



Notes from the Margins

March 2020



Love in a Time of Covid-19

These are strange days we're in, and it's possible that they could get stranger still. This is not the article I initially wrote for this newsletter, but it's the only one I know how to write now, in these weird and unprecedented days of the covid19 pandemic. Fairly soon after WMU announced that they would be moving to online classes, UCM made the decision to suspend our programming, believing that our number one job at that given moment was to keep our students and the communities they actively serve, safe. We sent an email to all of our students to communicate our plans, offer words of comfort, and assure them that we would be available to them for support in these uncertain times.

One of the first things we thought about was how interruption of services and school would impact the most vulnerable among us. I quickly remembered time with a group of students just a couple of weeks ago in a class in which I was presenting a poverty simulation, discussing the reality of how illness has an even larger impact on those who are poor, because they don't have paid sick time, leaving them with the terrible choice of either not working and not getting paid, or working while ill, feeling awful themselves, and running the risk of spreading it to others. I thought immediately about our weekly service/learning programs in Kalamazoo, in which feeding kids is a primary aspect, and out of this concern, gave the Boys and Girls Club a check to cover the meals we wouldn't be supplying for Friday night dinners during the hiatus in service, and committed to making sure that Peace House kids still got

snack. I've talked with several students in the last few days, and their dismay and concern is easy to read. These are uncharted territories, and the unknown is always harder to cope with than what we already know through experience. But, it's an opportunity too, to boldly exclaim one of UCM's most famous sayings, "The event is what happens as our plans fall apart." Students are used to hearing this phrase from me, and they understand it on a gut level. Things are going to be challenging or different or even a bit scary, but we'll use our skills, critical thinking, compassion, and connection, and we'll make it all work.

This is not the only confusing and scary time we've known. I remember helping students work through Columbine and 9/11, also uncertain times, albeit for different reasons. But, what was true in those cases, is true now. While we never celebrate devastating experiences in which people suffer, we know that these times show us what we're made of, right? Are we going to allow our panic and fear to lead the way and cause mayhem over toilet paper, or are we going to keep our eyes wide and clear so that we can stay attuned to those who are most at risk when services slow down, or anxieties rise? Times like these are the greatest opportunities for love to save the day. The kind of love that leads to active listening, acts of compassion, and suspending judgement. The kind of love that stays flexible amid the chaos of constantly moving parts and shifting expectations. The kind of love that stays open to the unknown, as Caleb, Kristy, and Kaet have expressed in their varied reflections in this newsletter. We here at UCM are more committed than ever to being motivated by a love big enough for all of us. A love bigger than Covid19. Thanks for the generous and faithful support that makes all of this possible.

-Rev. Kathleen Robertson King

Communication Beyond Boundaries

While attending WMU as a freshman, I walked into my dorm building one night to see a regular sheet of printer paper with the dark silhouette of a city skyline and 'UCM Urban Plunge: Chicago' typed in all caps hanging up just beside my mailbox. Excited to travel away from class for a weekend, I eagerly signed up, not knowing we would be sleeping on the floor of a church just outside Downtown Chicago for two nights.

I met all kinds of people while working in Chicago. I can recall Al from an assisted living facility in Lincoln Park telling me about how he worked as an illustrator for the carnivals after World War II. Or Bernard, a funny fellow who was my euchre partner at a center for homelessness on the South Side, casually explaining his experience as a club dancer as he drew his next round of cards. The lack of restraint both Al and Bernard shared while talking to me felt both surprising and heartwarming. I could not believe that they would so readily tell another lad who'd just showed up out of nowhere to 'help out' so many details about their lives. It truly felt like we both set aside our judgements in order to allow the other individual to fully express themselves and their identity.

True, their stories were captivating. But what really stuck? Their smiles and friendly goodbyes as we were leaving. Sure – we were there to serve food, or to paint walls, or to help clean dishes. But what we all appreciated, resident and volunteer alike, was the communication we shared across boundaries and social class.

I truly feel that my service-oriented immersion in both Chicago and Kalamazoo, drove me to want to continue to listen and share experiences with people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Through communicating with one another – we learn what it means to be in another's shoes. We learn to hone our sense of empathy.

