

## Crossing cultures, transforming lives

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**“G**oing into a different culture, in which I find myself again like a child, can become a true psychotherapeutic opportunity,” writes Henri Nouwen in his Latin American journal *Gracias*. “When we walk around in a strange milieu, speaking the language haltingly and feeling out of control and like fools, we can come in touch with a part of ourselves that usually remains hidden behind the thick walls of our defenses.” That part, says Nouwen, is “our basic vulnerability, our need for others, our deep-seated feelings of ignorance and inadequacy, and our fundamental dependency.”<sup>1</sup> Confessing these feelings and embracing the God whose grace emerges in the muddle provide fresh understandings of Christian service, a pathway for healing, and a chance for conversion.

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In his opening remarks at a Wingspread Conference on “The Role of Service-Learning in International Education,” J. Lawrence Burkholder, president emeritus of Goshen College, said he humbly claimed only one credential for speaking at the event: he is a “born again” believer in international education.<sup>2</sup> I write as one similarly reborn, as one revived and renewed by the God who lures us into the muddle. Through leading four units of Goshen College’s Study-Service Term (SST) in the Dominican Republic, two groups in 1989 and two more in 1997, I became a believer in the conversion possible through cross-cultural encounters and experiential learning. And in the spirit of some Dominican evangelicals, I’ll testify to a series of rebirths during my years of association with Goshen College, re-commitments to God and to graceful living, as well as to

international education, and to service or experiential learning. Now, as my wife, Ann, and I prepare to facilitate another SST group experience, this time in China in fall 2002, I am reminded of Nouwen's powerful observation, and Burkholder's rebirth.

Goshen College's Study-Service Term takes students to the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Germany, Mali, China, Indonesia, or Ethiopia, for six weeks of study in an urban area, followed by six weeks of service in a rural or small-town setting. Assignments include teaching English, working in clinics, construction, day care, and agriculture. SST and parallel programs at other liberal arts colleges take participants into the realm of the unfamiliar, and that space makes transformation inevitable for those with eyes to see, ears to hear, or hearts to embrace. For service alongside others as well as conversion of ourselves, God calls us to cross borders and boundaries, in our own communities or countries or overseas.

Wilbur Birky, director of Goshen College's Study-Service Term, writes in the orientation materials for program leaders about the "vision, history, and ethos" of SST. Birky draws on the biblical metaphor of the incarnation, and proposes that the incarnation is "an act of divine imagination rooted in a profound realization that even God could not *know and understand* the human condition completely without *entering into* it, to experience it in the body. That was a true cross-cultural experience." Birky says a description of the early parts of Jesus' incarnation aptly apply to SST: "It is to give up one's customary place of comfort, to become as a child, to learn a new language and to eat in new ways, to be received into a new family, to work in the mundane 'carpentry shop,' to attend the local house of worship, to question and be questioned, to experience frustration and success, and to learn to serve in the very 'thick' of life. This is *service-learning* in the context of *crossing over* into the life of the 'other.'" Birky says if such encounters are necessary for God, "how much more so for us in this *knowledge by experience for compassionate action*."

Before going to the Dominican Republic, our group prepared for the experience through orientation. The campus network of returned SSTers also briefed us about what to expect. Even with that preparation, we often felt out of control and like fools, most

of us speaking the Spanish language only haltingly. A decade after the Study-Service Term's 1968 inception, the student newspaper charged then-director Arlin Hunsberger with not adequately orienting students for their study abroad. In response, Hunsberger appealed to the program's original design, which he implied "actually proposed a healthy amount of initial disorientation abroad as a primary goal of the undertaking."<sup>4</sup> Disorientation, when it does not overwhelm, contributes toward humility and receptivity. Disorientation engages us, draws us out, makes us open and vulnerable, teachable.<sup>5</sup>

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Nouwen says our transformation comes in cross-cultural experiences when we embrace the scary feelings and learn that "our true value as human beings has its seat far beyond our competence and accomplishments." In settings where we are out of control, we find ourselves being loved "not for what we can do, but for who we are." That frees us to live with others in a "fellowship of the weak," which is true healing. "In the presence of God," writes Nouwen, "we are totally naked, broken, sinful and dependent, and we realize that we can do nothing, absolutely nothing, without God."<sup>6</sup>

As leaders in education and the church, and as North Americans, we are often perceived not only as being in control of our own lives, but also as being powerful in others' lives. Although we may often feel out of control, we frequently hide that reality and live with our illusions. Cross-cultural experiences strip away that thin veneer, and graciously allow us to *be* how we often *feel*: dependent on others, lacking in confidence, and hungry for love. After her experience in SST leadership in Central America, my colleague Ruth Krall wrote:

*Previously my conception of teaching and learning was that the teacher was responsible to be strong, not weak; to be informed, not confused; to be loving and perceptive of students, not needful of love and perceptivity.... But in Costa Rica, I was not an expert. I was not always*

*strong. I was not always loving and culturally perceptive.... Honesty about painful feelings and confusion did not appear to destroy [my students'] inner security nor did it seem to cause a lack of trust. Walking the same road as they did each day made us into co-learners.... One enduring result of SST in my personal life has been this basic challenge to my theories of teaching and learning. I am more committed to relational teaching.<sup>7</sup>*

For Ann and me, too, in the Dominican Republic, it became clear that in spite of our incompetence, or perhaps because of it, our students and our hosts graciously accepted us, even loved us, as we came to love them.

