

Stories of Stewardship

(1)

...Sue Severin, a Marin County, California health educator, found herself so frustrated and angry over the terror imposed on Nicaraguan villagers by the Reagan era policy of "low-intensity conflict" that she set aside her career and volunteered for a highly dangerous project: to join a faith-based citizens group going down to document terrorist activity along the Honduran border. It was an effective way of converting her anger to useful action and, like many nonviolent projects, it led further than she anticipated. It was on this mission that Sue and the other North American team members stumbled onto the power of *nonviolent interposition*, or more specifically the technique that is now called *protective accompaniment*. Wherever they went, particularly during their longish stay in the formerly besieged village of Jalapa, there were no Contra attacks. So on their return to the States, Sue and others decided they had no choice but to go back and offer the protection of their presence to the people among whom they had lived, and to do it in as many areas as possible. Naturally, this was a frightening prospect, and she was as frightened as anyone while sitting in her comfortable, safe home in Marin County reading about what "the Contra" was doing in those remote jungle villages. But, as Dutch child rescuer Cornelia Knotterus also found, "The best antidote to fear is action." Strangely enough, while Sue and the others were actually in Nicaragua, fear was never a problem.

While I was there I never felt fear. I think the main reason was, I was there out of choice.... I found-- much to my surprise-- that I became very calm in danger. I'm a Quaker and don't go very much with "God" language, but the only way I can explain it is, I felt I was in the hands of God: not safe-- that I wouldn't be hurt-- but that I was where I was supposed to be, doing what I was supposed to be doing. And this can be addictive. Maybe that's why we kept going back.

Is There No Other Way? The Search For a Nonviolent Future, Michael Nagler, p.85-86.

(2)

Just listen to testimonies from the women and men who risked their lives to save Jewish and other victims of the Holocaust. Professor and Mrs. Ege played a prominent role in the highly successful Danish rescue operation. Mrs. Ege: "We helped the Jews because it meant that for once in your life you were doing something worthwhile.... I think that the Danes should be equally grateful to the Jews for giving them an opportunity to do something decent and meaningful."

Is There No Other Way? The Search For a Nonviolent Future, Michael Nagler, p.86.

(3)

To refocus, let me share with you this story, or most of it, as it came streaming into my computer one day back in 1992.

Reference: Latin America
Title: ENVIRONMENT: OUTLAW POACHERS BECOME NATURE RESERVE GUARDIANS
an inter press service feature
by roberto herrscher

buenos aires, nov (ips) - in an argentine nature reserve, poachers who once hunted endangered species have been converted, into the conscientious guardians of the animals they once stalked.

the remarkable conversion took place in the iberá nature reserve, in corrientes province, 700 kilometers north of argentina's capital.

In 1987, pedro perea munoz took over the directorship of the iberá reserve. munoz met two poachers, "mingo" cabrera and ramon cardoso, who had lived in the reserve for as long as they could remember.

their life was difficult. carbrera and cardoso lived deep in the swamps of iberá and survived by fishing and hunting. from time to time they would travel to the small village of pellegrini, on the southern border of the reserve, to sell carpincho, deer and alligator hides. instead of adopting an antagonistic attitude, munoz understood that these men knew iberá better than anyone and that hunting was their only means of survival.

"they couldn't believe it when i offered them a job. now they are the most dedicated and conscientious guards (at iberá)," munoz told ips

"to understand nature, one must be peaceful. these men were born with this. they were hunters by necessity, and now, as guides and guardians, there is no one better. by just looking into the eyes of people entering the reserve, they know who the poachers are," munoz said. . . .

amongst the clear crystal wetlands of iberá live the last 700 members of a rare south american swamp deer a large mammal, whose hooves end in toes united by membranes. iberá's residents also include the aguara guazu, a small wolf in danger of extinction. a variety of rodents, lizards, alligators and multicolored birds complete the population of this unique and delicate ecosystem. cabrerea and cardoso are just two of six guards in the reserve, but they are the favoured guides for researchers, photographers, and members of ecological expeditions.