Since my time at UCM, I have worked with inmates from Washtenaw County Jail and from prisons all around the state. I've learned to suspend and challenge my judgements and allow for conversation to dictate itself. I don't think I'd feel as comfortable and as able to listen to inmates, let alone anyone, if I hadn't actively participated in service trips and youth-dialogues with UCM.

-Caleb Foerg, UCM Alumni

Caleb attended WMU then transferred to U of M where he graduated with his degree. When looking through old UCM reflections, we found a file from the 2015 Chicago Urban Plunge trip Caleb speaks of in his article. Below you will find Caleb's reflection from 2015.

"It seems we often have the tendency to believe the world is twisted. Twisted in parts beyond our comprehension - and at every step of the way, we encounter darkness that overwhelms the light.

A fellow at Lincoln Park today, Terry, spoke about his light as the path of divinity through Jesus Christ. Another fellow over in the Boulevard mentioned his illumination more implicitly; through his expression of love and kindness towards/through others. As he lives vicariously, and Terry sees a spark in the path of spirituality, it dawns upon myself, and others on this trip, that we all have our own lampposts.

I'm not a religious man, but I sure as hell know that the mere existence of every individual who walks this confusing and great earth, is a testament to life; to know that each mind has stuck through the struggles and fought to untwist the knots of our twisted perceptions. That is a reason worth living for; or a collection of reasons, rather.

And towards the end of our time together as a group this weekend, I will walk away knowing that justice, as broad and as seemingly vivacious a turn as it may be, will never be extinguished, even in observation of the modern man's most complex and verbal problem: poverty.

Not just a buzz term,

Not only a phrase to be used in debate,

Not only a word to drop for conversation resonance,

And certainly not a big scary monster under the bed.

Poverty is a mask on an age-old question of the self in the wake of others. And at the end of our time here as individuals, as we inch towards old age, we'll know that somewhere down the line, we balanced the 'I' with 'Them'!"

-Caleb Foerg (2015)



Student Reflections ...

"This semester I had the chance to volunteer at Peace House on Thursdays. The second week I volunteered, there were already kids who were glad to see me return. Peace House makes me feel as if I can build positive relationships with the kids who attend Peace House and to be a voice of encouragement. This semester I also gained insight into the need Peace House is filling when I asked a student what they enjoy most about Peace House, and she responded with she likes that she can play and do homework. I had always internalized the belief that time to play and do homework is something that we all have access to at home. If kids don't have the basic access to play and be a kid, and to be coached through homework, then succeeding in school becomes much more of a challenge

I have lived in Kalamazoo for almost 4 years, and Peace House has been one of the most meaningful ways that I have connected within the larger community of Kalamazoo. Since living in Kalamazoo, I have heard more than my fair share of negative rhetoric about KPS students, and though I've been aware of the systemic policies that cause the disparities these students face, I didn't realize I had still been internalizing some negative messages until volunteering at Peace House. When spending 2 hours a week with these thoughtful, intelligent kids, I've experienced a cognitive dissonance with some internalized messages that left me with a more complete understanding of the challenges the kids in this community face. Peace House offers a place where kids can be kids, and focus on homework; where students can be kind and studious, and themselves. I am glad that I can be a part of the Peace House community that is providing these kids with a safe space to grow, learn, and have fun."

-Kaet



"This is my fourth year with UCM and still every experience teaches me something new. I have seen some of the kiddos at the Boys and Girls Club grow up and it amazes me how much this organization impacts, not only the kids, but the community as a whole. I look forward to seeing their smiling faces every week and being able to reflect on each and every event. It has helped me grow as an individual. I am more willing to express myself and be vulnerable with those around me. The kids teach me to be honest with myself and my feelings and to take care of one another. They teach me to ask a lot of questions and challenge me to learn all of their names. They bring out the kid in me which is something that we all could benefit from, especially those of us currently in college who are being pressured to grow up. We can all use a bit of creativity and curiosity to keep us young and hopeful.

UCM has brought me a whole family of people that I otherwise never would have met. We share similar interests but come from different backgrounds and it's a wonderful place to grow. The organization as a whole is very welcoming and inviting which encourages us to think beyond ourselves and about others who we come into contact with. Without UCM I am not sure I would have developed into the leader I am today. I would not be confident in my abilities to succeed and I certainly would not have such amazing people supporting me along the way."

-Kristy

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