In our second experience in the Dominican Republic, our greatest vulnerability came when we visited Haiti for four days. Haiti and the D.R. share the same island, and the two nations have long had a tempestuous relationship. We wanted to learn about the Dominican Republic through the eyes of Haitians,

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whom the Dominicans often fear. We wanted to hear about service and development from Mennonite Central Committee workers in Port-au-Prince because no MCC or Mennonite Board of Missions workers were based in our primary host country.

When we crossed the border at Jimani, stopping overnight in Fon Parisien, we immediately were in the land of the unfamiliar. The language switched from Spanish to Creole, which none of us had studied, and we were forced to communicate with our faces and hands, and through traditional dances and games with the young people of the village. We ate indigenous foods we had not encountered in the

Dominican Republic. In Port-au-Prince we lived in an orphanage with former street boys who had undergone religious and quality-of-life changes we could not fully understand.

One of our Haitian lecturers was Father Roger Desir, an Episcopal priest who spoke to us about Haitian and Dominican

history, philosophy, and religion. Father Desir lived through the turbulent history of Haiti's last six decades, and spent seventeen years translating the Bible into Creole so his people can read the text in their own language. He had been imprisoned for his advocacy work on behalf of fellow Haitians. Committed to a life of service, his passion and commitment gave him credibility. His character made us want to sit at his feet. His riveting presentation, which concluded with a blessing, moved me nearly to tears. His intellectual and spiritual integrity left me humbled.

What made Father Desir's lecture so powerful, I came to realize, was its experiential authenticity. His heart and soul were in his words, and he had engaged the world, on behalf of others, in a way that made his words truthful. When we returned to the Dominican Republic, we asked our host lecturers to speak not about traditional subjects but about the topics about which they felt passionately. We learned about deforestation, for instance, rather than about the previously assigned subject of "Flora and Fauna in Dominican Republic." We also recruited new Dominican lecturers, primarily people who worked for social service agencies, or in politics, or with church organizations. When people spoke out of their passions, and out of their engagement with the world, rather than only out of their academic locations or disciplines, they had much to teach us. How could I—one who also purports to teach—have missed this lesson before?

Graduate school had catapulted me into the classroom with vigor, and what I lacked in teaching experience I made up for in rookie zeal. But after only a few years of teaching I sensed I was getting boring, and that I needed more outside stimulation. I needed fresh insights from the world beyond the campus. Leading our international education program did that for me, for a time. My hope is that I never forget how needful I am, how needful we all are, of passions and experiences outside the classroom, or beyond the pulpit. As teachers and ministers, we need ongoing experiential learning if we are to have something to teach. And with such learning, we also will be better able to value such opportunities for conversion, and a pedagogy that draws on and analyzes our day-to-day encounters with the unfamiliar.

Those who have lived or traveled abroad, even as sensitive tourists, often have glorious stories of "aha" moments or

revelatory breakthroughs in critical thinking. One mundane revelation, but with far-reaching implications, came to our students in the Dominican Republic. Most of the student transportation there is in *carros públicos*, usually beat-up, taped-together (literally), decades-old Toyotas that scuttle down Santo Domingo's primary streets, picking up anyone wagging the Dominican finger. As a hitchhiker signals his need for a ride with thumb raised, here the prospective passenger points downward with her index finger. In these ancient, tiny wrecks, two people are expected to sit in one front bucket seat while four more crowd into the back.

Several weeks into the summer term, some of our students were remarking about the insanity of a common occurrence. They

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briefly would be alone in a *público* with the driver, sitting comfortably in the front bucket seat, when another passenger-to-be would finger the car to a halt. Then, though the backseat was empty, the new rider would open the front door and pile nearly onto the lap of our student. Some of our SSTers saw this as an unwelcome attempt at physical intimacy, others as a sign of Dominican senselessness.

At Casa Goshen, the weekly group-processing time in our home, we sought to understand *público* behavior. Most students realized that for our Dominican hosts physical contact with friends or strangers was not a

problem, so that was one mitigating explanation. But few had thought through the truth that emerged from our conversation: because of traffic patterns and the dangers surrounding exiting and entering cars, all passengers are required to exit *públicos* from the right doors rather than into the roadway. If the person who sat on our student's lap had instead gotten in back, he eventually would have been pressed against the driver's side door. If he needed to exit the car before the other backseat passengers, all of them would have had to get out before he could. Seen in this light, his scrunching into the front seat was sensitive, appropriate, and eminently rational.

