

SHARED VISIONS

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Volume 18, Number 2

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

Advent and Christmas: Seasons for Caring, Gifts, Questions and Reflection

In this issue of Shared Visions, we explore themes from both the Advent and Christmas seasons, as well as themes that often develop during this time in the cycle of the average volunteer year. Many volunteers find that after about half of their service year (or more) is over, they begin to ask questions about topics ranging from their effectiveness to why the world is as it is, and how that can be changed.



We hope that this issue of Shared Visions provides you with some practical ways to address these questions and discoveries. And as the birth of Christ brings feelings of awe and wonder to the world, we hope that this season brings feelings of awe and wonder, and renewal of spirit, to your volunteer service. As always, if you have any questions or comments about Shared Visions, please email us at sharedvisions@pallotticenter.org.

May God bless you, your work, and those with whom you work this Christmas and always!

Time to Make Mid-Course Corrections?

We're all familiar with the idea of everyone having an I.Q., an Intelligence Quotient. But what about the notion that everyone also has a F.Q., a Flexibility Quotient? Reflecting on your own flexibility may have some practical implications for the effectiveness of your life as a volunteer.



When rocket scientists send a capsule to another planet, for example, it is absolutely required to build in having one or more "mid-course corrections," when they tweak the trajectory so it stays on target. So as you approach the coming new year, this may be a fine time for you to step back from your day-to-day tasks and objectively assess how

they are going. Ask yourself and perhaps others: Do I need to change anything about how I handle my work as a volunteer?

Consider how things are going for you at work:

- If there were one change you could make in the way you work, what would it be?
- If you could change the way your co-workers or clients see you, what change would you make? Does anyone see you as "just a volunteer?" As a messiah?

Flexibility is particularly important in the area of

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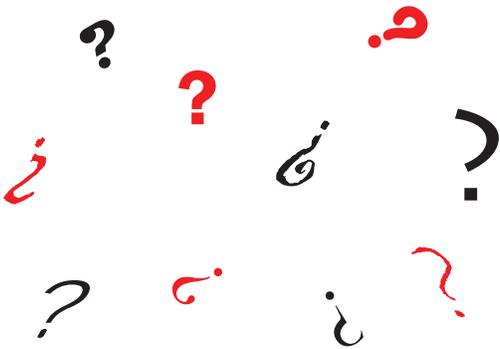
Activity: Asking Your New Questions

Introduction

For the past several months, you have been hard at work at your placement site and striving for some type of rhythm in your community living. Along the way, questions may have been percolating from your experiences, perhaps about why you, your co-workers or fellow volunteers do some of the puzzling things you do. Additionally, you may be questioning some aspects of life in your neighborhood, society or in the Church.

Asking questions, says Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB, is the key to personal and spiritual maturity. **"They lead us beyond ourselves to the Great Idea that makes all of life worthwhile"** (from Called to Question: A Spiritual Memoir). We need to pay attention to the common questions that arise in our daily lives because only by doing so can we **"attempt to unravel their many meanings, to give them flesh, to honor their spiritual import now and here, in our time and in our lives."**

The activity which follows is an opportunity for you to think about and share your own questions with your community members. Working together will expand your own clarity and build community, and will be an opportunity for fun as well.



Group activity: Sharing what puzzles you, seeking new insights

Plan a time that works best for all of your community members to participate in this activity. *Be sure to let the participants know that they should come to the activity with examples of questions that have been puzzling them.* Allow an hour for discussion.

Directions

Gather your volunteer community in a comfortable space that lends itself well to discussion. Choose someone to facilitate the discussion.

The Facilitator may use the following discussion topics.

1. What are some questions that you've been dealing with concerning your volunteer community life or your work placement site? List all the questions your group raises.
2. Ask the group to prioritize which questions they want to tackle and in what order. (Examples could be practical matters or might include tougher issues.)
3. Begin with the question which has the greatest interest. Ask the person who first raised it to briefly summarize his or her question and what he or she finds puzzling or interesting about it.
4. Invite others to contribute any insights they have which clarify the question and then give each person a chance to share their response.
5. When the wisdom of the group is exhausted, decide if any follow-up research is needed, who will do it and when, and how it will be reported back to the group.
6. Then, proceed to the next interesting question and repeat the process.

