



St. Julie Billiard's Commitment to the Poor

FOUNDRESS OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME DE NAMUR AND SAINT FOR OUR TIMES

Ministry in "Being There"

by Therese Del Genio, SNDdeN

St. Julie was a minimalist: "Who knows but that He gathered all of us together here, to win Him one single soul?" and a maximizer: "I seem to have been dropped here by the permission of the good God, and then I only think of doing what he shows me moment by moment."

I am grateful for the courage of her beliefs and actions, whenever I am challenged by someone demanding of me an accounting of our shelter's numeric successes: How many homeless people went to rehab? How many homeless people got jobs? How many homeless people moved into apartments and got off the streets? Although there are definite quantitative answers, it seems to me that the notion behind the questions is flawed. The end result may be personally satisfying or frustrating, depending on the situation, but the calculations miss the point. For me, it is the sharing of the journey, the connecting of two souls, the experience of just "being there," that is at the heart of the matter while I am at the shelter.

"Being there" at Southwest Chicago PADS is intentional on my part, although I never know who will come to the door. At 9:30 one morning, the doorbell rang with annoyance and persistence. The door was opened to an exhausted and dehydrated Joe, begging for a PADS' ID.

He had been released from prison with the clothes on his back, \$10.00 in his pocket, and good wishes, to start a new life. Because of a shortage of half-way houses for ex-offenders, he was paroled to a shelter for 150 homeless men in downtown Chicago.

Upon his arrival, he was greeted with the bleak news, "Unless you have a photo ID by tomorrow, you cannot stay here any more." On December 31, 2004, state IDs in Illinois cost \$4.00. Twenty four hours later, the City raised the fee to \$20.00. What to do?

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A stranger in the crowd of 150 overnighters mentioned that Southwest Chicago PADS offered shelter photo IDs. Because he lacked money for the bus, Joe set out on foot at 6 a.m. and arrived 3½ hours later drenched in perspiration. A volunteer told him that without some proof of his identity, no PADS' ID could be made for him. As I walked into the room, I watched a man and his hope dissolve before my eyes.

Gently intervening, I suggested that we could solve the dilemma more productively after Joe had the opportunity to eat a bowl of cereal with a banana, drink a cup of coffee, and put on clean clothes after a shower. Forty-five minutes later, Joe was a different man. The attentiveness to such basic human needs (e.g. Jesus said, "Give her something to eat,") made all the difference in the world!

The volunteer who helped Joe, witnessed an incredible transformation, not only of outward appearances, but also of personal dignity and hope. Within minutes, Joe posed for a picture and took his laminated ID, which he put gingerly in his pocket. He now would have a roof over his head—a roof shared with 149 other people, but at least a roof.

As we walked to the door together, Joe showered me with so many smiles, "thank you's" and "God bless you's" along with a mighty handshake, that I felt drenched in his appreciation. I had done so little for him. I just couldn't fathom the depth of his gratitude—until months later.

Sometime in January, several viruses viciously attacked me. Trying to be prudent, I made an appointment with the doctor, as soon as possible. All night I was awake hacking in respiratory distress. The next day I drove to the doctor's office, an hour away, and was relieved to find only two people in the waiting room. The nurse looked at me quizzically and stated professionally, "The doctor had an emergency and isn't in. I called and left you a message."

"I never got it," I replied weakly.

"You can make an appointment for Friday."

I knew in my heart that I probably wouldn't be alive by Friday! As I fumbled to get my calendar out, all the coughs I had been suppressing exploded.

"You sound terrible. Forget the calendar." This sensitive nurse was calling the doctor at his emergency and had him call in an antibiotic prescription to my pharmacy.

Within 24 hours, I was feeling better and profoundly grateful, as I thought of Joan, R.N. and her act of compassion. It was then that Joe's face floated into my consciousness, and I understood how an act of kindness, while just "being there," was a gift of God, to someone in great distress. I pray that what Joe taught me about expressing gratitude, will be shown by me for acts both great and small.

It seems to me that Jesus, the itinerant homeless preacher, had, as his method of operation "being present" fully, to those He encountered, wherever their paths crossed: in cemeteries, sheepfolds, synagogues, houses, up trees, and around lakes, in boats, or at on-shore gatherings. It also seems to me, that He was profoundly impacted by the mutuality of the encounter, while "being there."

Something like that happened to me, as I gathered with the guests for our regular Wednesday evening discussions, during "Bridging the Gap." The topic, that night, was on making good decisions. The participants were asked to share

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a personal experience of making a poor choice, and then making a better decision.

Lorenzo spoke of the joy of finding a wallet with \$300.00 inside! Unfortunately the wallet contained the ID of his next door neighbor! There was no move on Lorenzo's part to return the wallet. Instead he focused for three days on how he would wisely spend the money. His conscience, however, continued to prod him. Finally, he confidently walked to his neighbor's door and returned the wallet and all of its contents with no desire for a reward. Lorenzo was thrilled that an impulse to do wrong could be overcome for the better, if he delayed his actions. Everyone in the group could relate to his insight.

The last participant to share was Gerald, who spoke poignantly of the tragic murder of his brother. Over time his undealt-with grief turned into an obsessive rage. Then late one evening he came face-to-face with his brother's murderer. Gerald reached for the knife he carried in his back pocket. With one hand he pinned the culprit to the wall, and with his other hand, he raised the knife to stab him. Before the knife could do its damage, Gerald reflected on his unhealed loss. He looked his brother's killer in the eye, lowered his arms, and whispered, "I cannot kill you, and do to your family what you did to mine. I forgive you." With that, the intended victim faded into the darkness, as did Gerald's obsession to retaliate.

With tears in my eyes and joy in my heart, I looked intently at Gerald, a street saint. Just "being there" with him, in the midst of his comrades in the heart of his story, had a lasting effect on me. In the life of this special man, I understood what St. Julie meant by "the goodness of God" reflected in, and around us!