

An Eternity of Leaking Pipes

By Carl Mazza

Don't waste life in doubts and fears; spend yourself on the work before you, well assured that the right performance of this hour's duties will be the best preparation for the hours and ages that will follow it.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

We ought not to grow tired of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed.

The Sayings of Brother Lawrence from The Practice of the Presence of God

A religion that takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them is no religion.

- Ghandi

"Where is the water shut-off?!" This was the urgent question that greeted me on my return to the Farm after a day of meetings downstate. Immediately, I knew what was wrong. "Another water leak," I said to myself, "one of the hundreds of little disasters we have faced over the years."

As I stepped out of the truck, I quietly questioned, "Is this what it's all about? We are supposed to be partners with people, not things – yet, we race around spending so much of our time fixing, stacking, repairing, sorting, removing, replacing, and cleaning." It all, as they say, comes with the territory,

A Homily from Our Annual Meeting...

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We do not hear people say "I'll never give to Meeting Ground – their buildings aren't fancy enough. I'll never give to Meeting Ground, their meals aren't gourmet fare. I'll never give to Meeting Ground, the place is a dump!" But we will hear, "I'll never give to Meeting Ground again – they were rude to me – they were arrogant – they were hostile!" As Proverbs 15 suggests, "To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone, and a word in season, how good it is." Our dealings must reflect caring, concern, compassion, and love!

I suppose.

Within minutes Udo and I stood over a bathtub, looking into the exposed plumbing, shaking our heads that the leak had not been discovered sooner. As always, it can be fixed – and we will move on. The water I watched dripping slowly back down onto the floor mirrored my sense of futility that so much attention needed to be paid to such material labors.

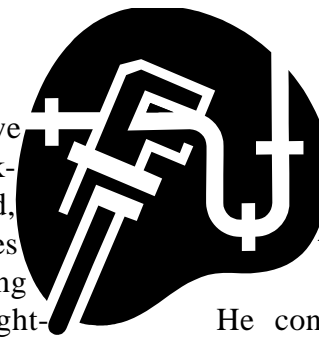
Within minutes we had shifted gears, and were sitting in a circle with thirty-eight young people and their leaders – a volunteer work camp from Clinton, South Carolina. We were now looking at faces instead of pipes, and in a moment of sublime paradox, we were discussing the meaning of their hard volunteer work in the heat and humidity. "What does our service mean?," we asked each other. It does get frustrating.

Before long, we began talking about how we have all seen lives changed over the days, weeks, months, and years. Not just the expected new beginnings for folks experiencing homelessness, the thousands who have lived with us in our community since 1982, but all of us – whether homeless or housed. The work, even the most mundane and uninspiring aspects of it, has led us into a venue of grace. Through it our lives are changed forever.

Residents: Proverbs also presents advice to residents – As residents we have duties and roles to play. We are part of a family and each must contribute his/her part. Meeting Ground does not owe us a home, it offers us shelter, food, fellowship, so we can make a home together. As residents we should not see ourselves as recipients, we should strive to be participants.

The prodigal son *blew-it* – he wasted his substance on wrong decisions, he *screwed up* his life. But then he *came to his senses* and realized that even servants at home *had food enough and to share, while he perished with hunger* - so

As we talked we seemed to be walking along a road, reminding ourselves of the amazing changes and thought-



conversions we were experiencing on the way. It became clear that the work of our hands was being infused, through a splendid energy, into a comradeship of soul. Sharing work is also sharing life, even when the experience is a plumbing emergency, or dish washing, or whatever.

A few summers ago a similar youth group was describing their week's experiences in a chapel service on the last day of their camp. I will never forget the moving story told with quivering voice by a sixteen-year-old. He spoke about how he had been "partnered" with a homeless man early in the week, and given the job of weed-whacking around the long western fence. It was not an exciting task, and to make matters worse – the team didn't know how to operate the weed-whacker.

The man who was homeless was much older, and from a very different cultural and economic background than the teenager. The boy thought, as he watched the man helplessly fumbling with the cutter, that at his age and experience he should have known how to work it. In his mind he began reducing the man's stature to incompetence, probably lazy, and

he went home and said to dad, "I've sinned, I've messed up – take me back and I'll be a servant." His father had compassion because he loved his son, but also because the son no longer had an attitude problem. He didn't come home demanding, "You owe me – you're my dad – take care of me." Rather, he admitted failure and confessed past mistakes and offered to pitch in and to improve.

Robert Frost in The Hired Man wrote "Home is a place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in." So Meeting Ground is open to whomever has to come here – and our policy is to

not very bright. Such was the starting point on the road to conversion for this young man.

He continued his testimony to describe how they finally got the machine started and began working together on the hot, humid, and buggy task of reducing the tall growth. As they worked, they began to talk. Over the next days they became friends, and the man became a mentor to the boy – helping him to understand and relate to things in his own life that were deeply troubling.

Now at this meeting, wiping away tears, he spoke about the deep friendship which had been formed, and how he would never forget the man who had opened so much of the meaning of life to him. His grief was over how severely he had misjudged him at first. In working and sweating together with him, he experienced a rebirth of understanding.

Behind the veneer of a stumbling, poor fool he saw into the heart of an eternal being, and thus, also, deep into his own soul. Such is the power of weed whacking, leak stopping, dish washing, clothes sorting, and pipe fixing. It's all part of the territory for those who wish to serve with and among persons experiencing homelessness. It may seem like an uninspiring terrain, but it is, in truth, the very land of our souls.

take you in. We offer the shelter, but you make it a pleasant stay or a miserable one. We offer the house – but it takes a lot of living in a house to make it home. To continue what it has been, and continue what it is called to be – Meeting Ground must be a caring, concerned, community of love where no one, including God, is a stranger. "The Lord tears down the house of the proud, but maintains the widow's boundaries."

Let's work together, rich and poor in wealth, rich and poor in spirit, to keep Meeting Ground a place of caring, concern, compassion, and love!