

SHARED VISIONS

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

The Typical American

by Susan Driscoll

Associate Missionaries of the Assumption

While working as a lay missionary in Cochabamba, Bolivia, I was inevitably the object of many stereotypes. We ALL have stereotypes of people, especially when we know nothing about them. Because it is a normal human thought-behavior, this stereotyping occurs everywhere in the world. I want to share one way in which I was stereotyped, how this affected me and how I learned to deal with it.

As a Catholic volunteer educator, I was assigned to live in a community with other volunteers from various countries and religious faiths and with 30 youths known as "street boys." At first I was glad to hear of this communal living situation because I have always been interested in getting to know people of different faiths and backgrounds. This time, however, it was different.

My housemate and fellow volunteer, who I'll call Lynn, was a woman of about 33 and a social worker from the Netherlands. Upon meeting her the first day in the apartment, I thought how great it was going to be to work and live with someone from

another part of the world. Before long, Lynn and I learned that we had things in common. We both like the music artist "Dave Matthews," Merengue-dancing, vegetarian pasta dishes and speaking Spanish. However, our differences revealed themselves at unexpected moments like bolts of lightning. In retrospect, I believe our conflicts were magnified because we were in a foreign land and "two fish out of water." I'll never know exactly why things happened the way that they did. Nevertheless, I think that the natural tendency for people to make stereotypes played a significant role.

I couldn't imagine how two people with the good intentions to work with some of the most oppressed people in the world could find themselves in the midst of mutual misunderstandings that led to resentment and pain. I felt that Lynn had this image of me as a know-it-all "Americano." She reacted to things that I did and said in ways that, to me, were exaggerated and antagonizing. One of my first afternoons working in the home for abandoned teenage girls, Lynn and I were tutoring the girls in math and reading. Because I was new and

"Our differences revealed themselves at unexpected moments like bolts of lightning."

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Volunteers... listen up! It's Advent, when we "make straight the way for the Lord" by clearing away injustices. But don't volunteers do this all year around?

Read how volunteers Susan and Ryan struggled to "make straight" their volunteer paths by handling stereotypes and standing up for themselves. pp. 1-3

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Speaking Up and Finding Happiness

by Ryan Downs

Jesuit Volunteer Corps

Volunteers traditionally bring a great deal of flexibility to their placement site. They know few jobs are a "perfect fit" between the organization's needs and the employee's expectations. Ryan's experiences may not be typical of most volunteers. But we asked him to share it for the question it raises about volunteers working more effectively with their site supervisors, with co-workers and housemates.

I remember the day I headed out the door to begin my volunteer service. I was so happy, excited and nervous. I was going to be working at a Teen Center focused towards allowing homeless and at-risk teens to walk in new directions whenever they, themselves, felt ready to do so. I was to be a case-manager. The job description focused on me having, after a month or so of training, up to 15 clients. I was very excited about the Teen Center's mission and the job description.

My first few weeks at the Center were a bit awkward. A few of the full time employees were on vacation so the kitchen and cleaning staffs were in need of help.

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My boss asked me to please help out in the kitchen and also support the cleaning staff in their duties while they were short a few people. While I was doing so I was encouraged to take a few hours out of each day to begin training for my case-manager position. However, it was just too busy to allow me to begin the training. That was frustrating. I expressed my concern to my boss, and she said I would begin my training once the staff was again in full numbers. This delay was a bit bothersome but I realized that my cooking and cleaning duties were needed for the teens. So I continued to do so.

After a few weeks, the cooking and cleaning crews were fully staffed and yet nothing was changing. So, once again I approached my boss with my concern, reiterated the original job description I was supposed to have and what that job entailed. She seemed thoughtful about the situation and put me at ease by telling me that things would change. However, they didn't! Several further attempts at stating my concern proved to be of no avail.

I thought to myself, "Yeah, I could continue at the Center and make a contribution, but will I be fully happy? Did I travel all the way across the country to be unhappy with my work? How much will this dissatisfaction affect my entire experience as a volunteer?" After soul searching and talking with my community, friends and family, I decided to leave my placement for another. In retrospect, it was the right decision to make.

The word spread around to my fellow volunteers that I had left my placement. Many were curious as to why I did so. I remember the first retreat we all had together. It included every volunteer in our volunteer program serving in California and

Arizona, about 130 in all. That weekend a few people came to me asking about my having left the Teen Center. It turned out that I was not alone in my dissatisfaction. There were others who felt they were not being treated fairly when it came to being a volunteer and some employers seemed to have misunderstandings about what it meant for us to be volunteers.

