

SHARED VISIONS

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Volume 17, Number 1

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

How to Be More Open to Your Volunteer Experience . . . To Other People, Yourself and to God

We believe that “how” your mind works, whether open or closed, is one of the most important distinctions to which we can pay attention. It is more important than whether someone is educated or not, liberal or conservative, contemporary or traditional. We feel it will be one of the most significant determinants of whether your volunteer service makes a difference in the lives of others and in your own life as well.

Too often, however, the term “openminded” is mistaken for an “anything goes” mentality. To the contrary, we will explain that the term “openminded” refers to specific ways of thinking, processing information, relating to authority, to yourself and even relating to the past, present and future. It refers to very positive qualities within yourself which you can nurture during your time of doing volunteer service.

We will use this open door logo to highlight four key characteristics of an open mind, namely clarity, integration, balance and synthesis. Each issue will focus on one quality and give practical and fun suggestions for exercising it in your volunteer work site, community living, spiritual and personal life. We hope your time of volunteer or mission service is enhanced by your working with these ideas and activities. We pray that by working with these qualities, you will be a more effective volunteer and become more open to your volunteer experiences, to other people, to yourself and to God. We invite you to send us your feedback and suggestions at SharedVisions@PallottiCenter.org.



In This Issue . . .



This first issue, No. 1, gives you an overview of the open-minded person, rooted, in part, in empirical research which we tie back in with our faith. One social psychologist describes open-mindedness as the ability to receive, evaluate and act on relevant information received from outside the person, on its own intrinsic merits, unencumbered by irrelevant

factors in the situation arising from within the person or from the outside.* That's quite a mouthful and so our four issues will unpack the main ideas, starting with a first quality: being clear about our beliefs and our understandings of our world.

* Milton Rokeach, *The Open and Closed Mind*, NY: Basic Books, 1960.

An Open Mind Comes With An Open Heart

Making important decisions might be much easier if we could ignore our emotions. In the midst of an argument, emotions can commandeer the rational output of our open minds. When deciding on new career opportunities, feelings of loyalty and devotion to a place or company can cloud a logical list of reasons for making a shift. Emotions, however,



are an integral part of humanity, and life often consists of a balancing act between heart and head.

Having an open mind and having an open heart are not mutually exclusive. John Donne wrote, “no man is an island, entire of itself.” Similarly, no mind is an island, separate from the rest of the body. Volunteers are often described as being

(continued on page 2)

In this issue... Page 1: How to be More Open to Your Volunteer Experience and An Open Mind Comes With an Open Heart // Page 2: What Do You Understand “Openminded to Mean?” // Page 3: What Does an Open-Minded Volunteer Look Like...in Community? and ...in the Workplace? // Page 4: Biblical Reflection: Being Clear About Your Faith // Page 5: Develop Your Own Strategy for Overcoming Stereotypes // Page 6: Recipe for a Good Time

Activity: What Do You Understand “Openminded” To Mean?

Think of an openminded person you have known and then make a list describing in what ways he or she is openminded. Next think of someone you consider closeminded. Make a list describing how that person thinks. Compare your two lists with the way researchers’ describe how the open and closed minds operate. Similarities? Differences?

Here’s a Researcher’s Snapshot of two ways of thinking:

The Open Person:

The Closed Person:

Resolves contradictions in his or her belief system.	Is not even aware of the contradictory beliefs that he or she holds.
Makes judgments only after carefully gathering and evaluating information.	Pre-judges people and situations without gathering adequate information.
Distinguishes between what is important and what is unimportant.	Makes sweeping generalizations without prioritizing among beliefs.
Pays attention to the real world and does not fixate on one’s own needs.	Pays too much attention meeting his or her own needs, anxieties, self-esteem.
Can live with a reasonable amount of uncertainty and ambiguity.	Cannot tolerate uncertainty and so rushes into making snap judgments.
Keeps learning what he or she “does” believe in, but also what he or she “does not” believe in, so has clear knowledge about other faiths, politics, etc.	Typically sees little need to learn about what he or she does not believe in, so has murky notions of what he or she disbelieves.

(continued from page 1)

“good-hearted” or “open hearted”; being good-hearted is a remarkable trait, but is not the same as being “open hearted.” As the mind and heart are connected, it is important, while cultivating an open mind, to nurture an open heart, as well.