If this activity works well for your group, consider the possibility of moving to broader areas of the puzzling aspects of:

- **life in your neighborhood, society, or in the Church,**
- **policy issues, poverty and access to health care,**
- **communication and relationships related to community living, etc.**

Remember, the goal is not to settle for a predictable answer and thereby stop the process of thinking, but to continue to ask deeper questions and gain broader understandings.

From the “Magi” to the Mall: Finding Meaning in Our Gift-Giving Culture

Some of you may be familiar with “The Gift of the Magi,” a short story by writer O. Henry. In this bittersweet story, a young couple, Della and Jim, each sell their most prized possession in order to buy Christmas gifts for each other. In the end, the actual gifts that they give are unimportant; it is their gift of themselves which has the most meaning. O. Henry writes, “...in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give gifts these two [Della and Jim] were the wisest...they are the magi.”

We give gifts to family, friends and co-workers because we love them, because we enjoy their company, and because we appreciate all that they have done for us. When we do so, do we truly honor the “gift” of having these people in our lives? In this frantic time of decorating, shopping, and celebrating before the Christmas holidays, take some time to reflect upon your motivations and practices related to gift-giving.

- Alone or with your community, read “The Gift of the Magi.”
- As a community, reflect on the message of this story, and the implications of this message in your own life.
- Brainstorm, by yourself or with your community, different ways to simplify the gift-giving process and ways to “give of yourself” this Christmas.
- See page six of this issue of *Shared Visions* for resources related to this topic.



There are many simple and personal ways that we can honor the presence of the people in our lives! If we truly give of ourselves, we may find greater meaning, and greater peace, in our gift-giving tradition.

Self-Care: A Reflection on

The life of the volunteer is one of giving, and typically we think of giving in terms of giving to others. However, what volunteers often overlook is the importance of giving to oneself. Nurturing your needs and taking care of yourself may give you more energy and make you more effective in your work as a volunteer.

For busy volunteers, this is easier said than done, and will require self-discipline and creativity.

One path that you may want to explore is yoga, which incorporates both physical and spiritual health. This is accomplished through the use of meditation and physical exercises (*asanas*). There are many different types of yoga that vary depending on how much emphasis is placed on meditation versus the *asanas*.



A possible source of inspiration for the spiritual side of your yoga practice may be drawn from Rumi, one of the original Sufi Yogis. He practiced yoga that centered on the unity of divine love. The goal of Sufi yoga is to overcome the separation of “man” and God. One way this is still demonstrated in a yoga practice today is by beginning and ending each session by bowing and saying **Namasté**, which is a Sanskrit word meaning **the light of God in me recognizes and honors the light of God in you, and in that recognition is our oneness.**

The recognition of the presence of this divine light is a gift that you can give yourself to help carry you through your work as a volunteer. Yoga can serve as a possible way for you to nurture your needs so that you can be the most effective you can be.

Biblical Reflection: Christmas and Volunteer Effectiveness

Christmas presents us with such a wealth of spiritual themes that it may seem odd to associate it with the practical effectiveness of your volunteer service.

For many volunteers, wanting to make a difference is at the core of their motivation. Perhaps this is why you joined your volunteer community, work at a non-luxurious placement site and strive to help others. Most volunteers want to be present to others and effectively touch others' lives.

There is something especially "divine" and "incarnational" about wanting to be effective. The prophet Isaiah, for example, points to this in his description of the power of God's word.

"Yes, as the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth... so the word that goes out from my [God's] mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do" (55:10-11).



In a special way, this effectiveness describes not only the prophet's divine word, but also the Word born at Christmas, "in the beginning" (John 1:1) and every time there are two or three gathered together in His name. Volunteers, in one way or another, are no less effective than the rain drops or snow crystals. Here are questions to further your reflection.

- When you think about whether or how you are "making a difference" at your work site or in your community life, what comes to mind?
- When you consider how your volunteer site has been staffed by many volunteers over the years, what conclusion do you reach about how your part contributes to a sense of the greater whole? How does this contribute to God's plan?
- Christmas is a time when most people are willing to celebrate a sense of awe. What are some aspects of your volunteer experience that you find to be worthy of awe and reverence?

Giving

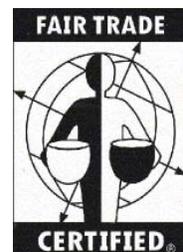
What are some other gifts that you can give to yourself or to others this Christmas season? Here are a few suggestions:

- Check out the *Yoga Journal*, www.yogajournal.com, for more information about practicing yoga.
- Practice deep breathing exercises as a way to relieve stress, center yourself and keep your daily thoughts or concerns in perspective.
- Make time for the things that you enjoy. Your happiness will shine through to your clients and community members.

