

Making the Political Personal

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I slid under the mosquito net of my bed and closed my eyes for a moment. The heat and humidity of rural Honduras in the summer had drained me; a morning full of tag and duck-duck-goose with thirty children added to the exhaustion. But playing with children and enduring the heat were only part of my learning experience in Honduras. Along with five other college students and two trip leaders, I traveled to Honduras to study service organizations. The Lily Foundation funds trips related to service and vocation, so the seven of us set out to explore different models of international service while volunteering at various organizations. We saw everything from women's rights NGOs to evangelical religious children's homes, and we learned to approach each place with a critical perspective but an open mind. We read books about theology, social change and vocation, and we asked ourselves questions about the ethics of service: Is there a right way to serve? How do we contend with all the inequalities of our globalized society? What cultural implications do volunteers from the United States carry with them when they serve in other countries? What impact do my choices at home have on people abroad?

These questions and more spun through my head as I lay in the hot room with the window open, trying to dry off the sweat beads on my forehead, my neck, my arms. I could hear our host, Leticia, moving around the living room and the outdoor kitchen to prepare lunch. I peered outside at this remarkable woman: dressed in a bright red skirt and simple white shirt to contend with the heat, Leticia led a seemingly simple but

industrious rural life. On this hot day in rural Honduras, she toiled in her kitchen to prepare a delicious traditional meal for us while her young grandchildren played games and giggled on her porch. She gently called us all to lunch and set steaming plates of food before us. After we devoured her beans, fresh avocados, and homemade cheese with warm corn tortillas, Leticia sat down to rest and talk with us. It was then that I discovered the spirit of service that this woman embodied.

Leticia's children had all moved to the United States, and she cared for their children back at home in Honduras. She lived in a community full of poverty, and she involved herself in it deeply. She belonged to a women's group at the church down the road from her house, and the women worked to empower themselves financially by holding festivals and making food to sell at them. With the exception of this moment, I had never seen Leticia sit still; she worked day in and day out to feed her grandchildren, to provide for her guests, to run her household and keep things together in the neighborhood.

It occurred to me as we talked with Leticia that she would never have the luxury of contemplating the ethics of service or other philosophical quandaries that we young students had set out to solve—she literally worked from dawn to dusk every single day. And yet she was the very model of service and hospitality that I strive to emulate in my life. She gave generously of all that she had. She shared her time and her life with us, showing us how to make cheese, how to do the dishes, letting us attempt to fold tamales. She fed us mangoes from trees in her backyard, she gave us beds in which to sleep. She gave us hospitality we could never even hope to repay.

In our hyper-efficient lifestyles in the United States, we tend to commodify things. We ask how much this will cost, or how much time that will take, or whether or not a given activity will be worth our time and energy. We even commodify the concept of service in our culture—we tally up the economic differences and judge the social change we make by the money we give or the number of hours we spend at the food bank, we count the number of letters we send to congress or smugly note how guilty we feel for having the privileges we do. And some of these things *are* important; indeed we are fortunate to live in a country where citizens have the voice and voting power that we do. It is important for us to take advantage of the opportunities we have been given.

But in our hyper-efficient, constantly going, and tirelessly working society, we sometimes forget to integrate our desire for change into our personal lives, into our relationships with those directly surrounding us. This concept is something Leticia modeled profoundly. To her, service took place in her relationships with her family and her friends.

The Christian theologian Ada Leticia Isasi-Diaz talks about service as taking place through the practice of solidarity with our neighbors. She defines solidarity as an action rather than just a notion; people must work together on equal footing to create change. They must walk alongside one another, share stories and struggles, and come to a profound understanding of each others' realities in order to truly work together.

As an ardent social activist, I found these ideas inspiring. But despite Isasi-Diaz's call to action, I felt a little bewildered as to how to actually integrate these concepts into my own life. Did I have to join a civic organization and wait until I knew the people well

enough to create change? What actual steps must be taken to live in solidarity and create change in the world? And what kind of change did I want to make in the world anyway?

Then it occurred to me that Leticia's involvement in her community and tireless work were not the only things that exemplified her ideas of service. A sense of solidarity and gratitude in her everyday activities—the passion and life she put into each sweep of the floor and every cup of coffee—was the basis for her service to others. As one woman from our trip noted, service is not separate from life; service *is* life. Our daily interactions, even with strangers, can be their own acts of service. When signing letters or lobbying for political change are practical but distant ways to make change, the solidarity we feel with the people around us is always present. If we value the lives of everyone around us as equally precious, if we see each person's soul as full of the love and pain and struggle of human existence, then we can cultivate a sense of continuity between large-scale social change and our personal lives. We can integrate service into our daily actions. In doing so, we will serve everyone more effectively.