



Fighting Hunger with Food... and Stories

BY KAMI RICE

At Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen, a hot meal is not the only sustenance offered to guests. The largest soup kitchen in New York City, Holy Apostles also addresses a deeper hunger in their guests through a weekly writing workshop.

The Rev. Liz Maxwell, associate rector of Church of the Holy Apostles and the soup kitchen's program director, says that people often ask whether a writing workshop is really an effective way to care for the poor. Shouldn't the focus be on meeting their more basic needs?

But, as Maxwell explains, the need for self-expression and meaning is every bit as powerful as physical hunger. When the participants write, "they connect with a spark inside them, and they experience the creative energy of God," she says.

The soup kitchen, which began in 1982, serves over 1,100 guests per day in the nave of Church of the Holy Apostles, a building that is itself a work of art and offers sanctuary in the busy city. In 1994 nonfiction author Ian Frazier received a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award, a program that in the 1990s provided financial support to accomplished writers, allowing them to create new works and to partner with community-based organizations. Frazier approached the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen about starting a writing workshop for their clients. The program is still going strong.

On Wednesdays, instructors sit at the exit of the church and invite guests to join the workshop after the meal. Weekly attendance is usually about 20 people, who meet in the narthex around a table

spread with paper, pens, and cups of coffee. The instructors provide a prompt to get things rolling—such as "It Was the Best Day" or "In My Other Life"—and everyone, including the instructors, writes about the topic for the next 45 minutes. Afterwards, participants read what they've written. At the end of a 10-week series, the pieces are collected and printed up and a public reading is held.

"Part of what seems to work about it is that people sit right there and write and have a community of people," Maxwell explains. Some participants only come to the workshop once. Others continue to come long after they no longer require the free meal.

While some instruction is offered, the workshops are about much more than just improving writing skills. They are also about providing an opportunity to tell one's story, which is an important part of spiritual restoration. "When you begin to tell the truth about your life within a supportive community," says Maxwell, "that truth makes you stronger, and you begin to have energy for other parts of your life."

Maxwell talks about Carol, a woman who has been part of the workshop since its second year. She came to Holy Apostles having beaten a drinking problem, but her housing situation was precarious and she was struggling with serious depression. She had always wanted to write, and the workshop gave her something to look forward to. As she received help in the workshop she was able to accept help with other pieces of her life. She has now published some of her writing and recently told Maxwell, "I'm not 100 percent where I need to be, but I'm pretty close."

The workshops also helped Donald, who reconnected with his family when he invited them to one of the readings. "The writing for him has been a way of gathering up his life and beginning to make something new of it," says Maxwell. He is no longer homeless and is actively involved in a church now.

Last year an unexpected opportunity led to the publication of a collection of essays, poems, and stories from the workshop's past 10 years. Released in October, *Food for the Soul: Selections from the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen Writers Workshop* was edited by Maxwell and writer Susan Shapiro and published by Seabury Press. Ten percent of the book's proceeds go back to the soup kitchen.

The contributors' backgrounds are widely varied, Maxwell notes: Some have held steady jobs while others deal with chronic unemployment and homelessness; some are educated, others not; some struggle with mental health issues, substance abuse, and dysfunctional families, and all wrestle with what it means to be human in an often painful world. Maxwell says the book is a balance between the particular and the universal: stories of poverty, love, despair, hope, desire, faith, and anger.

Many of the soup kitchen's guests spend their lives outside of "normal" human interactions. They become accustomed to other people averting their eyes. The workshop community offers them a place to say things they've never said before, and this then gives them confidence to share with others outside the workshop. "It's like developing a muscle," explains Maxwell—"the muscle of knowing yourself to be someone that people want to listen to. It's a way of recognizing your own dignity and having your dignity recognized by others."

So what does art have to do with fighting hunger? "When we create it is our link to the mystery of God. I think that the impulse to make a better world comes out of the same place as the impulse to make art." ■

(Go to www.holyapostlesnyc.org to learn more).

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