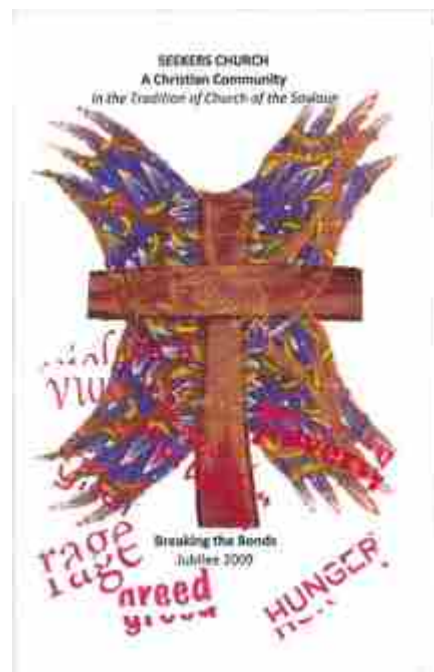


"In Search of Holy Discomfort" by Leslie Smith



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When I first heard about [Faith-At-Work's](#) annual service trip to Guatemala, my immediate reaction was: THAT is something I want my whole family to do together. At this point, my husband Stephen and daughter Carmen had been on Katrina re-building trips, Carmen had worked on projects in El Salvador, but I had always manned the home front, and we had never done anything like this as a family. This trip presented itself as a challenge, a challenge to step outside of the everyday

and familiar. And, with Peter and Marjory at the helm, I had complete faith that it would be a meaningful adventure. My initial positive response was strong and certain, enough to push through early obstacles, such as cost. We told everyone in the extended family that we wanted trip donations for Christmas and asked Faith-At-Work for scholarship assistance. Convincing Steve, Carmen and Annie that we should spend our summer vacation in Guatemala was easy. The challenge came in how to talk about the trip, how to think about it. I was quite comfortable describing it as a service trip, as was my family, but it was more than that. And it was the more-than-that that created the struggle. Though the trip was described as a "pilgrimage", I could not bring myself to call it that, just as I could not call myself a "pilgrim". The word "pilgrim" seemed so hokey, so "Plymouth Rock". It radiated a piety that made me allergic. When asked about what I was seeking, I settled on a "spiritual adventure".

As the trip drew near apprehensions arose. I read Henri Nouwen's [LOVE IN A FEARFUL LAND](#), the account of his journey to Guatemala following the murder of Father Stanley Francis Rother in 1981. As he writes, "This is a story of the mysterious presence of a faithful God in the midst of a country ravaged by violence, torture, and assassination." Were we putting ourselves at-risk in traveling there? The State Department travel alerts were ominous and unsettling, with accounts of tourists being targeted. The warnings prompted us to change our airline reservations so that we would not be arriving after sundown. And, after eight prior trips, Marjory and Peter reassured us about the precautions to insure safety.

The invitation to submit pictures and short bios to create a Guatemalan Pilgrim Bio book sparked concerns about the group. Who was it that we were going to be spending ten intense days traveling with? Turned out that Peter and Marjory were the only other Seekers going. The group was looking largely senior. "Is it going to be a bunch of old people?" my girls asked. I was more concerned that the other "pilgrims" would be a bunch of righteous do-gooders, and the preview, in the form of the booklet did not ease my concern. Would we feel perpetually alienated?

"Is there going to be a lot of praying and Bible-reading?" Steve and

the girls asked. “ Hmmm, probably not a lot,” I hedged. I knew that I was comfortable with Seekers worship, but would other family members be perpetually squirming?

What would we be eating? I began to wonder. Would I be able to get salads? Would I be able to exercise? I felt anxious about leaving all of my comfortable routines and rituals behind and the total unfamiliarity of what lay ahead.

On the eve of the trip, I set my alarm for 4am. I needed to go for a run to fortify myself before we set out for the airport. We had smooth traveling and were greeted at the Guatemala City airport by Peter and Marjory. I felt a wave of welcome relief as we began to meet up with the rest of our group. Even from the initial airport conversations, my “pilgrim” fears were dispelled. These were real people, interesting characters, ready to engage and up for an adventure. As we sat waiting on our duffle bags, Melissa, an English teacher from Lubbock, TX, was already recommending her favorite books to Carmen.