What this made me realize was that volunteers could be unfavorably pre-judged by others. I began to realize how easy it could be to be stereotyped as a volunteer. For example, some employers may expect volunteers to always say "yes" to whatever job they are assigned. This can be very frustrating. Like most starting volunteers, I had high energy, vibrancy and a desire to make a difference in others' lives; but, I was also human and could become burnt out in my work. With no intention to create an unnecessary fuss, my experience at the Teen Center motivated me to give other volunteers a "heads up" and to alert them to this potential problem.

Most volunteers are well prepared and know they need to be flexible in tackling their jobs, have a sense of humor and strive for balance. It was helpful for me to keep in mind that although I was a volunteer, I was also an employee with a job description and some natural limits. When things at work were troubling me I would ask myself: What would I do in this situation if I were a fully paid employee? As an employee, how would I react differently? I placed more emphasis on not allowing myself to be taken advantage of.

Once I began my new placement I made sure I found time to sit down with my employer and fellow staff to introduce myself. I told


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Celebrating God's "Presents"

Advent is a time when we prepare to celebrate God made real, God among us, in the person of Jesus. Between now and Christmas, you and your fellow volunteers could prepare for Christ's coming by sharing the moments in which each one of you recognizes God's presence among us. Here's a simple activity to do with your fellow volunteers in your community or place of service.

 Decorate a small cardboard box using colored paper, markers, photos, cutouts from newspapers or magazines, or whatever other supplies are available. Cut a small slit in the box's lid. Cut up a bunch of small slips of Christmas-colored paper.

Between now and Christmas, invite volunteers to make a special effort to be aware of 'God with us,' and briefly describe on the colored pieces of paper moments when they gained some insight or experiencing of that presence. Place the recorded moments / experiences in the decorated box. Encourage each person to make at least two or three additions to the box per week.

Here are a few examples:

- * When you saw one of your housemates or co-workers put the needs of another before their own.
- * How you and a friend opened up and shared stories late into the night.
- * Peace and contentment experienced during a beautiful sunset or snowstorm.
- * An uplifting quote from a book you're reading.
- * A phone call from a close friend you really miss.
- * A moment where you felt very close to God, such as during group prayer or a liturgy with your community.



Choose a time on Christmas day (or right before Christmas if your group can't meet on the 25th) to gather with your fellow volunteers for about an hour. Each person take a turn drawing a slip of paper from the box and reading it aloud to the rest of the group. If everyone agrees, after each slip is read the person who wrote that individual entry can identify his or herself and elaborate on the note. Then, give others a chance to share their reactions and any related thoughts. After all the 'moments of God's presence' are shared, attach a loop of string to them. Hang these new ornaments on your Christmas tree or around the house as a decorative reminder of God's "presents."

them of my passion for being a volunteer and what I hoped for from my year of service. It was important for them to know that my year as a volunteer did not just consist of my job. Rather, the tenants of my volunteer program were also central. Fortunately, the staff responded very well and asked interesting follow up questions about who I was and what I wanted to accomplish. Over time I no longer felt that I was being taken advantage of or stereotyped by my co-workers as the "volunteer" in their program. Because of my willingness to speak up about my needs as a volunteer, my initiation into the second placement site provided a solid foundation for the rest of the year. +

Questions for Ryan's article:

- ☞ Some volunteers have a difficult time saying no. Discuss some of the more typical underlying issues such as wanting to be liked, fear of confrontation, etc. How can you speak up appropriately?
- ☞ Speaking up about individual needs is very difficult to do. Brainstorm positive ways volunteers can approach supervisors, co-workers, housemates, etc. to share their concerns and achieve a positive result.
- ☞ Has your experience at your placement site so far lived up to your expectations? Any disappointments? If so, brainstorm with your housemates how you can improve your situation.

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wanted to get to know the girls, I asked one of them, Maria Elena, in her native Spanish what grade she was in. Lynn immediately replied to me in English, "You ought not ask her that question. She knows she's different from regular kids. She's sensitive to that." I didn't exactly understand Lynn's comment nor did I agree with it. However, I accepted her advice since she had been working with the street girls for four months before I arrived. Since it was my first week, naturally I wanted to ask the girls some

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basic questions. I also knew that my questions would have to be different from those that I would ask a "normal" kid back home. Because I was the rookie volunteer, I thought I should get to know the ropes of how things worked in my new community. Therefore, I asked Lynn, "Would it be alright to ask Maria Elena what her favorite subject is?" I really was not expecting what happened next. She snapped and replied, "Look! If you're going to be a smarty pants with me, I don't have the patience for it!" Trying to keep my composure, I replied, "I was asking a sincere question. I was just trying to be more careful like you said I should." She then went on to tell me that I didn't know the girls at the home the way she did. She said that the girls could get extremely sensitive because they know that they are different and have problems. I later found out that Maria Elena had bitten Lynn earlier that day.