For more information about Rumi, please visit the resources section on page 6.

Looking for
Fair Trade gift ideas?
Visit www.pallotticenter.org/Resources/fair_trade_resources.htm.

You'll find links to general information about Fair Trade as well as links to retailers of Fair Trade gifts, clothing, and food.



Recognizing and Proclaiming Joy in Your Work

During Advent and the Christmas season, Biblical texts and Christmas cards encourage us to be joyful. Volunteers and missionaries often serve in areas that are vastly different from their homes, and thus may encounter situations very unlike those from which they came. In these new experiences, it may be difficult to readily recognize joy. Where is the joy in children who do not have equal access to education, adults who struggle to find employment, and families who are unable to afford safe, adequate housing?

“The seers and listeners, the contemplatives of every age, will be prepared to recognize joy and to recognize its possibility everywhere... We must not be afraid to announce it to refugees, slum dwellers, saddened prisoners, angry prophets. Now and then we must even announce it to ourselves. In this prison of now, in this cynical and sophisticated age, Christians must believe in joy.”

- Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM

With Advent and Christmas approaching, consider the following:

- Where do you find joy in your work as a volunteer?
- To what extent do the people you work with (clients, schoolchildren, etc.) have joy? What insights about joy have you learned from them?

Moses was called to free God’s oppressed people (Exodus 3:4-9), releasing them from their prison. Fr. Rohr exhorts believers to believe in joy despite the shackles of the “prison of now.” Often people living in poverty or struggle are limited or defined by their present situation – their “prison of now.”



- During this time of preparation, are there attitudes, feelings, or situations from which you need to be freed? How can you free yourself and seek joy?
- What struggles are happening among the people you work with? In what ways do you see God working despite these struggles?
- In your workplace, how can your actions and attitude help set the people you work with free from being defined by the present?



The Psalms call us to “sing to God a new song; skillfully play with joyful chant” (Ps. 33:3). Together with your community and the people with whom you work, prepare a new song to sing, one that helps free others from situations lacking joy and hope. This Christmas and into the new year, your presence, and the joy you radiate, can truly be a gift to others.

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personal relationships.

- Think about and evaluate how you are relating to your co-workers, employer, fellow volunteers or family members. What changes could you make which will help bring your friendships or professional relationships into proper alignment?
- Rigidity or being too loose are both contrary to flexibility. Are there any changes needed in these areas, such as taking yourself too seriously or not seriously enough?

And, with regard to your spirituality, what criteria do

you use to evaluate how you relate to God?

- Is my image for God too small, lacking transcendence, mystery or awe?
- Do I treat divinity as personal, or as a commodity I tap into as needed?
- Are there spiritual practices I need to change such as allowing more time for journaling, prayer, or reading scripture?

When you make a mid-course correction, it presumes you are half-way to where you are going. So, where are you going in the short-term? And after your volunteer experience? ***Bon voyage and God bless!***

Resources for further reading. . .



The Pallotti Center's gift to you in this issue of *Shared Visions* is a list of the inspiring authors we cite throughout the issue, as well as some other resources for further exploration.

Advent resources from Pax Christi:
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Authors and Editors: Andrew Thompson, Jennifer Taylor, Colleen Lawler, Stacie West; Production Editor: Stacie West

Advisors: Rev. Frank Donio, SAC, Rev. Bob Kinast, Bill Lowell, Sr. Anita Joseph Reeves, CSC, and

Pallotti Center Directors: Kristelle Angelli and Joan Smith.

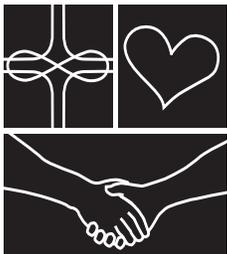
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The Mission of the St. Vincent Pallotti Center

Our goal is to promote lay volunteer service that challenges laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church, and to support lay volunteers before, during and after their term of service. 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.

Regional Pallotti Centers are located in Boston and St. Louis. The National Office is in Washington, DC.

Shared Visions' goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: intellectual growth, emotional and physical health, leadership and prayer.



The St. Vincent Pallotti Center
for Apostolic Development
415 Michigan Ave. NE
Washington, DC 20017
(202) 529-3330 (in DC area)
(877) VOL-LINK (outside DC area)
pallotti@pallotticenter.org
www.pallotticenter.org

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