

Trees in the Promised Land...

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Tony made it clear, in forceful terms, that she needed emergency housing and special help to get out of her homelessness. That insistence alone was enough to set many to work, and she got the support she needed.

The point of contact for help, that which in fact had saved her life, was not in a human service office, nor through organized homeless advocacy. It came, as relief often does for such persons, through the contact and community of another person who shared her precarious life. Tony's mission was not "to care for the poor." Rather, his urgency was to help a neighbor, one like himself – a member of his own rugged community. His call for justice came from the soul of his relationship with a person, whom in knowing, he had come to love. He reminded us, in plain speech, that his liberation, as ours, could not be separated from hers.

Gustavo Gutierrez, whose thought was shaped as a priest in ministry with and among the poor of Peru, writes, in We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People, of the powerful authority of firsthand awareness of the life and daily struggles of those who live on society's edge.

Beyond any possible doubt, the life of the poor is one of hunger and exploitation, inadequate health care and lack of suitable housing, difficulty in obtaining an education, inadequate wages and unemployment, struggles for their rights, and repression. But that is not all. Being poor is also a way of feeling, knowing, reasoning, making friends, loving, believing, suffering, celebrating, and praying. The poor constitute a world of their own. Commitment to the poor means entering, and in some cases remaining in, that universe with a much clearer awareness; it means being one of its inhabitants, looking upon it as a place of residence and not simply of work. It does not mean going into that world by the hour to bear witness to the gospel, but rather emerging from within it each morning in order to proclaim the good news to

every human being.

Our community at Meeting Ground is fortunate to have the partnership of scores of volunteer groups who help in every phase of our daily work: young people, adults, and inter-generational. Most are from faith communities or fellowships, but also schools, service organizations, scouts, sororities, and folks who just organize themselves to help. In orientation meetings we always emphasize that the most important aspect of service is the development of relationships, and the soul of community life. The work itself thus becomes a context for creating the possibility of neighborhood, in which human encounters take place and meeting occurs. In this space, sacred in nature, we may discover the means of liberation for ourselves and others.

This would apply if the project is building a house, serving in a soup kitchen, or in any other sphere of non-profit or community work. To speak of "caring for the poor" is a noble aspiration, and to so desire is a good thing. But as Dorothy Day reminded us, "The greatest challenge of the day is how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us." [Loaves and Fishes]

Such a radical work is essential in getting to what we often call the "root causes" of poverty in our world. We usually discuss the issue in terms of numbers and statistics, and, according to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau report, "Poverty in the United States 2002," they are on the increase. But it is just as important to know firsthand how poverty is degrading to the human spirit, and to perceive its intense loneliness which creates disparity and alienation for those embraced by its grip.

Justice implies the restoration of true human community. It calls for liberation, for all alike to have access to the means of life, health, and dignity. In establishing justice, the role of faith communities is irreplaceable. Our mission to the World, our outreach, is not



Anna Edwards, a mission volunteer from Indianapolis in front our the new family residence building at Clairvaux Farm. Anna leaves this month to prepare for medical school in August. She has been living and working at the Farm since January doing everything from office work to truck driving! She will be missed very much, but she leaves a legacy of love and appreciation among all!

charitable service. It is, rather, the expression of a desire more subtle and profound than words alone can express. It is the impulse of the creative call for all people, ourselves included, to return home to the love which alone is the bedrock of life and human society.

We are not called to extend a one-sided charitable care for those who are poor and marginal, however noble the aim of such philanthropy. Our task is to rekindle kindred human community – to create contexts of meeting, and to call all persons together as one, beyond the barriers of class, race, and rigid custom. We are to meet persons as individuals, not to serve humanity in the abstract.

Why is this so important as to be considered indispensable to the establishment of justice? It is simply that, without the work of meeting, and the deep, passionate sensibility that it is the right thing to do, there would be no foundation for restraint, gift, deference, or generosity. The spirit which moves for such high design is that only perceived in the gut understanding of truth. These absolutes are irrevocably embedded in human spirit and brought to the surface in our living through the challenge of our relationships – with ourselves, with God, and with all persons we encounter. Such relationships precede justice, as perceived in the tradition by St.

Francis:

The first fact to realize about St. Francis is involved in the first fact with which his story starts; that when he said from the first that he was a Troubadour, and said later that he was a Troubadour of a newer and nobler romance, he was not using a mere metaphor, but understood himself much better than the scholars understood him. He was a lover. He was a lover of God and he was really and truly a lover of persons; possibly a much rarer mystical vocation.

A lover of persons is very nearly the opposite of a philanthropist; indeed the pedantry of the Greek word carries something like a satire on itself. A philanthropist may be said to love anthropoids. But as St. Francis did not love humanity but people, so he did not love Christianity but Christ. Say, if you think so, that he was a lunatic loving an imaginary person; but an imaginary person, not an imaginary idea. (G. K. Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi)

It is not enough to offer charity. Our duty is to plant seeds of liberation, and everywhere to prepare a world in which justice, as the Bible foresees, will be as commonplace as trees at every turn, and just as simply sown. *And the leaves of these trees are for the healing of nations.*