I was expecting many more challenges after this incident. I knew that if I was going to live and work with Lynn, I would need

to deal with our differences. I decided that I wasn't going to be argumentative with her. I felt that she had been stereotyping me as a young, naive, know-it-all American volunteer who went to Bolivia with unrealistic ideals to save the poor children. I was also beginning to realize that Americans do tend to be labeled as being loud, overly confident and narrow-minded when it comes to understanding the world outside of the US.

I had to ask myself a few questions in order to make sense of this. Was it assumed that I was a know-it-all ignoramus of an American because of the fact that I am indeed an American? Was I going to allow myself to be categorized in this way, or was I going to break the stereotype by making an effort to behave in a way that is non-typical of Americans? How was I going to successfully deal with the different people around me without compromising who I really was as a person?

While volunteering in Bolivia, I realized that I needed first to be true to who I was as a person and a human being. In order to keep the peace with Lynn, I tried not to be a "typical American." I don't know if that stereotype was in fact the root of the problem, nor had I ever thought of myself as a "typical American" to begin with. However, by thinking about and tussling with the stereotype I learned to be more humble as a person and as a volunteer in a foreign country. Most of us volunteers wanted to be there to make a difference in the lives of innocent children who, without us and outside help, seemed to have no hope for the future. In order to be successful in my job of helping the youth, I felt I needed to live free from labels and other inter-personal obstacles.

Dealing with people was a part of the everyday work as a volunteer in Bolivia. I couldn't have accomplished the things that I did without the help of others and on-going prayer. I still do not have all the answers to what makes people the complex entities that we are, but I do know that each of us has to be aware of any stereotyping tendencies in ourselves or others, then be humble, patient and tolerant if we want to live together in peace in earth's global village. +

Questions for Susan's article:

- ☞ Why do you think it was easier for Lynn to react defensively and create a stereotype of Susan, than to answer her with understanding? Think of a time when someone in your community or place of service pressed a certain hot button in you and you reacted hastily. What was the underlying issue there?
- ☞ What are some of the stereotypes you have experienced since becoming a volunteer, whether laid on you by others or of your own making about yourself or others? How have you dealt with them?
- ☞ Struggling against stereotypes can be an important part of discovering your real identity and personal values. What are some stereotypes you have experienced in your life or since becoming a volunteer? How have they helped or hindered you in discovering your real identity?
- ☞ Sometimes when people have established trusting relationships, stereotypes may be harmless and humorous. What has been your experience with this?
- ☞ In order to be successful in helping the youth at her school in Bolivia, Susan needed to be free from labels and other inter-personal obstacles. What obstacles get in your way as you try to live up to your full potential as a volunteer?

Advent and Volunteering: On the Road to Christ

*It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said:
"A voice of one crying out in the desert,
'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'" (Matthew 3:3)*

Volunteers work actively to remove the social injustices around them. You fight the good fight and prepare the way for Christ to perform miracles in the people you serve. As volunteers you are also like modern day John the Baptists who, through your visible service and good deeds, are calling the world to make straight its paths.

As a time of hopeful expectation and waiting, Advent evokes the same feeling of uncertainty that a volunteer might experience during the year as they prepare for their future and contemplate the next life step. Advent is also a time of preparing the way. Volunteers, by fighting against social injustice, have concrete opportunities to prepare the way of the Lord to enter into the lives of those they touch .

As adults, we all realize the significance of awaiting the Messiah's coming during Advent even if a bit of child-like excitement for the arrival of Christmas still remains.

Perhaps, with a similar mixture of excitement, anxiety and hope you look toward the future after your volunteer experience. You may be listening expectedly for God's call to help you discern what is the next phase of your life- not knowing, yet hoping and trusting that a plan does exist for you, and that with prayer and patience you will discern the call.

Reflecting on the parallels between your volunteer experiences and Advent may help you find a deeper meaning in this Christmas season, and a deeper meaning in your time of service just when the newness and excitement of those first months wear away.

Discuss with your fellow volunteers or journal privately on the following questions:



Develop this topic. Discuss how these and other volunteer experiences are like Advent in the sense of making straight the way in correcting social injustices that impede the coming of the Messiah into your hearts and into the world around you. What kinds of opportunities to alleviate suffering or social injustice has your volunteer experience provided you? How is this making straight the path?



What ways do you believe you are contributing to the coming of the Messiah into the world, or creating God's reign on earth?



Discuss how the volunteer experience is like Advent in the sense of waiting and expectation. How does waiting for the Christ to arrive compare to waiting to understand more fully God's call in your life?



What role does trust play in your belief in God's plan or promise for you? Discuss the role trust plays in the Advent season as well as in the volunteer experience as a period of personal transition.

