Fall 12-1-2003

Rejecting Perfection

Jennifer Miller
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: http://dc.cod.edu/plr

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol24/iss1/53

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Light Review by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.
If I can stop one heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life
From aching,
Or cool one pain.
Or help one fainting robin
Into his nest again.
I shall not live in vain.

-Emily Dickinson

I have developed an insatiable desire for S’mores. This addiction has advanced me to the mastery of a roasted marshmallow. The key to perfection is squatting directly above a campfire’s embers. In this position the flames menacingly lick, parching your skin to what feels like the blisterly black of a marshmallow gone wrong. The red and yellows violently dance, seducing beads of sweat from your charring cheeks. That is the intensity of a Phoenix sun in July. The drive to the Canyon Day Apache Reservation was three hours from the Phoenix airport, and I picked the van that had been crippled of air conditioning.

The members of “my” youth group and I suffered the ride with windows up, because the highway wind literally scalded our faces. For fun we bought a bag of ice at McDonalds, and passed the time melting cubes in our belly buttons, ears, and down the seat of our shorts.

Over the course of a week I fell in love with Arizona’s clay-layered landscape and survival-of-the-fittest edge. I had only been in the Glen Ellyn Bible Church youth group for three months, so the beginning of my trip rained doubts and insecurities onto the sparse, sandy soils of the Apache reservation. I decided to partake in a mission trip because I felt my faith in God had finally solidified from the liquidy goo of my adolescence. I wanted to take the next step. Somehow, to me, that meant venturing with 29 strangers to Canyon Day, a place where lightning could be seen as if someone paused time so we alone could view each zig as
it zagged in the mountains. A place where puppies frolicked - motherless, bitten by prickly, stowaway burrs and vermin. A place where Apache children lack-adainsically wandered, unsupervised and up to no good.

I didn’t know anyone. I knew some names, but I had yet to begin the “get-to-know-you” process - shooting the bull, nailing down interests and hobbies, and, finally, meaningful conversation. Our youth pastor, Brian, told us we were to have two major projects while in Canyon Day: laying the concrete for a basketball court, and putting on a Vacation Bible School.

The latter was referred to as “VBS”. This being my first mission trip, I hadn’t the slightest clue what those initials stood for, but I gave the appropriate “smile and nod” response and agonized over different names I was from these “birth-Christians?”. They were all raised in immaculate Christian homes, never missing a daily devotion, TV limited to the Disney Channel or religious programs, blessings toward all food (including Kibbles and Bits for the family dogs, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Rex), no swearing or negative demands (such as “shut up” or “butt out”), only G rated movies, and a lifetime of church perfect attendance. I didn’t accept Christ as my savior until I was 14; it seemed as if these teens were so educated, so disciplined, and I was beneath them, left behind.

I grew up Catholic and got lost somewhere between “Our Father” and “Hail Mary”. It didn’t help that I was a Chreaster (one who attends church only on Christmas and Easter) and went to a public school. The only time I was exposed to religion was Wednesday nights at C.C.D. Somehow those letters meant Catholic class. Two hours of agony listening to a decaying nun, reading the Catholic rules out of our special Catholic workbooks, and dealing with the pubescent Catholic boys whose eyes seemed permanently fixed below my neckline. It wasn’t until I began attending a Christian Reformed high school that I came to understand the meaning behind Jesus’ death and how loving Him filled a void I had felt throughout middle school. These thoughts came slow and scattered, but my senior year I figured a mission trip was the perfect way to catch up with the rest of Christianity, and my first goal was to conquer V.B.S.

In order to advertise the VBS, we made fliers and took to the streets. Canyon Day was a small, dusty community, easily plastered with Christ’s “propaganda”. Our team split into groups and went from house to house. At first glance the town seemed to be littered with typical, middle class, ranch style houses, but upon approaching our vision focused. My crew maneuvered up sunken steps, through jaunty front walks twisted by gasping weeds, and around jutting boards dislodged by rot. Doorbells were a frivolous extravagance; our knuckles blistered as we knocked on doorframes without screens, some without doors at all. Muddled, grime stained faces peaked over windowless sills. Babies toddled through front yards sodded with shards of glass and crushed beer cans. Gravel lawns fenced by barbed wire served as the Apache welcome mat.

Some children romped along with us, a hodgepodge parade. Little girls wearing chintzy, Spandex, printed pants and ratted, dirt marred T-shirts (too big or small) carried dilapidated dolls with matted hair and naked bodies. Older boys displayed mediocre tricks on their rusted “mountain bikes”, encircling us like sharks, stirring up sand, and plunging tire first into the backs of tiny knees. Six-year-olds pushed one-year-olds in doll strollers, wheels straining over chunks of rock, Cabbage Patch print camouflaged by clay.
The first night of VBS proved our efforts successful: 80 children flooded the church grounds. We passed out nametags and performed every game our teen minds could recall as the leaders determined how this swarm of energetic chaos would squeeze into a tin-roofed building the size of a three-car garage.

We took it in shifts: half would sing songs and create crafts, and the other half would receive us as slaves. Some of the older boys were occupied by games of Knock Out, some toddlers thunderstruck by the possibilities of chalk. The others wanted only one thing: piggy back rides.

