

From Barbara Dickens:

THIS WEEK WAS A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE FOR ME.

It wasn't because we lived in the red-carpeted chapel,
Sleeping between the pews,
Surrounded by HYMNALS, BIBLES, CANDLES, INCENSE, and
even some old leftover COMMUNION WAFERS.

IT HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH OPPOSITES MERGING
INTO ONE, COMPLETE, FULFILLING UNITY.

A. It was billed to be a time of SERVICE AND HARD WORK.
But there was plenty of FUN AND PLAY.

B. There was a WHOLE LOT OF TALKING and
Just about as much REAL LISTENING.

C. There was LAUGHTER and there were TEARS, sometimes of
SADNESS,
And sometimes just from LAUGHING SO HARD.

D. There was TOGETHERNESS, and also times of SOLITUDE
and REFLECTION.

E. In the atmosphere of ACCEPTANCE and TRUST, individual
TALENTS EMERGED spontaneously.

Those of us with FEWER SKILLS learned on the job with no
pressure.

F. Our MINISTER BALANCED her DISPARATE ROLES as
ORGANIZER, INSPIRER, and EXAMPLE OF HARD WORK, and
also one of the SOMETIMES GIGGLY GIRLS.

THANK YOU ELIZA, for providing us this opportunity.

From Kathy Murphy:

This will make my fourth time speaking from the pulpit since January of this year. That's the reason I tried hard not to be one of the people doing a homily this morning. I'm uncomfortable with the frequency despite the fact that it may look easy for me to some of you. It's not. But Eliza reminded me that this has all been about my stretching myself, and that is true. Wildflower keeps presenting these possibilities to me, and each experience has rocked my little complacent world every time.

And so it was true for me on the Galveston trip. I am a state employee bureaucrat. It is hard for me to remember when I worked as physically hard for five days in a row as I did this past week. And yet, it's also hard for me to remember the last time I felt as satisfied on a Friday afternoon after a week's work.

The first floor of the Sunlight Baptist Church was huge with, I think, eleven large rooms interconnected in a labyrinthine way. I believe we made our mark in each one of them, scraping, mudding, priming, and painting - walls, ceilings, columns, and cabinets. We worked on our knees, from ladders, and from scaffolds. With that many rooms and that much work, I found myself working side-by-side with different team members all through the week doing one task, then another, and getting to know these nine other people better in the slow conversational way that happens when you work side-by-side. And it wasn't just conversation that we shared. The audible collective moaning and groaning because of overworked muscles became a song unto itself. And then there was the laughter. It's been a while since I've laughed as much and as hard as I did this past week. And I mean the kind of laughing where you have to bend over and meet your knees or the laughter might just knock you over. Robin and I had one of those moments when we found ourselves in the chest high baptismal full immersion font behind the altar after lunch one day.

So you know what I'm trying to say here about connections. I think we all tried to support each other. Not having Amy with us was the hardest thing of all for me. But Kate reminded us several times what Amy's reaction would have been to some of the things we experienced, often mentioning it would have been her laughing the loudest.

Hurricane Ike hurt Galveston and the surrounding area badly. In order to survive, Galveston must convince you that it is "tourism ready" and if you stay on the main roads and the beaches you'll believe it. But during our orientation we learned, that before Ike, Galveston was a town where 60% of the residents were renters. Many of them have simply left. They are down to about 40,000 residents and house after house remains damaged and empty. The jobs aren't there, but the need for basic social services is still great. Houston organizations provide food bank trips to Galveston weekly. Trauma medical options have completely shut down there which means that if something seriously happens, your only option is to be flown out by helicopter.

Ironically, the youngest member of our 10 person team is one of the more experienced in working directly in disaster recovery areas along the Gulf Coast. Elizabeth kept picking up the rug for me, helping me peak at what gets swept under during a natural disaster aftermath. It's all about the lens you choose to look through.

I'm proud of the small contribution we made to help the Sunlight Baptist Church. One of the best moments of the trip for me occurred during a lunch break as we sprawled across the street on the lush lawn of the very large, very in tact St. Patrick's Catholic church – apparently an often used lunch break spot for the 8 to 9 other teams that have preceded us as they too labored in the Sunlight Baptist church. An African American woman drove by us slowly, honked and raised her hand in a gesture of thanks.

