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** —

"Life and Growth"

by Liz MacKenzie

Redeemer Ministry Corps

I wrote many noble essays for my volunteer application. When contemplating a year of service I wrote of how great it would be to work with homeless families, live in community with people who shared similar values, lead a simple lifestyle, and spend time nourishing my spirituality. But the images I had of those four aspects (service, community, simple living, spirituality) were so vague that when the reality of my volunteer year hit me, the noble essays took off to their rightful home in fantasyland. There was a bit of a crash, a whole lot of anger and many, many questions. The good news is that I recovered from the blow and by the end of the year had salvaged some of the noble thoughts.

I claimed that I wanted to be challenged by a year of volunteer service. I was challenged more than I ever thought possible and sometimes more than I wanted to deal with. Some days I felt like I was not living but barely surviving. The material and emotional poverty I witnessed at my placement site was incomprehensible. Getting to know my community members and allowing them to get to know me took more than the mind-reading skills I wished we all had. Letting go of the materialism that had become so normal to me required constant thought around the choices I made everyday. And I often found it difficult to have faith in the God who led me to such a dark place. Sometimes there were so many questions to answer, things to do and just stuff to deal with that I wanted to cry. I don't like to cry.

"I was challenged more than I ever thought possible... Some days I felt like I was not living but barely surviving."

When I initially looked back on the year it seemed to be a painful year of personal growth, but I realize there were times of joy and clarity that renewed me and encouraged me along the journey. I remember a bright afternoon of playfulness when Maurice and Monae tested my imagination when I babysat them while their mother was in a job interview. I wondered how I would entertain a 6 and 10 year old without a playground or

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Carpe Diem! Seize the day! Making the most of your volunteer experience: the good, the bad, and the wonderful!

Volunteers, Liz and Trevor, share the joys and challenges they faced living simply and in community. Both gained insights to help deepen their personal spirituality and to be giving, yet balanced people.....pp. 1-3

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Putting People First

by Trevor Bonat

Jesuit Volunteers International

I remember walking by the frozen food section of the local supermarket on Chuuk, Micronesia with my community-mate, Jess. The heat was oppressive. As we strolled by the meat, I slowed my pace to a saunter, wanting to curl up with the beef. It was our first week on the island and, in hindsight, I should have jumped into the case. Sadly, my mind was on our shopping list and I did not think it culturally acceptable to snuggle with a frozen side of beef. This rather absurd incident, or potential incident, was typical of my two-year experience as a teacher and Dean at Xavier High School in the western Pacific. My focus was on my service to Xavier, not relaxing among the frozen vegetables.

By the end of the first quarter, I was volunteering for just about everything. I took on an extra course, started helping with student activities and assisted our principal with discipline. I have that work ethic that is not satisfied until I am completely overloaded. Teaching 6 of 7 periods a day, working with activities after school, and praying, in addition to my life in community, made me a happy little work-a-holic. If they had asked me to shuck oysters in the kitchen just for kicks, I probably would have done it as well. I had come out to Micronesia

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nintendo nearby. I ended up taking them to a local university where my brother was a freshman. We spent the afternoon running through the dorm courtyards, playing in the sprinklers, climbing trees and collecting sticks. I felt like I could share the carefreeness of my childhood with them... and so did a priest from the university who I thought was going to yell at us but instead gave us tips on how to get up to the highest branch.

Celebrating Christmas with my community was pretty funny when we exchanged our "white elephant" gifts. We all had a different expression of the idea to give gifts using the least amount of money possible. Gifts ranged from a cup of sand from the Jersey shore to hand-painted ornaments to an unwanted fanny pack. We all had a good laugh and were reminded that Christmas really isn't about buying stuff, but about celebrating the birth of Christ together. Finding entertainment within the realm of a simple lifestyle sent me back to my childhood in North Carolina when my brothers and sister and I would spend entire days in the forest. I was reminded that nature is free to all and more interesting than any $7 movie I thought was a must see. "Free to all" was important because it meant that the families I worked with, who often struggled to make ends meet, could enjoy it as well.