Entering the town of Antigua and especially, the exquisitely beautiful grounds of the Lutheran Center where we would be staying, created a feeling of being in a haven in the midst of a foreign world. We began to settle in. In the course of exploring the town, dining in the court yard of Dona Luisa’s, beginning to get to know the group and then gathering together in our own courtyard to worship, I could feel myself relaxing. It was an experience of surrendering, of giving up attempts to control and be in-charge, and trusting that whatever happened would be OK. It was freeing. What a relief not to feel that I had to be in charge, but could rely on others to translate, to navigate, to lead. The sense of being in good-hands, feeling a deep trust and confidence in Peter and Marjory’s leadership, helped with this. On Sunday morning, as we shared communion of banana bread dipped in grape juice in the warmth of the sun, I remember thinking: There is nowhere else that I would rather be. I felt happy to be alive and in that spot with my family and this new group.

The workweek began Monday morning. I woke with the sun and set out for a run, carefully choosing my footing on the cracked sidewalks and cobblestone streets. I got back in time to gather with everyone in the center patio for stretching and singing and communal back-rubs. We were off to breakfast at Dona Luisa's at 7am, a charming little restaurant run by ex-Peace Corps volunteers where we did not have to worry about the safety of the food. Our trip was co-sponsored by [PAVA](#), a local organization that emerged to focus on building and re-building schools, bridges and water-supply systems in the Guatemala highlands following the civil war. Several mornings at breakfast, PAVA representatives and board members came to speak to us and began to give us a sense of how PAVA came to be. They told stories of the former Peace Corps volunteers organizing covert, high-risk ventures to take calcium-enriched cookies to villagers hiding out to escape the violence. Dona Luisa's husband Dennis reportedly had a price on his head for driving his motorcycle, saddlebags packed with cookies, up into the highlands to reach the villagers. What began to be apparent was the power of grassroots help efforts in this war-ravaged little country. I felt proud to be affiliated with PAVA. We boarded the bus around 8am and set out for the drive up into the mountains. The bus driver Juan was a gem; Peter called him (in Spanish) the "minister of the church of the Way". He was a man of many talents: a skilled driver who got us out of several harrowing scrapes; a speaker of four languages and ready translator who chose to work along with us in the village, and even figured out how to Geri-rig the cement-mixer when it broke down one day on the work site. The bus ride was a full two hours, winding up into the mountains, along ridges and narrow treacherous roads, but the bus rides gave us time to get to know each other in unexpected depth. We were a motley crew of eighteen, ranging in age from 14-year-old Annie to late 60's. People who at first blush seemed annoying or abrasive, became much more loveable as we got to know them in their vulnerabilities and discover their softness. The judgments melted away, and increasingly, we functioned more like a communal family, aware of and attentive to each other's particular needs and capabilities and idiosyncrasies. By mid-week, there was the sense of being known by each other and the loving teasing that came with that.

When we arrived, or got as close as we could drive, we hiked the steep hill and walked along the ridge to get to the village. La Loma had recently incorporated

as a village for the express purpose of being able to apply to PAVA for help to build a school. Previously, the boys of the area were allowed to walk to nearby villages to attend school, but for safety reasons, the girls were not. Our arrival heralded the launching of the village school where all of the children could attend, and we were very warmly welcomed. There were ear-popping fireworks, speeches, dances by the children of the village in costume and a huge feast. The villagers spoke Kaqchikel, a Mayan dialect, and some Spanish, so our communications were a hodge-podge, with members of our group translating here and there. The men of the village had already dug the foundation of the school and we began the work of bending and tying rebar to create a structure for the cement. I quickly became one of the Rebar Queens, along with my buddy Carter. It was hard to share the workstation as I relished the rhythmic challenge of creating rectangles. This kind of physical labor was new to me. Some of it was repetitive and could feel meditative. Some of it was physically exhausting, like the lifting of cement blocks and buckets of wet cement. At one point, we made an 18-person conga line transporting cement blocks up a hill for most of an afternoon. I was strangely, happily, entirely out of my element.