The outcome of the discussion bowled over the student who had raised the subject. What she had regarded as senseless was transformed through seeing from another perspective, and the chastening that came through the revelation carried over into the remainder of her experience. Experiential learning requires us to think *about* and *from* other perspectives, and to think critically about our own narrow perspectives.<sup>8</sup>

During our days in Haiti we met with Mennonite Central Committee representatives, one of whom spoke about occasional “cowboy missionaries” who enter a culture “with their six-shooters a-blazin’.” Students were pleased to recognize more clearly than before the sensitivity with which Mennonite development and mission workers approach their host cultures. They realized then, if they had not done so already, what limited “service” they could do in the final six weeks of their Study-Service Term.<sup>9</sup> Through what they heard, and through what they later experienced, our group came to know that service includes “being” and “understanding” and “accompanying” as well as “doing.” Service sometimes simply means being taught, and affirming the giftedness of those with whom you are living. It means receiving, having your feet washed, as well as washing another’s feet. The night of our meeting with the Mennonite Central Committee workers, student David Roth wrote in his SST journal:

*I'm going to bed tonight tired, but a good tired that has come from thoroughly extending myself in every intellectual, emotional and physical way during the Haiti trip. I am spent intellectually—I pushed so hard to soak up every word from every speaker, pushed my brain constantly for three days, examining/connecting/critiquing ideas presented to me. I spent myself in staying up late all the nights to talk among wonderful people in fascinating subject areas. And I've never learned so much in three days, never. I think my life/views/opinions have been altered permanently in some areas, like thinking about poverty, and about dependence/service issues, and about entering a culture you have little knowledge of. And it feels good to be spent. The rush I got from all the input has given me so much to ponder in a long-term sense.<sup>10</sup>*

Most of us came away from Haiti and the Dominican Republic changed, converted, humbled by our vulnerabilities, impressed with the wisdom of our overseas Mennonite workers, grateful that our colleges offer cross-cultural experiences, and committed to lives of Christian service. Thank God for breaks from the routine, encounters with the unfamiliar, and learnings from those whose perspectives are rich with truth.

In *Gracias*, Nouwen writes that the more he thinks about the meaning of acting and living in the name of Christ, the more he realizes that what he has to offer others “is not my intelligence, skill, power, influence or connections, but my own human brokenness through which the love of God can manifest itself.” This, he writes, “is what ministry and mission are all about.”

*Ministry is entering with our human brokenness into communion with others and speaking a word of hope. This hope is not based on any power to solve the problems of those with whom we live, but on the love of God, which becomes visible when we let go of our fears of being out of control and enter into God's presence in a shared confession of weakness.... This is a hard vocation. It goes against the grain of our need for self-affirmation, self-fulfillment, and self-realization. It is a call to true humility. I, therefore, think that for those who are pulled away from their familiar surroundings and brought into a strange land where they feel again like babies, the Lord offers a unique chance not only for personal conversion but also for an authentic ministry.<sup>11</sup>*

As pastors and teachers, may we seek out such unfamiliarity. May we go into the muddle with open hands and hearts. And may our transformation grace us with vision and passion to contribute to God's reign.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Gracias: A Latin American Journal* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 17.

<sup>2</sup>J. Lawrence Burkholder, “The Idea of Service in International Education,” in *The Role of Service-Learning in International Education: Proceedings of a Wingspread Conference*, ed. Stuart W. Showalter (Goshen: Goshen College, 1989), 25.



<sup>3</sup> Wilbur Birky, "SST: Vision, History, and Ethos," *2001–02 SST Faculty Handbook* (Goshen: Goshen College, 2001). Birky's italics.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Fisher Miller, *Culture for Service: A History of Goshen College, 1894–1994* (Goshen: Goshen College, 1994), 270.

<sup>5</sup> On disorientation, see, e.g., William A. Beardslee, "Stories in the Postmodern World: Orienting and Disorienting," in *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State Univ. of New York Pr., 1990), 163–75. See also Hebrew Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann on personal development changes coming about through discontinuity, displacement, and disjunction rather than in stages of equilibrium. Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Pr., 1987), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Nouwen, *Gracias*, 17–8.

<sup>7</sup> "Leading SST Convinces Krall Relational Teaching Is Best," *Goshen College Bulletin* (November 1988): 5. Ruth Krall teaches peace, justice, and conflict studies at Goshen College.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Colby and William Damon argue, in *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* (New York: Free Pr., 1992), 77, that "the ardent truth seeker shakes up comfortable presumptions, including those of the truth seeker herself." They add that not *all* other beliefs may be up for grabs, since "a core commitment to honesty can coexist with other articles of faith."

<sup>9</sup> About the time Goshen College began the SST program, Ivan Illich gave a provocative address at Guernavaca to the Conference on Inter-American Student Projects. In the speech entitled "To Hell with Good Intentions!" Illich told his listeners to voluntarily "renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you (as 'vacationing do-gooders') to impose American benevolence on Mexico." He entreated his audience to "use your money, your status and your education to travel in Latin America. Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to *study*. But do not come to *help*." Cited in Alexander A. Kwapong, "Some Reflections on the Role of International Education in the '90s," in Showalter, *The Role of Service-Learning*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Used by permission.

<sup>11</sup> Nouwen, *Gracias*, 18.