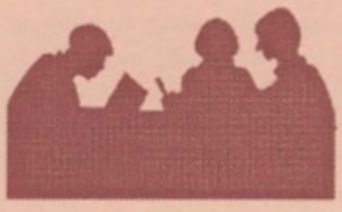
And the God who I once claimed led me to this dark place, was more faithful to me than I to Him. His presence during my volunteer year was truly life-giving and sustaining. When I felt I could no longer deal with the suffering I saw at my placement site, He spoke to me in the silence, saying "I am here, I will deal." My most fond community memories are of our shared prayer times. I usually came out of the prayer room thankful for the expression of faith that was shared and renewed by the spirit present there. Spending time outdoors in nature was like spending time with God. I could feel His presence in the air, the trees, the brook and every creation.

"It might not have been the year of life I had envisioned in those noble essays, but I did learn and grow a lot from my experiences."

As I was looking through my journal, I found this sentence written at the end of my volunteer year, "I can't say that it's been the best year of my life or the worst... it has just been life and I am thankful for that." It might not have been the year of life I had envisioned in those noble essays, but I did learn and grow a lot from my experiences. There was an abundance of failure as well as success during the year, but always life and growth. ✚

Questions for Liz's article:

- The material and emotional poverty Liz saw was incomprehensible to her. To what extent have you, as a volunteer, witnessed material and emotional poverty? How has it affected you and how do you handle it? What are your spiritual and practical responses?
- Liz received helpful guidance from unexpected sources, i.e. the priest in the courtyard and God's voice in the silence. Identify people in your life who will help you reach "the highest branch." How can you access their advice and support?
- What were your expectations coming into this volunteer year? Are your hopes and dreams for this year coming true? What meaning can you find in your victories or struggles?
- Liz experienced times of joy and clarity that renewed and encouraged her. What relationships or experiences have been a source of renewal and growth for you? What are some ways you can further these joy-filled relationships with friends, God or nature, and allow them to nourish you?
- Liz realized the value in things that are "free for all." Make a list of all the free and natural resources you can enjoy with your co-workers, clients or community. Make plans to take advantage!



quick dishes

Short on time? Always on the run?

Here are a few ideas for volunteers who need healthy, quality helpings while busy helping others!

- Add your favorite veggie or tofu to Ramen noodles.
- Boil pasta. Top with parmasan cheese, nuts, soy sauce, pepper or lemon.
- Slice up a bunch of celery, carrots, broccoli and cauliflower. Refrigerate them in water so they're on hand when you need a quick snack to go.
- Try a grilled peanut butter sandwich. Make it just like grilled cheese, but with peanut butter!
- If you have a microwave, cook a large potato for about 7 or 8 min's. Slice up and top with salsa, sour cream or veggies.

- Make a large batch of rice. Save the left-overs for when you are short on time.

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to serve and I was getting much done. Upon reflection, I was having a lot of fun (albeit masochistic), but I was not very happy. My mentor and friend, Mike Toolan, and the writings of the contemplative monk, Thomas Merton, added some joy to my hectic volunteer life. Their words focused my time, not on cheap fun in among the chilled hamburger, but on joy.

I had always seen Mike with the students — talking, eating, and chewing betel nut. I knew that he had close relationships with many of the students. (Mike passed away this past June after a fight with leukemia. The looks on his students' faces at the funeral witnessed to his care and love for them.) Merton wrote that sooner or later we stop working for a particular cause and start focusing on individual people. It is the value of relationships that decides everything. In retrospect, I hold my relationships with Mike, my community and the students I came to know, as my most prized possessions. As my work became more focused on my students and coworkers, it became more filled with joy, for it now had names to give it meaning. My second year on Chuuk brought more stress and less time, but my priorities helped me put individuals first. Mike's influence inspired me to put the time spent with my Chuukese community at the top of my to-do list.