"now that we understand the importance of the reserve, we see that, without realizing it, we were spending our whole lives preparing for this," cabrera said.

** End of text from cdp:goodnews **

Is There No Other Way? The Search For a Nonviolent Future, Michael Nagler, p.155-156.

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...two American schoolteachers came up with the idea... of taking young offenders who were in detention and putting them in charge of some severely handicapped youth. Sharon Roberts was one of the teachers. As she admitted, she was asking a lot of the Los Angeles school board: to let her "put the most dangerous people in L.A. in charge of the most vulnerable." The paradox worked brilliantly. Again, both the disabled youth and the offenders "won." "I was used to being a thug on the street," says Alfred, age 16, member of the Cripps, on probation for being accomplice to a shooting, "but now when my home boys come around ... I tell them I have other things to do." Things like taking a disabled girl named Star to class, while he earns high school credits and work experience:

This shows I can do something. It's the first time I've felt like, that. I feel more kindhearted and stuff than I thought.

Note how in Alfred's mind now being helpful is the only thing that counts as "doing something," He has already come a long way from the prevailing paradigm attitude that to "do something" you have to help *yourself* (not to mention hurt someone else). But the big winners were you and me-- society as a whole. Young detainees who would have caused worse trouble down the line, almost without exception, were given a way out of this desperate spiral by the only method that can ever do that. They found good in themselves.

Is There No Other Way? The Search For a Nonviolent Future, Michael Nagler, p.157-158.

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A good example is the peer mediation programs catching on in many schools. Teachers and administrators have been thrilled to find that not only do the programs "chill" a lot of the violence in school yards and classrooms, but a peculiar pattern emerges all across the country. The biggest troublemakers turn out to be the best mediators. How odd.

After his "conversion," one of those mediators told a friend of mine that to be a mediator you have to "check your ego at the door." You're not just in it for yourself, is what he meant. You have to put your own feelings aside. Then he added, still more significantly "I've always had the skills to be a mediator, but I didn't use them before because I had no one to show me how." Nor is he that special; everybody has this capacity so very few learn to use. "We're all like hidden gold mines."

His statement is a like a textbook of conflict resolution condensed into three sentences. (1) You have to "check your ego at the door," get a little above your own personal feelings. Some kind of spiritual sacrifice, large or small is the basis of any action that can result in peace. (2) All it would take for most people to get their hands on this skill is a little training. (3) And finally, given such training, we discover a "gold mine" in every one of us. If we don't find a way to mine our inner resources it causes the greatest trouble for us and society; when we do we can find ourselves becoming the most creative peacemakers. Whether they start out as poachers in an Argentine game preserve or youth offenders in Los Angeles, the most difficult people are often the ones most capable of helping us create loving community if we would help them out of their difficulty.

Is There No Other Way? The Search For a Nonviolent Future, Michael Nagler, p.158-159.

(6)

I wanted to write this book because it is my growing conviction that my life belongs to others just as much as it belongs to myself, and that what is experienced as most unique often proves to be most solidly embedded in the common condition of being human.

Reaching Out, Henri Nouwen

(7)

A vocation is not the exclusive privilege of monks, priests, religious sisters, or a few heroic lay persons. God calls everyone who is listening; there is no individual of group for whom God's call is reserved. But to be effective, a call must be heard, and to hear it we must continually discern our vocation amidst the escalating demands of our career.

Compassion, Henri Nouwen

(8)

After Bishop Morneau had finished one of his presentations regarding stewardship, an eager man came up to him afterwards to give him his business card. After doing so, the man did a double take, and asked for the business card back. He crossed out "owner" and wrote in above it "caretaker", and then returned the card to the bishop.

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My mom knows how to work the heart. She's positively artistic about it. When she weaves her tales of need they reek of compassion and transference: someone needs something, and you're the only one who can provide it.