The church parking lot was a circus and we teens the attractions. I galloped and bucked with the rest of them, but my jealousy bubbled when I saw Davey Voss, a group member three years younger than me, talking to a child about God. That was why we had come. To spread God’s Word. The failure clouded my eyes as I sprinted back and forth, weaving around wrestling matches and pastel sidewalk landscapes. I wanted to share my knowledge, to give them faith in something solid. But I was still a Christian-kindergartener, and lost.

As the night came to a close, we crammed the vans to bursting and set to the task of child-delivery. The children had such a magical night that they did not wish to exit the realm of the “white people” (as they called us). Their directions twisted and looped the 12 passenger vans (filled with 15-20 Apaches) throughout the reservation, until the enraged drivers discovered the children’s fear of police. Threatening a trip to the station gained quick compliance, and each child safely returned home. I personally did not assist in this endeavor, but the horror stories were retold at wrap up that night. We collapsed in a circle, massaging each other’s worn necks and shoulders and ravaged lower backs, rehashing the day’s traumas.

The following nights began in a similar fashion. The multitudes trickled in and our bodies became running jungle gyms once more. On the third night I met a little girl named Cheyanne.

I never asked her age, but judging by her petite, roly-poly frame she could not have been more than five years old. Her skin took the coloring and texture of an acorn, its sweet, baby smell intermingled with earth and wet dog. Tangled, ebony hair frayed onto her shoulders, offsetting inky doe eyes. Her younger brother Chandler wobbled next to her, looking not a day over two, his gritty, sun crisped hand urgently clutching hers. She tagged along with me that night, leaving my side only to seek Chandler out of the writhing mass of Apache and make sure he was safe.

Over the course of the night I had summoned the courage to talk religion with this cherubic child. I asked her what religion she was, and she recited an unpronounceable traditional Apache name. I risked a, “Do you know about Jesus?” fumbling with words in my mind, terrified of losing my opportunity. She nonchalantly nodded, saying, “My Grandma gave me a Bible, but it’s gone.” I asked, “Have you ever been scared? Or felt alone?” She was hesitant, but replied with a yes. “Well, Jesus can protect you and will always be with you!” I realized the corniness of my speech, and wished I had Davey with me right then. She reacted sharply, spitting out, “But He never helped my brother!” Cheyanne had been very soft-spoken up to this point; I wondered what horrible wrong Chandler had suffered. She remained distraught, so I neglected prying into the matter. Instead, I asked if she had ever prayed for her brother, or if he prayed. That gained a “no” shake of the head, followed by a strained glance at her stunt-
ed fingers. Then we prayed; just a little, half-hearted prayer for protection and love. I could feel her fidgety knees next to mine, and a daring peek confirmed that her focus was ricocheting about the room rather than concentrating on my words. When we were done, I asked her if she wanted to be a Christian. A shrug of the shoulders and “I don’t know” was her answer, which I accepted with a hug of farewell and “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The following night was the VBS Carnival, a much-anticipated event by both my group (for I felt I could finally possess it as my own) and the community. More children cascaded to the Lighthouse Community Church’s mess hall than ever before, demanding entertainment and human roller coasters.

Earlier that night I had asked Katie, another member of my group, if I could have the children’s Bible she brought along. She hesitantly said there was a child that she wanted to give it to, but for reasons unbeknownst to me, she allowed me to take it anyway.

I found Cheyanne immediately, or rather, she found me. She ran into my out-stretched arms, burying her smudged, chestnut cheeks into my work-blighted polo. Her chubby fist found my bleached fingers and we marched to my station: Bozo Buckets. She joyously retrieved the table tennis balls that seemed to bounce only to places I could not reach. I told her to go play, to visit the nine other stations the carnival had to offer, but she insisted she was not interested in others. After my Bozo responsibilities had been fulfilled, I picked up Cheyanne and set her on my lap. I presented the Bible to her, showing her key points, reading the story of Jesus aloud. Her charcoal eyes ignited at the mention of a gift; her tarnished fingers clumsily turned the pages with the reverence of childhood. She enthusiastically listened, quietly wrapping her little mind around every word. I asked her again if she wanted to be a Christian, and, again, she replied, “I don’t know.” I told her she should bring the Bible home and read the other stories. Her voice came soft and broken, “I can’t go home. My daddy’s drunk. I go to Mommy’s house now.” My stomach tumbled. My eyes threatened outburst, forcing me to turn my strained face to the scuffed, dust-patterned floor. Again we prayed. I prayed for her family, for her safety, for her growth, and pleaded for Jesus’ love. I glanced at her once. Her baby hands were clasped beneath her pouty, chapped lips. Her eyes squinched so tight, spidering wrinkles at the corners.

I gave her one last ride to her mom’s rusted pick-up truck. Chandler was already there, and she initiated a game of Cat-and-Mouse, the way children do, without words. I was staggering back towards the mess hall, my chest shaking, fighting my unraveling emotions, when I heard a little voice projected from across the dismal lot, “Jenn! Jenn!” I turned a twitching cheek. “You promise you’ll pray for me?” she shouted, Chandler’s little body grasped tight in her arms. “Every night,” I crackled, choking on revelation. “Every night.”

I had journeyed to Arizona to perfect my faith. To make a difference. To matter. When I left, mothers were still crying for their suicidal youth, fathers were still drunkards, and the sun was still baking. My insignificant life was not enough to create an instantaneous change; I didn’t come home knowing God’s plan. But I planted a seed in the desert that summer, and now all I can do is pray for the Living Water of Christ to help it grow.