

# MANNA *in the wilderness*

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## Hope in its Profoundest Moment

by Julia Occhiogrosso

They were all spruced up with cheery faces. "Comida, Comida!" the two, three and six year old chanted as Stevi and I made our way down the alley to their hidden quarters with a couple of boxes of food. This had only been our fourth visit in the last four months to this worn and wretched abode which they know as home. I was surprised by the quick recognition acquired by these young ones. Their mom let us in the back door into a small, bare but clean kitchen. Even in its starkness it was a major upgrade from the other room we had come to know from previous visits. I found it difficult to stand in the stifling stench of this ten by ten foot space. It was all too painful to see this young mom and her three children sharing an old mattress laying on a filthy carpet. A baby crib and broken armchair furnished the rest of the room.

Anna (not her real name) and her children are one of a few recipients of monthly food boxes. A team of volunteers go out in pairs to bring food and compassionate presence to families and seniors in need. It is a simple gesture in a vast land of material and spiritual needs. As we approach our sixth month with this project, I come upon the ironic fact that what began as my altruistic gesture camouflaged as serving the "needy" is only a hoax leading me to encounter my own deepest need; to know the healing and hope-filled power of the Holy One.

In the last couple of years, I have opted to focus more on my role as parent than to do the soup line. Gary and the many volunteers that support him keep the soup line going. While I know that this is a right and appropriate decision for me in the present moment, I also recognize that I suffer a loss in not encountering the experience of the poor in a concrete, personal and consistent basis. Perhaps that is why six months ago, when I began to feel adjusted enough to my new role as mom, I decided to venture out into another (less demanding than the soup line) service project. I talked to others about

this food box ministry and the idea seemed to resonate enough for us to begin the effort. We get regular monthly food donations from local parishes. Two loyal volunteers (Claudia and Mary Lou) come monthly to assemble the food boxes and a team

to us. Some take the boxes and escort us out quickly. Others sit us down for a long spell of conversation. Some send us homemade cakes and knitted goodies as a gesture of thanks. Others are always needing more. Some (as we are clued in by other recipients) might



I WAS HUNGRY by Meinrad Craighead

of ten of us meet on the fourth Saturday of each month. We pray and go out in pairs to our brothers and sisters and afterwards those of us who wish to, spend time debriefing about our experience.

We go out two by two. The people we encounter vary in their responses

very well be exchanging our offerings for drink.

We go open and receptive to building relationship; to building a family of support. When we re-group to debrief the morning's experiences we are sharing a living faith journey (continued on back page)

(*Hope*, continued from front page) with one another. The stories and scenarios are difficult and painful and get us in touch with the strengths and afflictions of those we encounter. We are both inspired and humbled, both shaken and grounded.

It is easy to fall into the trap of our own power. The power we hold as the providers of basic needs. The power to judge and to give and not to give. The power to decide who are the deserving and who are the undeserving based on our standards and expectations. This is an insidious trap we are all vulnerable to. It is a trap which is only averted if it leads us to discover our own frailties. If the discussion and discernment of such subjects help me to see that it would be difficult to near impossible for me to alter my worst tendencies even if it meant I would risk losing something valuable to me than on some level they are redemptive. If our sharings breed empathy and compassion for the weaknesses of ourselves and others then we are on the path to become wounded healers.

There are many different ways that people report experiencing the Divine; the Holy One. The great mystics were able to be in constant awareness of the divine realm. For myself, I would settle for a little taste once in awhile, to keep me on track and to help me stay connected to the indwelling of hope that is vulnerable to the forces of evil in this world. While I recognize that spirituality is a personal journey, I will also share that nothing has touched or transformed the deepest places in me more radically than my cumulative encounters with persons who endure the suffering realities of poverty and injustice.