The relational experience that came in the laboring with the people of the village was remarkable. Language did not seem to be a problem. There was lots of non-verbal teaching and playing with words to convey meaning. A spirit of warmth and playfulness prevailed as we got to know each other. Timateo carried a radio around his neck and when I showed interest in the music, he rigged it up near my worksite and laughed at Annie's horror at my dance moves. "Oh, Madre!" Though we were using few words, it did not feel like small talk as we were often talking about families and relationships. They were very curious about our relationships and loved the fact that our whole familia was there. The children of the village were all around and came closer each day. When Annie and 22-year-old Ashley began teaching hopscotch and offered a game of hide-and-seek, they went wild with shrieks of delight. "Uno, dos, tres!" they would request. There was something haunting about the hide-and-seek games, as we realized that many of the older members of the village had likely hidden to avoid the violence in this same mountain region years before. One day, Carmen read a children's book aloud, in Spanish, DO KANGAROOS HAVE MOTHERS? "SI!" the children would yell, and it became a back-and-forth. After the children disbanded, a group of men gathered around one of the men from the

village who began reading the book aloud, laughing at the pictures. Later we realized that these men had grown up during the civil war and likely missed out on such childhood experiences. There were many powerful relational moments. At one point, the hefe(Boss) was admiring my leather work gloves. With Juan's help, we were talking about the fact that they would likely cost about three times as much in Guatemala as in the US. On that last workday, I loved being able to place my gloves in the hefe's hands, in thanks. One day, as we were finishing lunch, I noticed that Carmen was missing. I could hear a sound like hand-clapping and discovered her in the adjoining makeshift kitchen getting a lesson in making tortillas from the head cook. This tiny woman in a bright woven wrap skirt was slapping a tortilla from one hand to the other in lightening speed as Carmen attempted to follow.

Though we were only there a week, there was definitely a powerful experience of connecting, over and above helping to build a foundation for their school. \

It was on the bus rides, over meals, and during evening reflections that we wrestled with how to make meaning of our experience. For example, how to think about ourselves, if not tourists? The issue emerged vividly around picture-taking. Several members of our group took pictures non-stop. To me, taking pictures seemed objectifying and distanced us. It had us observing, like tourists, rather than participating. BJ, our picture-taking leader, carried his portable printer wherever he went. Fairly soon after snapping a shot, he would produce a copy of the photo for all involved. By the time we left the village, I had a new appreciation. The picture-taking had become a meaningful way of recording our relationships. Much of the last day was spent posing together for pictures to enable us to remember each other and have something to hold onto. "Me with your familia," Timateo requested on the last afternoon. Our group struggled with the whole issue of leave-taking and what it would feel like- to each of us, to the children of the village who had taken to running to greet our bus, to the men of the village who relied on our help? How to address our attachment? Feeling anxious the night before our last workday, we agreed to follow the lead of the villagers about how to say good-by. We needn't have worried. They had an elaborate good-by ceremony all planned, officiated by the two local teachers. The work stopped and

everyone participated. There were two piñatas and folders of beautiful hand-made art for Carmen, Annie, Ashley and Peter (who had made himself beloved by bringing nose flutes for all). What followed were lots of picture-taking and hugs and tears and a glorious send-off with ear-popping fireworks. We could not have created a better good-by ritual. My daughters resolved the matter of the leave-taking by vowing that next time, it would not be just a week. They voiced their longing to have an experience of becoming more a part of the community. Longer-term volunteer work perhaps? Peace Corps?

Which brings me back to that idea of pilgrimage. This was not simply a service trip or volunteer experience.

Though I still cannot call myself a pilgrim, this notion of pilgrimage began to grow on me. The reflection time each evening allowed for a daily practice of slowing down and savoring and absorbing. It was an invitation to respond to the experience of the day from our deepest place, to share the often poignant stories and challenges, to identify the signs of hope and moments of meaning and mattering. It was an invitation to see the sacred in our experience.