But I'm the grateful one. The ravages of Ike are less abstract for me now. Along with all the human suffering, is the news we learned last week that thousands of trees will be taken down soon, many of them Live Oaks. Visualize hundreds and hundreds of dead trees, and imagine how Galvestonians will feel when they all start to be cut down very soon. I think their hearts will break again, one more time.

It's a long road to recovery for them and we need to understand what all the communities along the Gulf coast have gone through since Katrina, Rita, and Ike have changed their lives. This work that we did, and the financial contributions many of you made to make the trip happen, is a way to keep Wildflower connected to our neighbors. We're a better church for it and god knows I'm better for it as well.

From Debbie Groves:

One of the many unanticipated pleasures of our service week in Galveston was the

laughter and shared humor . Quips, cracks, puns, belly laughs and good-spirited teasing

pulled us together as a team of coworkers and sister Unitarian Universalists. From joking

about our "holy" sleeping quarters in the chapel of the Episcopal student center to teasing

each other on our paint-and plaster bespattered clothes and generally disreputable

appearance during the work day, we supported each other with cheerfulness and loving

laughter in a that was totally awesome---as far as I was concerned.

Equally important, we also had our serious and reflective moments. I truly believe that the

work we were doing down in Galveston was as much a blessed sacrament as our

worshiping together is here today. But I know I will remember the laughter and the silliness

that lightened our physically challenging work and made our time together a happy and

extremely rewarding experience for me.

Growing up a Mennonite meant that service work was an important part of my early

religious experience. As a teenager and then as a young adult, I participated in many short-

term work-camps and longer-term volunteer assignments both here in the States and then

in Britain in the '70s. I've called those service experiences my "hands-on education", which

they undoubtedly were.

But this past week was a uniquely wonderful experience for me. Unlike earlier work-camps

where I didn't know the other volunteers--who came from different states and even different

countries---this time I was working and laughing and sweating together with member of my

CHURCH FAMILY. I was with women who were there along with me because we shared a

common commitment to the importance of turning our ethical and spiritual values into

concrete action. (to p. 2)

We didn't all know each other that well, but our daily shared work experience, our communal

Meals, our beach walks together all knit us together into a strong and supportive

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community of sisters.

Even though we were scraping, painting, taping and mudding for a faceless unknown—the

congregation of the Sunlight Missionary Baptists Church, we were strengthening the bonds

between the ten of us, who had chosen to come together in shared service. That has been a

very valuable and priceless treasure that I've brought back with me from our week together.

I would like to share a few quotes that I find especially meaningful in light of this

past week in Galveston. The first is from Menno Simons, the ex-Catholic priest who founded

the Mennonites; in 1552 he said this:

It is not customary that an intelligent person clothes and cares for one part of his body and leaves the rest naked. The intelligent person is solicitous for all his members. Thus it should be with those who are the Lord's church and body. All those born of God are called into one body and are prepared by love to serve their neighbors.

Although I consider myself not so much a Christian anymore, but more an agnostic, the

basic principles expressed in that quote mean a lot to me. We are all one body---connected

as brother and sisters in our church family and are prepared by love to serve our neighbors.

The next quote is from the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. :
Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.

And the last quote is by the author Lillian Smith. She said:

To believe something not yet proved and to underwrite it with our lives—it is the only way we can leave the future open.

I truly do believe that we can and we will eventually exist together in a world full of love,

compassion and kindness towards each other. That is not yet proven as a real possibility—

but I intend to keep working towards it as long as I live. Doing voluntary service work is one

way to turn my beliefs into tangible realities and leave the future open.

From Elizabeth Falcon:

I know most of you don't know me and that's because I just moved to Austin in January after almost 3 years doing Katrina relief in Biloxi MS and New Orleans. For me our trip to Galveston was a chance to reflect on my previous experience and learn from a new place and new people. Throughout our time there I saw many sights that reminded me of those places that I had worked, places that I came to know and love.