UNWRAPPING YOUR HOLIDAY PRIORITIES



Now that we are into Advent, there are several ways we can focus our attention and pray as we prepare to receive the Light of Life - Jesus Christ. Take a moment and reflect on how you are experiencing Advent and personally preparing for the coming of Christ into the world.

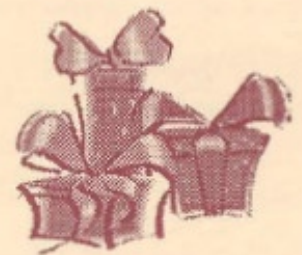
Use the following questionnaire to identify your priorities and clarify how you want to prepare for Christmas.

(Use the following scale for each question: 5 - Perfectly describes me, 4 - Usually describes me, 3 - Occasionally describes me, 2 - Rarely describes me, 1 - Never describes me.)

1. ___ During the holidays I feel overwhelmed by the number of things I have to do and the number of gifts I have to buy.
2. ___ I mostly look forward to eating all the holiday cooking - cookies, treats, and meals.
3. ___ During the Advent season I participate in traditional Advent prayers and reflect on how God plays a role in my life.
4. ___ I like to spend the holidays volunteering my time and I focus on helping the poor, homeless and needy of our society.
5. ___ This time of year allows me to see the bigger picture and focus on the meaning of my life.
6. ___ During the holidays, I most enjoy spending quality time with my family.
7. ___ I have a difficult time focusing during the Advent season because of all the other things that surround me- Christmas shopping, sending out Christmas cards, decorations, holiday parties etc.
8. ___ I feel stressed out and unbalanced during this time of year. I am short on patience and gain weight from all the eating. I struggle to really find time to relax.
9. ___ At Christmas time I focus on being more peaceful and bringing the true Light of Christ to those around me.
10. ___ I buy cards and gifts in which the money is going strictly towards a charity or a socially responsible organization or corporation.
11. ___ While I enjoy all the music, social events, and gift exchanges, overall I feel a tremendous amount of hope, peace, and gratitude.
12. ___ As Christmas approaches, I can hardly wait to get together with old friends.

Identify your current focus - Take a look at your answers to the survey above and add up the scores you gave yourself for these pairs:

- Sum of 1 & 7: _____ Food lover (focused on the treats, meals, cookies, weight gain, etc.)
Sum of 2 & 8: _____ Gift giver (focused on the materialistic side of the holidays)
Sum of 3 & 9: _____ Spiritual seeker (focused on prayer and role of God)
Sum of 4 & 10: _____ Policy maker (focused on social justice issues and making a difference)
Sum of 5 & 11: _____ Big-picture person (focused on feeling hope, peace, and gratitude)
Sum of 6 & 12: _____ People person (focused on family and friends during the holidays)



- ❖ Compare your scores for the six pairs of survey items. Which of the above phrases (food lover, gift giver, etc.) best describes your priorities right now?
- ❖ To what extent are you content with your current priorities?
- ❖ Would you like to shift your focus in any way during this holiday season? How so? (If yes, proceed to next question...)
- ❖ Take action! What do you need to do to change your focus and get on track?

Biblical Reflection: *How's Your Messianic Complex?*



Recently, three former volunteers were asked, "What comes to your mind when you hear the term 'messianic complex'? What meaning does it have for you?" Former #1 said, "Is it a temple complex, sort of like a sports complex?" Former #2 said, "Someone who feels they are always messier than they should be." Former #3 described its common usage as "Someone who tries to save everyone."

In the gospel for the third Sunday of Advent, 16 December 2001, the imprisoned John the Baptist, seems confused. John was not only the greatest prophet, but, as Jesus noted, John was "more than a prophet" and John had been preparing others for the Messiah's coming. Yet now John wants a clarifying answer from Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matthew 11:3)

What could possibly have confused the Baptist? John locked into one meaning. He expected the Messiah to be passing judgment on the world, big time. Yet, here is Jesus being merciful, healing and forgiving people. So John's view was limited and had room to grow. *But what about you?* Have you ever viewed Jesus through too narrow a window? How has your view of Jesus changed?

Volunteers, especially after six months, know something about false expectations. As former volunteer #3's answer implied, sometimes volunteers initially see themselves as saving others, big time. Jesus would rightly have had this messianic complex. But if you have had one, that's another matter. Share with compassionate co-workers what your messianic complex has looked like during your time of volunteer service. If it applies, describe how it has changed over time. What events, if any, have helped you change your view of yourself as a want-to-be 'messiah'?

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. Regional Pallotti Centers are located in Boston; Paterson, NJ; 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.



INSIDE: Stories and activities to nurture the personal, communal and spiritual development of lay volunteers and missionaries!

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