Consider the following questions to guide you through nurturing your open heart:

- *Do you allow yourself to express your emotions, with variety and in different situations? Can you control your emotions when necessary or appropriate?*

- *Do you allow yourself to love others? Have you opened yourself up to being loved by others?*
- *An open mind is more about how you think rather than what you think. So, too, with an open heart. How do you express what your heart feels? Rather than **who** do you love or express hospitality towards, **how** do you express love or hospitality?*

The next time you engage in a situation that you feel “opens your mind” in some way, make note of how you feel, as well. Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s words to a friend serve as a nice reminder of the connection between mind and heart: **“Deep Thinking is attainable only by a man of deep Feeling.”**

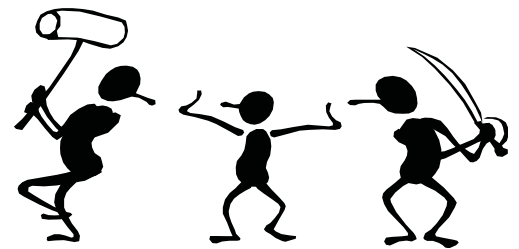
What Does an Open-Minded Volunteer Look Like...in Community?

Volunteer communities, as microcosms of the larger world, are usually comprised of very different people. Typically the members of the community share some common bond: desire to serve the poor, interest in the charism of a particular religious community, etc., but the volunteers may share very little beyond that cursory bond. This can often make it very difficult to be open-minded within the community. Volunteering frequently brings the challenge of living in a new environment, often far from family and friends; working in a position that can be emotionally, mentally, or physically stressful; and analyzing or defending one's faith and belief systems.

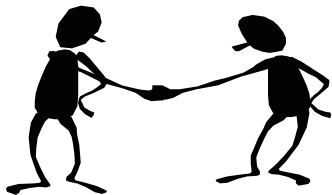
Here's a recipe for an interesting community experience:

- Take several passionate volunteers.
- Mix in each volunteer's preferred way of being or doing.
- Add a dash or two of stress from a new placement, pesky maintenance quirk, or looming expense.
- Stir in a basic community decision such as how to practice stewardship with the heating or (if you're lucky) air conditioning system.
- Bake for the duration of your community night.

What do you get? A big mess. One person thinks turning the heat to a consistent 72 degrees is the best. Another read an article that said that you should turn off the air when no one is home. Someone else calls his or her mother to find out what they do at home. Each person is convinced that he or she has the best solution, and no one wants to listen to the alternatives. The volunteers are angry at each other over the situation for weeks.



The whole debacle sounds pretty silly, right? It's not so silly, though, to consider the larger implications of closed-mindedness in this situation. An unwillingness to listen to others and an insistence that one way of being or doing is absolutely correct ("my way or the highway") can bring conflict that is more pervasive and damaging than where you keep the thermostat.



An open-minded volunteer living in community doesn't need to bend to every suggestion or whim of other volunteers. In fact, a characteristic of an open-minded person is clear knowledge of one's own values and belief system. An open-minded community member does listen to and acknowledge, thoughtfully and without instant dismissal, the wisdom and opinions of fellow community members. The end result of an engaging dialogue may be that each party continues to think and act as before, but the willingness to engage and to talk with each other rather than at each other makes all the difference. An open-minded volunteer in community also gathers a wide range of knowledge before making a decision that impacts the entire community, and seeks to understand the far-reaching implications of the decision. For example, if a volunteer doesn't like the old microwave and he or she has access to the community purse, will an impulsive purchase of a new microwave prevent his or her community from buying essentials such as food or cleaning supplies?

Living in a community is certainly a challenge, but keeping an open mind can alleviate the stresses surrounding a new place, new job, and new people. Ultimately, having an open mind can prevent many large-scale conflicts, and can open one to more experiences, methods, and ideas.

Biblical Reflection: Being Clear About Your Faith

The people brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and who had a speech impediment. Jesus touched the man's ears and said "Be opened" and the man then immediately began to hear clearly and to speak plainly (Mark 7: 31-37).

This gospel story can be interpreted on several levels, with the first level being simply as a report of a miraculous physical cure. But to stop at the physical level would be incomplete. Mark clearly wants us to see this story as the fulfillment of the Isaiah prophecy which affirmed that when God arrives the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the mutes will sing, the lame will run and deserts will sprout springs of water (35:5-7). In other words, God's grace will transform lives and all of creation. Here, Mark's gospel affirms that in Jesus this long awaited day has dawned.

But there is also a third level of meaning suggested by the following question. Do you think the gospels are concerned about Jesus opening clogged ears or, more to the point, opening closed minds and hardened hearts? Physical transformations are important, but the gospel messages of faith are about deeper conversions, about opening each person's mind and heart to Jesus' teachings. The New Testament, being a religious document, is intent on telling the story of how faith in Jesus brings individuals and entire nations to hearing the gospel, to seeing life in a new light, and putting this faith into action.

