

Trip of a Lifetime

By Matt Royster

You have probably heard about the mission trips to Venezuela sponsored by the UCC's Global Partners, but you haven't participated. Why not? That described me until last year. My name is Matt Royster and I live in Denver. I had struggled with the time commitment and dollars needed to go, and with increasing my carbon footprint as my mission in life is to inspire folks to take better care of the Earth!

Fortunately, in one of my occasional moments of wisdom, I decided to go. With the support of my wife Sandy, and the support of three of our UCC churches collecting donations to take, I was set. One church's mission committee helped pay for a portion the trip. I could tell that many of the donors were with me in spirit! Other Global Partner leaders did a great job helping us prepare for the trip. Participants got to know each other and the leaders were very clear on what to expect. All of that preparation made me feel very comfortable to go. So last April ten of your brothers and sisters from around Colorado left DIA bound for Maracaibo, Venezuela. The journey had begun!

We were greeted by wonderful folks who made us feel very welcome. Part of the reason I decided to go was because I felt this need to know more of God's children around the world. It was one of the most profound experiences of my life. We were immediately taken under their wing and treated like family. To experience how others live, even for a short time, was amazing. It was clear that family and relationship with God were at the top of their priority list.

We spent five days miles away from Maracaibo in a small village

called Ospino. There we stayed at a hostel built in 1840. We worked on a project that created a community of landowners who had been squatters on the same land. Pastors from other towns came to work with us. We worshiped each evening with the all the folks we had spent the day working beside, along with folks from the community. The Holy Spirit was very present and the music was incredible!

The family that fed us every meal for almost five days of the nine-day trip had 11 kids, seven adopted right off the street. Living in a masonry home of about 750 square feet (no basement), they gave up their family room to makeshift tables and fed us very well. Remembering the generosity of this family still causes me to tear up. There were so many acts of generosity and loving kindness that continue to touch my heart, even today. Please consider



joining a mission trip to Venezuela. I'm so glad I decided to go. It is a great opportunity to get to know more of God's children. May God bless you on your journey.

This year's mission trips are: Youth Trip- July 21-28; trip in October- dates to be determined, Hopefully a few of our Venezuelan friends will be here in June to participate in a workshop at Iliff (some church visits available). For more info please contact Alice Silver at 720-344-6947. Thanks!

Matt Royster can give a presentation (with slides) on his mission trip to Venezuela to your church. Also, Matt is developing a non-profit named One Voice for the Earth. His mission is to give presentations to inspire individuals to take better care of God's creation. Also, he can provide music and words for worship. Please contact Matt at OneVoicefortheEarth.org

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Reflections
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February 2010

The Year of the Lord's Favor

By Tom Rehling

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to bring
Good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release
Of the captive and recovery of sight to the blind,*

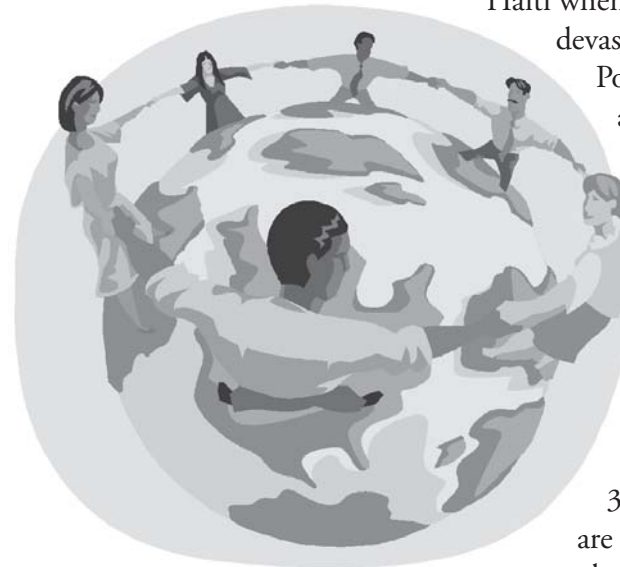
*To let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19*

Near the beginning of his ministry, Jesus entered the synagogue and read this passage from the scrolls. His proclamation dazzled and confused the listeners. The "year of the Lord's favor" most likely is the declaration of a "Jubilee Year." The effect of a Jubilee Year was twofold. First was the automatic release or emancipation of a Jew who had become enslaved or imprisoned. The second was the forgiveness of debt and the automatic return of property to the original owner. It was like a "do over" that returned everyone to an even playing field and gave them a fresh start on life.