I recall many glimpses of this Holy Presence in the experience day in and day out on the soup line. When I say Holy Presence I am not speaking of any life shattering other worldly image like one may see on the hit series *Touched by an Angel*. It is more like a seed that gets planted in you and grows in fits and spurts along with the collection of encounters with the marginalized your heart has received. It is a Presence that is not tangible and measureable in any way except that one day you find yourself weeping over the oppression you read about in the daily news in some distant land and you wonder why you

are so emotional. You might find yourself getting physically sick at the thought of a death penalty execution. Or, when you walk past someone laying out on the street begging for food you may still just walk by but you cannot focus on the conversation you were having, your thoughts and heart are somewhere else.

Regardless of how the Holy Presence shows itself in your life, you just know that you are changed and that you will never be able to go back to thinking, perceiving or feeling the same way about the world reality again. When you are at a social gathering and the subject comes up about those "lazy bums" or those "welfare cheats" you hear a voice inside trying to conjure up the courage to say something profound and convincing to persuade your company to the side of the poor, but you are minimally convincing. Even a profound defense of the "undeserving" poor cannot convey what occurs to the human heart in the actual experience of relationship with the persons who endure the plight of poverty and injustice. Nothing replaces the conversion potential quite like standing in feeble solidarity with the defiled and despised of this world.

Yes, once again I am changed. Despite this new knowledge and new pain, I am glad of the transformation in me. I know the Holy One is present in love and that I can touch the wounds and grieve the wounds and not only survive but be strengthened by the experience. This is Hope in its profoundest moment.

Consistently, this is what the poor have witnessed to me. I say this without an ounce of sentimentality or naivete. I say it about the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor alike. They have often taught me how to desire life despite the suffering; to "keep on keeping on", "to never mistake kindness for weakness" and to "be grateful for the morning sunrise".

When I enter the wretched abode that is the home for this twenty-four year old mom and her three young children, I am

humbled by her courage. I am in awe of her capacity to manage three young children to daycare via the Las Vegas bus system, then get herself to job training, doctor appointments and her case worker. With her broken English and limited literacy she wades her way through the bureaucratic maze which dominates her existence. Despite all of this, with each visit she reports to us a mastering of a new hurdle in her slow steady progression toward decent housing. Something in me longs to honor her and the many like her who are inspirational models of endurance. Their lives speak of the eternal presence within of dignity, fortitude and life's victory over death.

It is a gift to experience the infinite qualities of the divine in the many moments of our time on this earth. I find it in the beauty of nature, in the simple joy of my children, in the mercy of a friend ... and still I cherish the opportunities of meeting True Hope in the least of these among us.

*If you are interested in helping with the food distribution to families and seniors every fourth Saturday morning of each month, contact Julia at 647-0728.*



### RELIGIOUS ACTION FOR DISARMAMENT

Dec. 29, 1999 - Jan. 2, 2000  
Las Vegas, NV & the Nevada  
(Nuclear Weapon) Test Site  
Join a candlelit procession onto  
the Test Site at midnight, Dec. 31  
Join Bishop Tom Gumbleton, Dr.  
Rosalie Bertell, Fr. Dan Berrigan,  
Joyce Hollyday, Ched Myers, Fr.  
John Dear, Sr. Rosemary Lynch  
Nevada Desert Experience  
(702) 646-4814  
Box 46645, Las Vegas, NV 89114

**VOLUNTEERS  
NEEDED  
FOR OUR MORNING  
BREAKFAST, CALL 647-0728**

## PLEASE JOIN US:

**Wednesday-Saturday, 6:00 a.m.:**  
Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.  
**Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:**  
Serve breakfast at Ethel Pearson Park (E & Washington St.) to the homeless.  
**Tuesday, 5:30 p.m.:**  
Mass or Liturgy at Catholic Worker, potluck following.  
**Seven Days a Week:**  
Hospitality (IHN) to 3 to 5 homeless families.  
**Last Saturday each month; 9:00 a.m.:**  
Deliver food to homes in need, gather for reflection & prayer, call for info.  
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Las Vegas, NV 89106-3039  
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