

MANNA *in the wilderness*

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Beyond Separation: The Possibilities and the Promise

by Julia Occhiogrosso

I stand staring through the chain-link fence that encloses the field that the Catholic Worker and others have used as a site to gather for sharing food, clothes, and companionship with street people.

The fence was put in place by the City of Las Vegas a couple of months ago. The

painful realities. From immigrants needing asylum, to persons exhibiting “antisocial behaviors,” to anyone who is outside our familiar comfort zone: it is easier to put up a wall than to do the harder work of finding connection.

Policies and responses to the homeless crisis meted out by the city have only

builders. Then in collaboration with DOT, the huts were destroyed as their former inhabitants looked on.

These “solutions” to the crisis only serve to create more entrenched barriers between homeless advocates and policy makers. They fuel the illusion of our separateness, reject the truth of our



James Gay III Park, is large, at 5-blocks long, and close to the Catholic Worker. It offered shade for the homeless and has renovated restrooms (pictured above), but has been closed for over seven years, even though it's regularly maintained by the city. The three empty lots we have served in for over twenty years (next to the old St. James the Apostle Catholic Church) were recently fenced in by the City of Las Vegas. (PHOTO BY JULIA OCCHIOGROSSO)

pandemic had already altered the way we could be present to street people and share food. We had just mastered the COVID-19 routine when we were presented with yet another adjustment challenge.

We now set up on the sidewalks that border the perimeter of the fence. I will probably never know what motivated the city's decision to enclose the field. As I gaze at the stretch of wire mesh outlining the profile of human beings waiting in line for food, I think what an apt metaphor for the ways we respond to complex and

created more difficulties. In November 2019, the city passed a no-camping ordinance. At least two public parks in our area have been locked to any access for years. Weekly, we witness a line of Department of Transportation (DOT) vehicles accompanied by law enforcement making street people move from underpasses and other locations. Just a few months ago we witnessed the cities of Las Vegas and North Las Vegas force twenty-seven houseless people from their tiny huts that had been gifted to them by volunteer

interconnectedness, and ignore the message of the Mystical Body of Christ. We are all members through Him. If one part of the Body suffers, the entire Body is diminished. If one part of the Body is uplifted, the entire Body progresses toward healing.

Pope Francis has called on us to build bridges, not walls. This is a call to dismantle the barriers no matter in what form these barriers show themselves. Even those of us who may not support policies that build
(continued on back page)

(continued from front page)

walls and put up fences, often have walls around our perceptions. How receptive are we to listening to someone who has a different point of view?

Recently I have attempted to have conversations with city officials to see if I could get a better understanding of what motivates these policies and initiatives. Truly curious, I put aside my assumptions and cynicism and inquired. The one person I spoke to seemed conflicted and seemed to have a heart for the plight of the homeless but lacked any vision for an alternative response.

If I am to call for the taking down of fences, or alternatives to putting up walls, then I must be willing to take an inventory of how I am inclined to do the same. Where am I complicit in building walls and fueling divisions? Where am I barricading my heart to another's suffering? Where am I afraid to reach beyond my comfort zone to someone whom I may have a conflict with.

Staring through the links of fence I find myself thinking about all the barriers that need to be removed so that we can better understand each other. Gandhi said that "everyone holds a piece of the truth." When we can acknowledge the limitations we each bring to any conversation, we can begin to recognize the potential insights that can be gleaned by opening ourselves to another's voice.

Dispelling the illusion of our separateness is more difficult than digging out a cyclone fence. It takes a willingness to sit with our fears and anger long enough to see how they mirror the feelings of the very ones we feel alienated from. We have to look deeper and in new ways if we are to find alternatives to the typical responses born out of typical human fears. It's the fears underneath the patterns of responses that have to be tended.

For those of us committed to taking down fences, we must be willing to ask new questions in new ways. What would you have to believe about street people to support these policies and approaches to a human crisis? Maybe people who are making these decisions have never had any positive contact with people on the margins. Maybe their entire perception is built upon stereotypes conveyed in the media. Maybe people making these decisions have little or no knowledge of the consequences of mental health issues like trauma, schizophrenia and depression.

Asking difficult questions with open hearts and minds is how we practice loving one another and loving our "enemy." It is the path to life affirming responses to painful realities.

Our food line guests seem to have adapted to the new setup. Food is still shared, the hungry are fed. And while we feel the loss of our gathering space in the field and endure another degree of social distancing, there is no barrier that can impede the creation of the Beloved Community for all those who seek it.



Former community member Eugene Bahn visited us recently and helped us make 340 slices of garlic bread for our Saturday food line.



Former community member Ryan Hall and his wife and former volunteer, Dr. Erandhi Hall, are the proud parents of son Elijah Peter Sinha Hall, born Dec. 2, 2020.

DONATIONS:

Checks: Please make checks payable to

"Las Vegas Catholic Worker" and send to:

Las Vegas Catholic Worker
500 W. Van Buren Ave.
Las Vegas, NV 89106-3039

PayPal Giving Fund:

<http://lvcw.org/giving>

Credit Card Donations:

<http://lvcw.org/donate>

Above: When it rained on Jan. 29 (pictured) and March 12, we did our meal assembly under the large carport. Fortunately the rain stopped for serving. We usually use paper bags, but used donated plastic bags on those days. We serve over 300 hot "To-go" meals, three mornings a week.

PLEASE JOIN US: COVID-19 Procedures:

Call or e-mail to schedule your volunteer morning. Please do not just show up. Do wear a mask. Visors, gloves and aprons provided.

To Schedule: (702) 647-0728 or mail@lvcw.org

Thurs.-Sat., 6:00 a.m.

Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

Thurs.-Sat., 7:00 a.m.

Over 300 Hot "To-go" Meals served to poor & homeless people.

Wednesday, 11:30 a.m.:

50 lunches taken to the homeless.

Third Sat. of the month:

Deliver food boxes to homes in need.

We are a Participating Member of:

Nevadans for the Common Good.

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