"Sooner or later we stop working for a particular cause and start focusing on individual people."

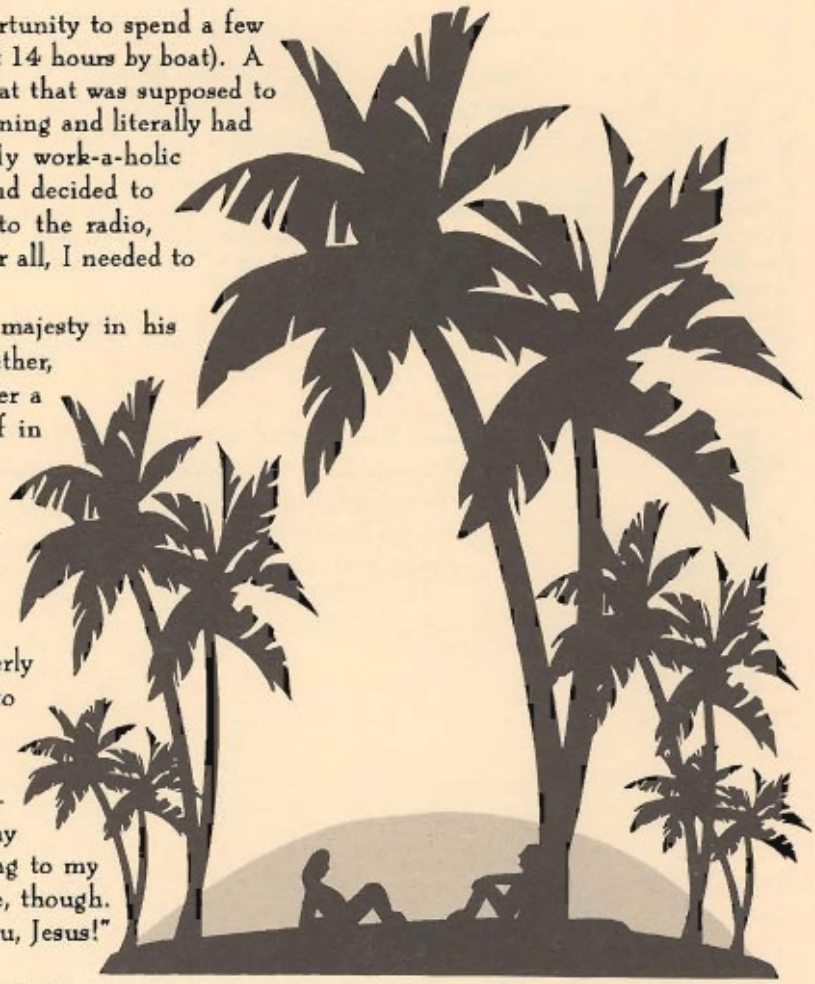
Between my first and second years I had the opportunity to spend a few days on an outer island south of Chuuk called Kuttu (about 14 hours by boat). A weekend getaway turned into a 10-day ordeal, since the boat that was supposed to pick me up never arrived. I would wake up at 6 in the morning and literally had nothing to do until I went to bed in the evening. My work-a-holic personality had no outlet. I met a man named Loyola and decided to enter his life a little, for my life consisted of listening to the radio, waiting for word on when I could get back to Chuuk. After all, I needed to return to work.

Loyola's life on Kuttu was simple and I found majesty in his attitude and inherent goodness. We went spear fishing together, dove for clams and, for 14 hours a day, we would sit under a tree. Spending time with Loyola and confronting myself in times of forced leisure taught the reality of St. Ignatius Loyola's outlook on life. "We are put on this earth to praise, reverence, and serve God . . . and other created things are there to assist in attaining that end for which we are created." My relationship with Loyola brought home that 'not-doing' actually could glorify God. Simple presence could be a form of praise, while work could be utterly opposed to the end for which I was created. Returning to Chuuk, both my leisure and my work had renewed purpose.