It is difficult to imagine a Jubilee Year in current times. Our world economy seems to function on credit and debt. How could that ever be wiped clean and zeroed out? Can you even imagine an equal redistribution of world resources and wealth?

Yet we do seem to dream of the "year of the Lord's favor" on a smaller and more tangible scale. The world rushes to the aid of Haiti when the country was devastated by earthquakes.

Political arenas cease and the world unites to provide resources to relieve human suffering. Aid is offered on the basis of need, not merit. And in our own country we wait to see if this will be a year of Jubilee that provides health care for 35 million Americans who are currently without access to adequate health care.



We pray for a time of Jubilee every time we say the Lord's Prayer. "Thy Kingdom come...forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors..." May we all keep praying for and working toward the realization of God's Kingdom on earth.

Tom Rehling is conference minister of the Rocky Mountain Conference, UCC.

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Me Tarzan! You Jane!

By David K. Popham

Aw sweet February, the month of love, with Valentine's Day falling at its midpoint. A beckoning call, we give ourselves leave to dwell and ponder that bittersweet sting of romantic love and nuptials.

When my wife and I wedded 21 years ago it was in the full bloom of romanticized thoughts of marriage. Somewhere along the way reality seeped in. I turned out to be "no knight in shining armor" as Kerrie lovingly reminds me.

Our saving grace, even though we were in the grips of Valentine's fever, was the forethought to include a beautiful reading from *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. Paraphrasing, he says that marriage is not two islands becoming one land mass. Rather marriage is two distinct islands whose shores are washed by the mutual waters of love.

Kerrie and I please each other the most when "she is she and when I am I," as the late Grady Nutt would put it.

Marriage has taken it on the chin for becoming the deadly art of living together instead of loving together. It follows from the heretical ritual of blowing out two candles so one can burn alone. Marriage under these conditions is nothing more than two people tolerating each other.

Faithful marriage is when we call out "Me Tarzan! You Jane!" You probably have other appropriate signifiers to indicate that you-are-you and I-am-I. The point being the space between us is the location for the real work of love, not the false notion that love is two lives dying so one can live.



Me Tarzan! You Jane! is knowing that we go farthest when we swing on our own vines.

Me Tarzan! You Jane! is realizing that supporting each other's goals is the goal of marriage.

Me Tarzan! You Jane! is laughing out loud like Abraham and Sarah 'cause we both share in God's blessing.

Me Tarzan! You Jane! is a lifetime of taking joy in each other, not a jail sentence of joint endurance.

Me Tarzan! You Jane! is she-is-she/he-is-he and I-am-I filling the space between with mutuality, love, and delight.

No doubt Kerrie will take umbrage at the caveman attitude "Me Tarzan! You Jane!" She-is-she after all. I, being no knight in shining armor, will smile back at her, grateful for Valentine's sting in my heart.

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Haiti -- We Will Not Fear

By Peter Sawtell

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Psalm 46 makes a bold affirmation of faith: "we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea." That is not an idle or abstract affirmation. Even when kingdoms totter and "the earth melts" with earthquakes, the psalm is confident. Biblical scholar Leopold Sabourin summarizes the message of Psalm 46 as a proclamation that "God is the Lord of creation, of history and of eschatology" -- even when nothing seems stable or secure.

For the people of Haiti -- most of them destitute before this week's earthquake, and living in a country that was already incapable of providing security and basic services -- fear would be an appropriate response, along with their overwhelming grief and growing anger. But, for some of them, at least, hope and faith are stronger than fear.

In the last few days, I have seen numerous reports of earthquake survivors gathering in the streets and joining in song. Amber Lynn Munger blogged today: "This morning we woke up to aftershocks around 5am. Again, the tremors were met with singing. The singing is almost as forceful as the quakes. They are still singing now with all of their force -- Hallelujah! It is as if they are saying "we are not afraid!"

I can't know all of historical roots and the complex layers of meaning tied to public hymn singing in the midst of the devastated city. From these reports, though, the songs of "hallelujah" do not express resignation or quietism. The singing is of persistence, and a refusal to give in to despair.

For the people in Port-au-Prince, singing goes hand-in-hand with their search for survivors, their quest for water and food, and their mourning of all that has been lost. Hymns center them and sustain them as they go about the hard work of survival. Each aftershock triggers new panic, and then songs of praise and confidence still the fear.

"We will not fear" is not an easy statement. The hymns in Haiti are a willful commitment to carry on when there is good reason to panic or give up. The act of gathering as a community in itself provides nurture and support. The songs of confidence affirm a hopeful reality more real than the horrors.

