

# MANNNA *in the wilderness*

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The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

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## Volunteering: The Secrets of Service

by Lance Cheslock

I stood on the porch visiting with two new volunteers who had signed up to work shifts at the shelter. We were (and still are) in need of extra help, so I hoped to make a good first impression. Volunteers are initially motivated by optimism and idealism, but it is their ability to cultivate compassion which sustains them.

If I were to present these volunteers with a glossy color brochure, the fancy print would suggest that working with the poor should be fairly straight forward. It would seem that all people really need is 1) a bit of smart counseling, 2) getting connected to resources in the community such as jobs and benefits, and 3) some warm hospitality to see them through to their first pay check. Ideally, this kind of service should quickly see many happy results.

Behind the "gloss," however, is a different reality. Service work is not easy, and though many good people with willing hearts enter service, actually making a difference is an on-going challenge. I realized that I needed to help these volunteers establish realistic expectations about their role at the shelter. I remember a friend once saying to me, "The difference between our expectations and reality is the degree to which we suffer." It was important for me to paint an accurate picture of what service would really entail:

**1) Service work is mostly a long series of small menial tasks.** Chopping carrots, emptying the trash, collating newsletters, running errands, washing dishes, answering the phone, sorting donations, cleaning up messes, .... As with any work, it is tiring. Amidst all these tasks, there is the occasional brilliant moment when one connects with a guest. Such moments come unexpectedly and are real treasures. It is important to see the big picture amidst all the endless little tasks. The hospitality of the shelter is, in fact, the summation of all these little tasks. It is the food, the cleanliness, the friendliness together which create a supportive environment for those we serve.

**2) People who are poor or in crisis can be very difficult to work with.** This makes good sense in our heads, yet in practice it can be elusive — If someone has been abused or lost their job or has lost control of their life and is in crisis, it is not difficult to understand why they wouldn't be in a "good mood." None-the-less, it can still be hurtful and unpleasant when such folks are ungrateful, express anger inappropriately, or show no motivation. It's hard

to feel compassion for someone who is not "honestly" dealing with their issues. To pour lots of energy into someone and get no "results" can be very frustrating. It's also easy to slip into the judgment seat about the decisions that a guest made which led to their current "down and out" circumstances.

Poverty should never be romanticized.



**VOLUNTEERS STIR 10 GALLON POTS FOR MORNING SOUP LINE.**

Poverty is ugly. Its biting grip starves the body and spirit and forces uncharacteristic, extreme behavior. When people are so desperate that their only concern is surviving through the day, they take to certain behaviors in their desperation to survive. If all the moral means within their abilities fail to give them what they need to survive, people will often resort to more desperate measures. To survive, people may stretch the truth, manipulate others, steal, or work the system. We can't condone such actions, but with eyes of compassion we can look below the surface of the individual situations for an understanding of the poverty which forced such behaviors.

This also underscores why it is so important to provide food, shelter, and security. When these basic needs are met people can begin to look beyond the measures they must take to just survive and can begin to strategize about how to put their lives back together for the long-term. Certain "survival" behaviors will take time to unlearn, but the person is given a new lease on life's possibilities and increased

potential.

When one sticks with the work long enough, many hidden surprises begin to emerge. In the face of serious and difficult life circumstances our guests repeatedly demonstrate generosity, helpfulness, wisdom, compassion and celebrative spirits. The goodness of human beings can never be fully squelched, and witnessing

the tremendous courage some guests exert to put their lives back together is always an inspiration.

**3) The novelty of helping in a new environment will soon wear off.** This is a fascinating place to work, given the diversity of people who come through our door. Yet in time, the intrigue of the new cultures will diminish. However, the need for help will not!

As volunteers get past the first adventures of their experience, a mood of unfulfillment or ineffectiveness can begin to set in. Sometimes it's the realization that there are no quick, dramatic results for their efforts. Sometimes it's the frustration of having so few resources to meet such great needs. Many have felt that just helping to serve a meal can't begin to make a difference in someone's life. The same idealisms we held when we inquired about volunteering can begin to haunt us.

The challenge is to stick with the process. It is equally important to not become dependent upon the outcome but to just do what needs to be done without expectation (continued on back page)

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tion of "results." When we are faithful over time, the fruits of service work will be harvested. These fruits of service work will take on many forms. Sometimes they can be new and wonderful relationships, a greater life wisdom, and the development of gifts we never knew we had.

Inevitably, people's lives are impacted, but not always in the same way or the same time-frame that we originally hoped for. I liken it to watering the soil in my yard. Parched earth, when given water will always spring forth new life. Yet the resultant bouquet will have an unpredictable character and beauty.

