

The Stranger Who Was Welcomed

In August 2015, I was planning a one-year fellowship through four countries, focusing on women's religious communities and faith-based work. I knew I wanted to spend time with a Catholic order in Australia, but as an American university student in upstate New York, how could I even begin to narrow that down? Luckily, a friend directed me to Saint Mary MacKillop, and thus to the Sisters of St Joseph. One of the first things I learned about Saint Mary MacKillop was that she lived by the words, "Never see a need without doing something about it." Her dedication to serving the poor and marginalized could not be shaken even by excommunication. Her courage in living out her faith is the foundation the Josephites build on, and the legacy that carried me to the Kimberley.

It seemed possible role models were all around me, and all the Josephites I met had something to teach me, some bits of wisdom and inspiration to share. I'm convinced that anywhere I went with the Sisters of St Joseph, I would have been with good people, dedicated to addressing need and lessening suffering in all its forms. But there is nowhere I would rather have been than Halls Creek, WA, with Sr Alma Cabassi. I quickly learned that living by the "Never see a need without doing something about it" philosophy means the work often spills beyond the hours you plan on. You can set boundaries, such as asking people to come to the office for food vouchers on Monday, rather than coming to the house on Sunday. But if it's Sunday, and someone is at your door hungry, chances are you're not turning them away.

This is not to say Sr Alma is a pushover, because she isn't. She is as self-aware, self-possessed, and firmly grounded in her faith as anyone I know. It seemed to me that Sr Alma was known and trusted by everyone in the community, everyone who had ever come in contact with her. She wouldn't always do what someone wanted, but you always knew she would see you as a person, hear you out as an equal, and treat you with dignity. When I first arrived, I wondered how Sr Alma could bear it, working to address hurts that will not be healed in a conversation, or a year, or a generation. When the work weighed heavy, she looked to the earth. A hill nearby offered a quiet haven of contemplation and prayer, and a 360° view of the Kimberley sunset. Sr Alma would notice immediately if a different bird was outside the verandah at breakfast. In much the same way, she noticed the smallest changes and growth in the people around her and in herself. It seemed even the tiniest steps and bits of learning became a chance to refresh faith, remind herself of the importance of the work.

For me, being in Halls Creek was complicated and unsettling. I focused my energy on Warlawurru Catholic School, where I was to serve as a classroom aid for the students who needed extra support. I quickly found almost all the students could use extra support, academic and emotional, and I didn't have nearly enough time to give. The students who didn't really need help on activities often still hoped to get hold of

some attention and acknowledgement. Suddenly my time and energy seemed like a scarce resource; of course I wanted to support the kids who struggled with schoolwork, but I also didn't want to be unfair to the more academically successful children. One girl could breeze through worksheets and assignments, but still hoped to get hold of a few minutes to talk about science and the solar system. She told me she wanted to be a scientist or a lawyer or a teacher. I felt blessed to be the one she told this to, blessed to get to say, "You would be wonderful at any of those, you could be all of those." I felt blessed to be the one she talked to about gravity. When I told her the moon used to be part of the earth, she followed up a week later asking, "Miss, how did that happen?" and proceeded to present several theories she'd been mulling over. In the back of my mind then, as now, was the wish I could tell her belief in herself and hard work would be enough, that she could become anything she wanted to be, but I know the odds have been stacked against her for generations. I wish I could snap my fingers and clear away generations of dehumanization, displacement, trauma. I wish I could wipe away all the messages given to Aboriginal kids about what they're capable of and whether they're worthy of their dreams. I can't do that, so what can I do?

Then, as in so many moments at Warlawurru, I swallowed the feeling that I was not enough, not doing enough, not giving enough. I wanted to be there for the kids and the community in ways I was not, am not. But that's part of this work, part of structuring your life around making tiny efforts, hoping for the best, and knowing you may never see the change. You do what you can for the beings right in front of you.

In a year full of welcoming communities, new friendships, and difficult goodbyes, Halls Creek was the most painful departure, the one I most doubted, and the place I most want to return. It's hard to believe I left over a year ago. There are so many things I carry with me, so many things I continue to learn from, and the pull back to Halls Creek has not faded. I continue to grapple with many of the same questions about who I want to be in this world, how I want to be in this world; doubts about the privilege I come from and what I can offer. What harmful systems am I complicit in? How do I seek out voices and stories different from my own? What can I do to support Indigenous communities displaced from the land I've gotten to call home?

Now in California, I work to change the systems and narratives around immigration and migrants. At the core of this work is the belief that every person is sacred, and that sanctuary is a sacred right. This means developing holistic support programs for newcomer youth coming from complex trauma, which flows directly from my time in Halls Creek. As the Kimberley helped me learn, to uplift dignity and amplify diverse voices, I need start by listening. How often have I been the stranger who was welcomed? Any chance to repay that kindness is a gift.

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