At first glance, Galveston seems to be thriving. The beaches are full, and there are hotels and restaurants open for business. But looking a little deeper, you can see a community struggling to recover. There are huge apartment buildings standing closed with no sign of improvement since the storm. In that silence are dozens of families who have had to relocate, and may never return to this city. Our work coordinator Reverend Billy, the charismatic Baptist minister who seemed far different from me, had my sympathies when he said he was at his volunteer site from 7 to 7 every day. He is one of the many residents that shoulder new burdens in the post-disaster reality. In Bolivar huge stretches of neighborhood have been flattened to sandy fields. Occasionally you will see a house or a cluster of houses, or sometimes just a two-story staircase alones on an otherwise vacant lot. It can be an overwhelming feeling to look out over an area and realize that

you cannot even identify the place that someone once called home. You need no experience to appreciate the weight of this event; all around us were the signs of communities and families struggling with the effects of hurricane Ike.

I work in disaster areas not because I love disasters but because I love communities. Both in Biloxi and New Orleans I was able to work closely with people who were deeply connected to their homes. These strong men and women inspired me to work hard with them to bring back a vibrant place for them to continue to live and thrive. It takes many people, working in many different ways to bring back a community so heavily affected. Many hands are needed to rebuild broken houses, and many patient listeners needed to hear survivor's stories. On this trip I got to spend a week with committed wildflowers doing that hard work.

It is also important for to remember is that it is not only hurricanes and natural disasters that push people out of their homes and communities, but slower, man-made forces that do as well. The closing of a car factory or the gentrification of a city can also cause families to look around and realize that they are in a neighborhood where they suddenly feel alone or abandoned.

When we as a faith community participate in the recovery and revitalization of a place like Galveston or New Orleans, we become invested in the success of a community that is not our own. It also gives us an opportunity to see ourselves in a new way and reinvest ourselves in our own communities.

From Rev. Eliza Galaher

The first phrase of today's responsive reading, which I have turned to not infrequently in my time here at Wildflower Church, states, "I want to be with people who submerge in the task...."

The final clause of our congregation's mission statement proclaims that, "...we commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice."

I hold these two passages up to you this morning like two companioning poems, like two interwoven tattoos.

And so here is what I know about our trip to Galveston:
Nine members of Wildflower Church—Lois, Kate, Barbara, Elizabeth, Robin, Debbie, Pat, Kathy, and Polly—committed to transforming themselves and the world around

them through the compassionate, loving, and just act of living and working together for five days, scraping, sanding, mudding, and painting almost the entire first floor of a three-story Baptist church, so that that first floor can eventually serve as a volunteer coordination center for Hurricane Ike relief.

And I know that nine members of Wildflower Church—those same nine women—submerged themselves in the task, not only of working in hot, sweaty, dusty, often inefficiently lighted conditions for six to seven hours each day, but also in living as witness to what Hurricane Ike has brought to Galveston, and to the Bolivar peninsula, and in living as models of what it takes to be in community for just about every moment of every day: patience, understanding, coordination, cooperation, self care, humor, and the willingness to stretch, just enough, in order to allow oneself to be transformed.

Members of the group have spoken for themselves this morning, so I don't need to speak for them, or tell their stories for them. I only need to offer to them, and to you all, my

thanks, for making this trip to Galveston possible, and for the opportunity to submerge myself, with you all, in the task of and commitment to transformation.

All who participate positively at Wildflower Church submerge themselves in beloved and just community, whether we're traveling to Galveston, to the state capitol, or to one another's homes for a visit; whether we're making coffee for each other in the William Temple Episcopal Center where we ten Galveston goes slept for six nights, or in this sanctuary, where we all meet every Sunday; whether we're taking hours to paint a building, taking minutes at a committee meeting, or taking days to find the right realtor to help us find a home of our own. We are doing the good work. And our trip to Galveston, as with our trip last year to New Orleans, makes manifest in a particularly powerful, explicit, and comprehensive way, the very spirit of who we are and the good work we do. The sweat and the aches, the bruises and the fatigue are right there, carried by our bodies. And so carried by our bodies is the spirit of life and love. And so carried are the acts of compassion and love and justice we commit

ourselves to. And so is the light. So, through commitment to transformation and the willingness to submerge in the task, so may our light shine. Amen.