

Thoughts from the Summer Lunch Program

The morning haze hung over the old gray van as children and volunteers from the community placed with care their gifts of brown paper sacks on the seats of the van. The outside of some sacks were decorated with yellow sunshines; other crayoned with stick people. Inside the two hundred sacks were sandwiches, cookies, and chips.

Our first stop was public housing apartments where the yellowest of butterflies hovered over clusters of blue thistle weeds and quickly scattered at the sounds of barefoot children running down the long hill. The children greeted us with “hellos,” but best of all were the hugs and toothless smiles and that wonderful question, “do you have books today?” We brought not only nourishment to the body, but nourishment to the mind and the soul. Oh, the preciousness of that one book, long after the last bit of peanut butter melts in the mouth. As I watched, the children choose and open the pages that spill forth ideas challenging them as they hunger to know what the words say, I remembered that a gift only becomes a gift when it is received with hands and heart. These books packed in cardboard boxes resting on the sidewalk in the hot July sun became a waiting discovery of potential.

Daily there came a child of eight with three children. She had on her wrist a chain of keys when I asked her about them, she said “it was to the apartments of the three toddlers that she kept during the day.” So careful she was to see that the little ones had their lunches first. Adult responsibility begins easily with many children who live in this housing project.

Often, innocence is lost in *street-wise knowledge* that can lead to anger—anger that often leads to violence. I approach with care to give council and advice to others without having known fully the wounds that need healing, but I saw it in a ten year old boy in line to choose a book. He pushed his way toward the front of the line and when an eleven-year old girl, holding an infant, stepped in his way, he drew his fist, screaming: “expletive deleted” and hit her on the cheek, knocking out one of her teeth. I saw it in a six-year old child waiting to get his lunch. He bit the ear of the little girl in front of him. This happened two days after the boxing match between two adults which made headline news. Adult examples that teach quick solutions and damage emotional development. As we hurriedly attended to the hurt child, I placed my hands gently on the boy’s shoulders and whispered in his ear that he must go home now. The next day with his posture stooped, he stood next to me and quietly waited his turn, leaving with his lunch and then, pausing, returned and gave me a hug. It was a silent Sacrament of Reconciliation. These children’s sorrows have become my sorrows.

I watched as a four-year old who always came with a grumpy face and a stick in her hand. She used the stick to threaten and bully the other children.

She would stay longer than the others just to talk, her need for acceptance was so great. Once, her stick that she carried out to control others was picked up by a six-year old boy who tied a string on the end and pretended to fish with his new-found fishing pole. The stick, a symbol of her internal anger, had been recreated into a symbol of hope. I pray that this child may come to know a stick with a sting tied at the end.

One morning I felt a tug at my arm as this wide-eyed child, whose face was covered in grape jelly, said to me "I know you missed me yesterday. I was at my grandpas." And another child, whose face was covered with mosquito bites, responded to my saying to her: "I missed you yesterday." She replied: "Say that to me again." I celebrate their self-esteem.

In the shade at the edge of an old oak tree, sat a mother mending her children's clothes. As I watched her lovingly sewing the old holes, it reminded me how important it was for her to examine the holes, choose the right thread, and slowly recreate useful clothes. It is with compassion that we must mend our own torn wounds and reach out to the wounds of others. As I watched her gently mend the old clothes, I remembered these words:

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear and confusion. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, powerless with the powerless. Compassion means a full immersion with the condition of being human. When we share in God's compassion, a whole new way of living opens itself to us.

Nouwen

With compassion, the torn wounds and the wounds of others are healed.

As I watched the children disappear up the long hill, the butterflies returned and once again, there was silence.