As a volunteer or missionary, you have a marvelous opportunity to dedicate this year or more of service to further opening yourself to God, to your co-workers and to your clients. Ask yourself: Where may I be partially deaf, blind or lame? For example: What is one area of my faith in which I need to go deeper and stop being satisfied with attending to superficial matters? Concerning liturgies or meditations, ask: What is the quality of my prayer? Do I tend to stay on the surface and simply criticize the homily or reading? To what extent do I contribute to the quality of my volunteer community life? Or, to the contrary, do I tend to blame others for their lack of simple living?

During your time of volunteering, as you continue to clarify and deepen your faith, we hope you will experience miracles and transformations, beginning with yourself rather than focusing on others' need for change.

Activity: Develop Your Own Strategy for Overcoming Stereotypes

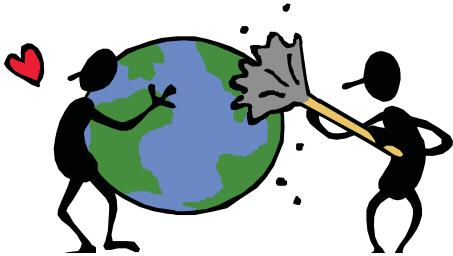
A stereotype is a prejudiced or pre-judged understanding of a person, group, place or thing. Although they can be amusing, too often they denigrate people and make their lives difficult. They may even limit your ability to make a difference in others' lives. For this reason, you may want to develop your own strategy for dealing with stereotypes.

- What is one stereotype you or your clients are currently facing? (One example is that if you work with Latino immigrants, many people in the U.S. think that they are lazy and do not work hard.)
- Where does this stereotype come from? What are its affects on your clients? On you?
- What can you do to help people overcome this stereotype?

Further reflect on this question of developing a strategy by recalling the first time you told your parents you wanted to be a full-time volunteer.

- What was their reaction? Was it positive, negative, inquisitive?
- What about other family and friends, how did they react?

It is not uncommon for prospective volunteers to find misunderstanding, close-mindedness or even resistance when first mentioning the desire to spend a year volunteering. Many of you undoubtedly encountered this at some point during your discernment process. What were some of the most common stereotypes that you experienced? Below are some common examples.



Volunteers are "do-gooders."

Volunteers can't find a regular job.

Volunteers are hippies.

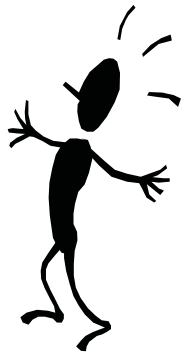
Volunteers are idealists/dreamers.

Volunteers are preachy evangelists.

Volunteers are bleeding-heart liberals.

Volunteering is like taking a year off.

Volunteering is not real life.



If you experienced what it is like to be stereotyped, what did you learn as a result? What made it difficult for your friends and family to change their views about full-time volunteering? How were you able to convince them to be more receptive of your choice to volunteer? If you have been stereotyped yourself, does this change your tendency to stereotype others?

By being sensitive to the prejudices that come with stereotypes, both in others and in yourself, and by having your own strategy for dealing with them, you are on your way to being a more effective and more open-minded volunteer.

RECIPE FOR A GOOD TIME: CALIFORNIA COUSCOUS

Found on <http://vegweb.com/index.php?topic=12037.0>.



You don't need to be in California to try this delicious recipe! As a continued challenge to further your open-mindedness, we encourage you to try

this vegan dish. Think of it as an excuse to try something new.

Ingredients (use vegan whenever possible):

1 medium onion, chopped
1 clove garlic, minced
1/2 cup organic vegetable broth

1 bell pepper
1 can black beans (drained)
1 can Mexican stewed tomatoes (drained)
1 teaspoon pepper
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon salt
Crushed red pepper or cayenne pepper to taste
2 or 3 cups prepared couscous
Olive oil

Directions:

In large skillet, fry up the garlic and onion in olive oil until soft. Make sure the onions and garlic don't brown. Add bell pepper, tomatoes, spices and broth and bring just to a boil. Reduce heat to low or medium-low

and let simmer for 10-12 minutes (or until bell pepper is tender). Add beans and cook for another 5 minutes.

Prepare couscous normally. (You can use veggie broth in place of water.)

To serve: Make a couscous mountain on a platter and pour mixture over the top. Let cool for a minute or two and enjoy!

Need help finding vegan ingredients or products? Check out <http://vegweb.com/products>. For other great vegan recipes don't miss www.vegancooking.com, www.veganchef.com and www.veganoutreach.org/starterpack/recipes.html.

Shared Visions

*A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers,
presented by the Saint Vincent Pallotti Centers*

©2006 The Saint Vincent Pallotti Center Volume 17 , Number 1

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The mission of the St. 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; St. Louis; and Oakland, CA. 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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