Whether playing cards with my community-mates, teaching or driving kids to a basketball game, the importance of *who* I accompanied brought true joy. Orienting my work as well as my leisure toward God's glory gave meaning to my experience. I still should have jumped into that display case, though. I think God would have gotten a kick out of my "Thank you, Jesus!" yelp as I bathed in frozen bacon. ✚

Questions for Trevor's Article:

- Trevor quoted the world famous Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, to the effect that eventually many people experience a shift from working for a cause to focusing on individual people. Which personal relationships have you formed at your placement site, community or in your neighborhood that give you a sense of being very alive? What are some ways you could further develop these relationships?
- When work-a-holic Trevor spent 10 days on an unexpected "island getaway," he discovered the value of leisure activities as a way of giving glory to God. When you review your work and leisure activities, to what extent do you think each gives glory to God? What are some changes you could make to balance work and play and thereby give God greater glory?
- Sometimes a volunteer experiences greater stress, as did Trevor, as he or she takes on more responsibilities. Make a list of the sources of stress in your work or living situation. How can renegotiating expectations or setting new limits help? What actions can you take to create a more positive and life-giving work or living environment?



Taking Time... Building Relationships

Trevor found greater happiness when he began to slow down and appreciate the people around him. Liz took time to discover deeper aspects of her relationships with God, nature and the children under her care. Developing relationships, appreciating the uniqueness and discovering the "little pieces of God" in each of those around you will help make this a very special time in your life.

Here's one activity to help you make the most of your volunteer time by deepening your relationships with your community members.

Instructions:

- ✔ Gather with your community.
- ✔ Pair up randomly by drawing numbers from a hat.
- ✔ Each pair of people find a place in your house where you can chat in privacy for about 20 to 30 minutes.

Possible topics for discussion:

1. Things I appreciate most about our relationship include . . .
2. I recognize some of your talents to be . . .
3. What do you find most difficult or challenging about your service placement?
4. Share a story of a special relationship you have at your service placement and what that person means to you.
5. Share a special memory or story from your childhood, high school or college years.
6. Name 5 things about yourself others would probably never guess.
7. Name 5 interesting places you've visited or lived.
8. Name a spiritual mentor or someone who's expression of faith you admire. Why?
9. Describe a favorite family vacation.

- ✔ After 20 to 30 minutes, come back and gather as a group.
- ✔ Take five minutes for each person to relate something particularly touching or interesting that his/her partner shared.

For individuals: Set aside a time with a co-worker, a neighbor or new friend, a social or church group, to exchange and discuss some of your answers.

Learning from *your* Tree of Self* Knowledge

* Remember, for Carl Jung, a deeper understanding of Self is an experience of Christ's presence within.

Liz recalled climbing trees with some young friends and days spent as a child in the forest. Trevor spent many hours relaxing under a tree with Loyola. Find a tree that appeals to you and spend a significant amount of time with it. Observe its unique characteristics. Sit with it. What insights can you gain from thought or prayer under (or in!) your tree? Here are some additional considerations!

Reaching for the Highest Branch:

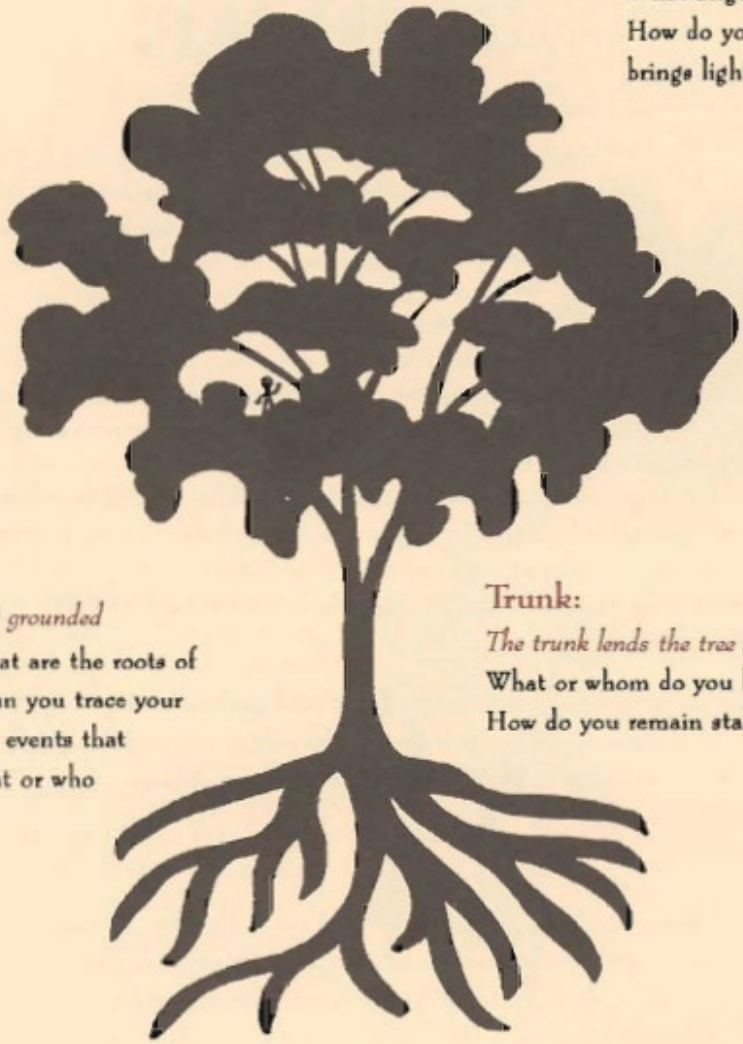
Climbing a tree can provide you with a view of things far away. Where do you go or whom/what do you consult for a better perspective?

Branches / Leaves:

Branches grow toward heaven and leaves respond to sunlight.
What helps you grow toward God?
What brightens your world?
How do you respond to all that brings light into your life?

Growing Edge of a Limb:

Growth often happens at the edges.
When persons go out on a limb and take a risk, new life happens. How has your time of volunteer service been a risk for you? How are you growing?



Fruit:

Fruit from trees is harvested and provides nourishment.
What do you hope to harvest as gifts of this year? What nourishes your growth as a human being, as a spiritual person?

Roots:

The roots of a tree keep it grounded and allow it to grow. What are the roots of your desire to serve? Can you trace your motivations to people or events that have inspired you? What or who keeps you grounded? How are you sustained?

Trunk:

The trunk lends the tree stability and strength.
What or whom do you lean on for strength? How do you remain stable and healthy?

Biblical Reflection: Jesus Wants Us to Live Life to the Fullest

A central theme in this issue is: How can volunteers and missioners make the most of their remaining time of service and live in a spirit of *carpe diem*, seize the day? Here's one approach. Ask yourself: How could one person, Jesus, make such a profound difference throughout the world? Throughout history?

Could it be, in part, that he understood what each person's heart longed for and that he spoke to this need?

"I have come that they may have life ... to the fullest." (John 17:13)

So given that Jesus came for this purpose, how can today's volunteers and missioners live with the vitality Christ intended? Read the biblical story (Luke 24:13-25), which includes the following passage:

"Were not our hearts burning (within us) as he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32)

Luke's gospel records this important reaction the disciples had to Jesus. Recall, the two disciples were walking to the neighboring town of Emmaus on Easter Sunday, and were joined by this "Stranger" who explained to them the meaning of the current events surrounding Christ's death and resurrection, how it all fit together.

The two disciples were profoundly touched as they walked with Jesus. He brought the disciples clarity, calm, and a vision of hope.

On *your own* journey with Christ, where do you encounter Him? Like the disciples whose hearts burned for God, do you feel a sense of "en-thusiasm," (which literally means "God within") in your own relationship with Christ? One way to *live life to the fullest* is to be in touch with God within ourselves and in those around us. In what ways do you sense His presence within you, within others?

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, 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.*

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