Throughout my childhood, Mom maneuvered like a surgeon, knowing exactly what she wanted from me-- and she always got it. This was her "gifting," and I "received" it with appropriate results....

There was an uprising in New Mexico and the Indians stepped to the forefront. Every month, a new kitchen item arrived in the mail, avocado- or orange-colored. Saltshakers, napkin holders, sugar bowls-- all sent in thanksgiving to my mother for her prayers and unselfish giving.

I thought she must be giving them a fortune because these plastic decorations looked so fancy. "Bra money" was what she called the cash she managed to squirrel away from the monthly household budget for the Indians. It seemed that although I wasn't wearing one yet, my bra money was wanted too. Just a nickel here, a dime there-- basically a cut of my allowance.

I was a hard sell, though. Sure, the Indians were in need. But no one was starving and no one was crying, and five cents from 50 was a big chunk. As hard as she tried, Mom couldn't get my cash. My compassion had met its limits.

Then came July. I remember dragging myself into the muggy kitchen one day, my bare feet sticking to the hot linoleum floor. Each step sounded like fresh ink rolling off a rubber stamp. I headed straight for the freezer. I just wanted to stick my head in for a few seconds of relief.

I swung the door wide, panting. The first wave of frost rolled across my face, chilling me. I took a deep, icy breath and closed my eyes. And when I opened them I had a vision.

Beautiful and cool, rising up from the fog like an army of shiny aluminum knights: Eskimo Pies. I blinked hard. It couldn't be. This was a "no sweets" household where ice cream was a tray of frozen orange juice cubes and where, until first grade, I thought a saltine was a cookie. *Eskimo Pies*-- in *our* freezer?

I stared at the neatly aligned silver packages, stunned. They were Eskimo Pies, alright. Mom had finally broken down.

I couldn't just take one. Something as valuable and unique as that would be missed, so I had to proceed carefully, according to protocol. I called out to my mother, who was knitting in the den, no doubt listening to the whole discovery process.

"Where'd the Eskimo Pies come from, Mom?"

"I bought them." Her tone was matter-of-fact.

I swallowed, not allowing any excitement into my voice. "Could I have one?"

Long pause.

"Ask the Indians."

I knew it! There had to be a catch. The Indians-- how did they fit in? My next response was critical, and I was tangled in tortuous riddle. I had to figure out the connection. But it was so hot... the pies were winking at me in the frost.

Hanging onto the door now with one hand, my head lazily loped over to one side, my body swinging, I tried to keep the whine out of my voice. "Why do I have to ask the Indians?" The condensation billowed out like smoke signals with each exhausted sway.

Long pause.

"Because that's who they belong to. And if you want one, you'll have to put 25 cents in that bank they sent us for our gifts-- the one gathering dust on the counter."

Mom was going to get my money and she was going to give it to the Indians after all. It hit me that not only was she going to get my money that day, but probably every day that summer because I knew the Pies lay waiting. I'd have to have one... and then another...

By August the little bank was too heavy to hold. On those days I was short the 25 cents I had tried reasoning with Mom about caring for her own offspring here in New York, but her response was always the same. "You've got to give, Margaret. Give and it will come back to you. When you can give without feeling sad about it, then you've truly given. But not until then."

I didn't like it, but I knew she was right. By October, I was putting in coins on my own, without the Pies. I felt good about helping. On some level it was like making a deposit in a Bank of Good.

By December, the Indians were out of peril and we were on to the local animal shelter,, and so it continued with many other charitable causes until I left home. Mom still has a dresser in her hutch that holds a well-worn clothes pin. It marks the money she'd set aside for someone or something in need. When I visit her, I sometimes open that drawer and the sight of the neatly folded bills causes a catch in my throat....

My mom gave me that present, the ability to empathize and desire to intervene. It's a beautiful, humbling gift-- the honor of helping. More precious than Eskimo Pies, it turns out.

With New Eyes: Fresh Vision For the Soul, Margaret Becker