The singing people of Haiti strengthen my faith and resolve. If they can move beyond fear when surrounded by corpses, rubble and political collapse, how can I despair? If they can sing of persistence and confidence when they have lost everything, how can we feel hopeless when Copenhagen and the US Senate don't do what we want as quickly as we'd like?

The Haitians gather to sing with each jarring aftershock. We can learn from them. Maybe -- when our news seems discouraging or distressing -- we too should congregate in the streets to sing hymns of commitment and hope.

First and foremost, this situation calls on all people -- people of all faiths, and those without faith -- to act on their most basic notions of compassion and solidarity. For most of us, who are far from the disaster scenes, that action means giving money. Loving prayers of compassion that don't also include significant giving simply won't cut it. Your denomination, Church World Service, or the Red Cross will make efficient use of your donation. This is the core ethical matter. Do it."

The occurrence of yet another crushing disaster in Haiti brings to mind a term from the writings of Lester Brown, "failed states." Those are countries "which on some level fail to provide personal security or basic services, such as education, health care, food and physical infrastructure, to their people." In 2008, Haiti was #12 in the list of the "top 20" failing states.

Among the other 20 states listed in 2008 are many of the geo-political hotspots of the world: Somalia (#1), Sudan (#3), Iraq (#6), Pakistan (#10) and Yemen (#18). Not only are failed states a disaster for their own residents, they are the seedbeds for terrorism and international turmoil.

Brown's eco-justice concern is that rapid and widespread resource depletion and the impact of climate change will lead more countries toward the instability of failed states. The global trajectory toward environmental crisis is tied directly to an increasing risk of civil war and insurrection, famine and disease, migration and displacement.

Eco-justice opens our eyes to the intersecting aspects of ecology, economics, politics and power that amplify disaster in failing states. Eco-justice draws us into compassion and solidarity with those in other parts of the world, and helps us see the enlightened self-interest in working toward a more just and sustainable world.

And the people of Haiti who sing in the presence of destruction remind us of the deep hope that must sustain us as we go about the long and difficult work of healing and transformation. May we, with the Haitians and the psalmist, announce that "we will not fear!"

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The Power of Words

By *Topher Mehlhoff*

Never underestimate the power of a kind word.

I have Crohn's Disease, which is a condition where my immune system fights against my bowels (and usually wins). What that means for me is chronic stomach pain, problems with fatigue, and some bathroom issues that are not fit to print in a church newsletter.

Usually, Crohn's Disease and I can coexist peacefully. I'm one the lucky patients that doesn't have to have multiple surgeries or make sure to be within 10 feet a bathroom at all times (I can stray up to 20-25 feet away). Mostly, I can live a normal life.

But for the past several months, it's been worse than usual and has interfered with my job as a youth minister. And I've had to miss a lot of Youth Group meetings because of it. Luckily, I have a great team of adults who can handle things when I'm sick. But it still really sucks to miss the two hours out of my week when I actually get to BE with the people I do my work for.

The other week I came down with a case of embarrassing bathroom issues on a youth group night and realized I had to call my team and tell them, yet again, that I'd be missing youth tonight. I hate doing this. Even though it's obviously not my fault that I'm sick, there's a nasty little voice inside me that always takes the opportunity to say, "Quitting again? Boy, everybody must think you're taking the day off to play video games..."

So I called one of our team members, Pam, to tell her. I apologized profusely, saying that I really hate having to do this all the

time. She said, "Topher—it's okay. You're sick!"

I said, "Yeah, I know," but went on to explain about my little voice who hates me. "Yep," said Pam, "I know—I have that little voice too. But no one actually thinks of you that way."

"**No one actually thinks of you that way**" was a revelation to me. It sounds stupid, but I can't express how much that statement meant to me! Although my brain was aware of it, my heart definitely wasn't. Honestly, it was just too hard to believe on my own that taking time off for being sick was okay. I had been letting the little voice push me around, and Pam's simple words knocked some sense into me.

So don't let your little voice push you around when you see an opportunity to speak kindly to someone! It may say, "They'll think you're being too personal," or "Who are you to give them a compliment?" But that's its job as a little annoying voice in your head. Just ignore it. Because your words might mean a lot more to that person than you know.

Now my little voice is saying, "That last sentence is *such* a cliché."

What a jerk.

Topher Mehlhoff is Director of Youth Ministry at Holladay United Church of Christ. To show your little voice who's in charge, share your revelations in a Reflections article by emailing Kathy@rmucc.org.



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