4) Change is incremental. Whether one is talking about changing behaviors of people, communities, or institutions, I've seen that change usually happens in tiny steps over a long period of time. There is no such thing as instant, sweeping change. In situations where large changes might seem to flash before us, what usually has happened is that small bits of change were happening silently over time and eventually gave way to a sweeping, dramatic moment, a "tipping point." It takes time to heal, to unlearn bad habits, to learn new behaviors, to get in shape, to forgive deep-felt hurts. Often the world is quite impatient as needed changes are awaited. Patience bears fruit. Good, positive change will find us, but at best it creeps at a slow steady pace! Another learning that has meant a lot to me is the value of exploring and celebrating the complexities of every person. Each person is made up of many unique facets. People are often labeled by the one part of their life which is out of order. "That's the alcoholic," or "He's the ex-convict," or "She's mentally ill," or "She's one of those welfare moms." Labels such as these carry dark, unfair judgments from society. These labels rob people of the breadth of their identity. When we use them, we blind ourselves to the wholeness of the other person. Labels can blind us from seeing what a person is doing right, the gifts they offer the world. Each person holds their own unique story. Each person has their own unique birthright, potential, and dreams. It's an

adventure to discover someone else's childhood stories, their favorite ice cream flavor and baseball team, and their sense of humor. We can learn from others' success stories, political viewpoints, spiritual beliefs, and childhood dreams. When we put into this broader perspective the part of someone's life that is not working it becomes easier to build upon that person's strengths.

I've learned that even when we use terms such as "we" and "they," we are injecting a separation between ourselves and others. We often erect barriers to protect ourselves from our own vulnerabilities. These barriers close off channels of compassion. A label says, "You're not like me"; it can prevent the user from fully acknowledging and receiving the other person and from discovering, "Hey, we have something in common!"

When we let go of labels, the identity of individuals can come alive!

Then, each of us finds freedom to be fully ourselves ....

As the weeks passed, I observed those two new volunteers develop generous spir- its of compassion. They have found a niche which is of great help to us, and have enjoyed a multitude of relationships. I hope they will be with us for a long time!

Lance Cheslock is the Director of La Puente in Alamosa, Colorado, [lapuente.net](http://lapuente.net)



Stillpoint center for spiritual development presents:

## Fr. Richard Rohr

*"The Naked Now: Learning to See Like the Mystics"*

Saturday, Dec. 5; 9:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. at St. Joseph, Husband of Mary Church, 7260 W. Sahara Ave. (at Tenaya). Cost: \$50, \$30 for students and unemployed. Call (702) 243-4040 to pre-register or for more info.

WEBSITE: [www.lvcw.org](http://www.lvcw.org)

**PRAY FOR  
PEACE  
IN OUR  
WORLD!**

(FOR  
TAB)

**Pray the Rosary: Tuesdays, 6:00 p.m.**  
**Prayer Services: September 23, October 28 (6:00 p.m., potluck following)**  
**Call Mark at (702) 524-3714 to confirm.**

**Bluegrass Concert and Dance to Benefit Christ the King Church Outreach Program, Sat., Oct. 10, 2009**  
**5:30 p.m. - 9:00 p.m., \$25 per person, featuring the Yucca Mountain Boys, Music and dancing starts at 6:00 p.m., Outdoors at the home of Peggy and Dale Devitt, 5875 W. Oquendo Road, Las Vegas, NV 89118 (near Jones and 215, phone: 871-1642). Bring your own picnic dinner and beverages (tables and chairs provided). Advance tickets please! Call 871-1642 for tickets or information.**  
**The outreach program provides the Catholic Worker soupline each month with stew ingredients in the winter and hot dogs and trimmings (corn, macaroni salad, watermelon) in the summer.**

**PLEASE JOIN US:**

- Wednesday-Saturday, 6:00 a.m.:** Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.
  - Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:** Breakfast served at G & McWilliams to the poor & homeless (about 150 people).
  - Wednesday, 8:00 a.m. - noon:** Hospitality Day, we invite 20 homeless men home for showers, to wash clothes, and to have a great lunch.
  - Thursday, 8:30 a.m. - 9:30 a.m.:** Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Court-house, 333 Las Vegas Blvd. S.
  - Thursday, 11:30 a.m.:** 50 Bag lunches delivered to homeless.
  - Last Saturday of month, 8:00 a.m.:** Deliver food boxes to homes in need.
- PRINTING DONATED BY AccuPRINT**

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