(name) _____,

one guilt-free permission to: _____



Volunteer's Guilt-Free Permission Slip

A fellow volunteer hereby gives you,

(name) _____,

one guilt-free permission to: _____



Listening to Songs that Inspire

Keith was motivated by the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen's Tom Joad album. Listen to one of the album's songs, if available. Ask each person to share a justice or freedom song that has been personally inspiring. As you listen to each song, discuss the social justice issues you hear being raised by the music. Share a question or response that stirs within you as you listen.



Identify & Share Your Social Justice Issues

Some social justice issues that personally matter to me:

Ways I deal with these issues:

What I have learned in the process:

Focus on Hope...

Spokes-Persons for the Voiceless

- ✓ On a large sheet of paper, draw a circle with "spokes" radiating out from the center (see example below).
- ✓ Identify one common social justice issue that your community is facing (perhaps in the surrounding neighborhood or town) and write it in the center of the circle. As a group, brainstorm resources you can access to help you to better understand and address the issue. Write each resource between the "spokes" of the circle. Tap into information at a diocesan peace and justice office, on websites, at your service placements, the library or among people you know. Each person research one of the resources surrounding the issue. Meet back in a week or two to share what you have discovered within the community.

Taking it one step further...

Knowledge is power!

- ✓ Plan a mini-retreat or volunteer community event for a speaker, video, or teach-in to help educate the group on the topic(s) you've chosen.

Think globally, act locally!

- ✓ What ways have you discovered to become part of the solution, such as events, programs, or efforts in your area dealing with the issue?





Biblical Reflection: Jesus Challenged Us to Greater Listening

Jesus urged us not to make judgments about other people (Lk. 6: 36-38; Rom. 2: 1-11) and left the job of judgment to God alone. This gave us a new vision of how we need to relate to one another. The common approach was to love "neighbors only," but Jesus extended the Old Law and said to love "enemies also" (Mt. 5: 43-44).

What's been your experience listening to others "non-judgmentally?" Describe any relationship you have

had which incorporates this approach to listening. Share with your fellow volunteers or a friend how such a friendship(s) has influenced you.

Have you seen anyone unfavorably judged because they appear poorly clothed, without housing, without food? Check out Jesus' vision:

I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink... Lord, when did we see you hungry? (Mt. 25:35)

Shared Visions

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The mission of the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center:

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church. Our goal is to support lay volunteers *before, during and after* their term of service. Local Pallotti Centers are located in Boston, Memphis, St. Louis and Sacramento. The National Office is in Washington, DC.

The Centers take their inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary.

Shared Visions' goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: Intellectual Growth, Emotional and Physical Health, Leadership and Prayer.



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