

Katherine Eva Maich
University of Notre Dame
Service Send-off Address, May 2015

"It all happened while we sat there talking."

In her autobiography *The Long Loneliness*, Dorothy Day wrote about the founding of the Catholic Worker Movement, "[i]t all happened while we sat there talking, and it is still going on." Sitting around a kitchen, drinking coffee, cooking, letting ideas surface as we talked about our days—those have been my favorite moments with my roommates at ND, during my year serving with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, and on breaks from dissertation chapter writing at Berkeley. Day described the founding of the movement by saying, "We were just sitting there talking...[i]t was as casual as all that, I often think. It just came about. It just happened." Those were the moments when community was created.

As we all sit here together today, I realize what an honor it is to return to Notre Dame and be here with all of you, to share this celebration of your hard work and acknowledge this important choice you have collectively made.

Eleven years ago, I was sitting over in Washington Hall, thinking about a city I was moving to—Camden, New Jersey. Not only had I never been to Camden, but I hadn't even heard of it before being told by the Jesuit Volunteer Corps that Camden was to be my placement. My relatives in Northern New Jersey paused upon hearing this news, as did others. "Caaaamden?" was the most common response, said with shocked politeness.

As an English major at ND, I didn't quite know what was ahead for me after graduation. My minor in Catholic Social Teaching had enabled me to develop an informed analysis of social justice and the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. I knew I wanted to put those politics into practice in a meaningful way, as I had in working with the Higgins Labor Center, while picking tomatoes in Immokalee, Florida, and during Summer Service Projects in South Bend, Raleigh, and Boston. But what I didn't know was how much I would be affected by the questions Camden raised, and I didn't expect it to impress upon me the need to create community throughout my life. As Dorothy Day reminds us, "[w]e have all known the long loneliness, and we have learned that the only solution is love, and that love comes from community." This is what I found there.

Camden's rustbelt identity shared similarities with other cities I knew, though I felt particularly stunned by the evidence of job loss in its empty streets lined with boarded-up homes, and by the towering giants of RCA Victor and Campbell's Soup, whose factories' glory days had long since dulled. I was surprised by our neighbors' warmth, a Puerto Rican couple who invited us over for drinks in their narrow rowhouse's backyard and bought us Christmas presents that chilly winter, as we dug our cars out of the snowed-in street since the city had no plows. Consistently rated the most dangerous city in the U.S.,

Camden prompted me to ask questions about the social effects of job loss on the community. I moved up to Amherst, Massachusetts, to think about these questions after, and then began doctoral work in Sociology at Berkeley. As we sat around talking, it happened, and it is still going on. I became an ethnographer before I knew what the research method was; I tried to see myself differently through moments of encounter with those who taught me about community, including Pilar.

Pilar

Pilar looked at me, silently, and stepped aside, slowly creaking the door open without her usual jovial greeting. It was the first time she had ever opened her apartment door wide enough for me to see inside, as she tended to say goodbye quickly when my housemate Krista and I walked her the few blocks home after dinner. This time was different; the door caught on something, and I realized it was pushing black garbage bags dragging on the cement floor, bags which I soon learned were full of packages of ketchup, sugar, salt, and soy sauce from her visits to restaurants over the last 15 years. Small cockroaches skittered from underneath the bags as I stepped in to see more of these sorts of collected items on top of her furniture, her bare mattress, and her kitchen counter. She watched my reaction as I glanced around and said, as enthusiastically as I could muster, "Okay! Let's get to work."

From the 13th floor of North Gate, a high-rise housing complex close to the Delaware River where Pilar lives, you can look out to see most of North Camden, along with the Ben Franklin Bridge successfully delivering traffic to bustling Philadelphia. You must pay a toll to get out of New Jersey, but you're free to enter and wander around, my housemates and I always mused. From the 13th floor, I looked out more times than I can count that day, wishing I was anywhere but a stuffy apartment filled to the brim with things that I considered 'useless', or 'trash', especially at first glance. Pilar would never use all of these things, so why keep them, especially in a small one-bedroom apartment in subsidized housing? I considered these collected memories of hers a problem, a hazard, because Pilar was in danger of eviction due to hoarding. My non-profit organization, Fair Share Housing, had tried to convince Pilar to "lighten the load." We worked together for about 9 hours that day, slowly piecing through fragments of her life, as I came to see what holding on to the little she had meant to her. I came to appreciate that Pilar was lonely, and isolated. Her severe depression had prevented her from holding a job. Having 'stuff' made her feel better at home. A gregarious, outgoing personality with a keen memory for detail, there was some comfort in the control of what she kept and in the company it offered her.

Part of the irony of trying to urge Pilar that she didn't need these things came from the fact that one of the four values of JVC, in addition to social justice, spirituality, and community, is *simple living*. My community members and I were told to leave behind cell phones, excess, and the hopes of real salaries, and to come to the program ready to embrace the year rather than material goods. But while that was a choice I elected to make, because I

had stuff that I could leave behind, for Pilar, of course, it was not. And part of my placement at the housing complex was to work with residents on issues that arose, such as Pilar coming close to eviction due to the fact that she held on to so much stuff. That day, we emptied her apartment just enough for her to pass the upcoming inspection, and for at least a month, I knew Pilar was safe.

During my year in Camden, we took Pilar, 25 years older than all of us, ice-skating for the first time, unable to stand up very well and so we took turns, arms under her like swooping crutches on the ice. She felt welcome to bring friends to dinner at our house countless numbers of Sundays, my night to cook, while I in turn gritted my teeth and tried to magically extend food for 5 into dinner for 8 or more, usually by adding more cheese to the casserole dish of some rice concoction. We celebrated her birthday at our house, and she invited us to the neighborhood Bible study. I went, every Tuesday night, because it was the meeting of our community. I heard things from our neighbors and their kids. Their worries, job losses, confirmations, and new babies—Pilar brought us into that community.

I learned to see myself differently through those moments of encounter, and that has affected my research practice, my teaching at Berkeley, and the sense of how my work takes on questions of social justice and marginality that I first thought about seriously at Notre Dame and lived out while in Camden.

Empty Yourself of All that is Not Love

Last weekend, Father Paul Doyle gave a blessing at my cousin's wedding that is still on my mind. He suggested that we try to "empty ourselves of all that is not love." What would it look like, what would *we* look like as a people, as a community of broken, fragile, lonely people, if we let go of all that is *not* love? The negativity, fear, insecurity, and anxiety we carry? What would it be like to hold onto love, the love we find in community, and let go of the rest?

Though living among a group of strangers from all Jesuit universities in Camden was my first sense of a formal community, the ability to share that encounter—sometimes in uncomfortable, awkward, and irritating ways—has remained relevant. Not all of you will live in a formal community over these next years, but this process of finding and forging your own in various iterations will be one to carry with you. I felt this in trying to bond with fellow graduate students in Amherst and in Berkeley, seeking and encountering real friends amidst a competitive environment where we doubt ourselves when our publications are rejected or we are turned down for a fellowship; when we worry we aren't good enough. I saw this in my dissertation research, when interviewing domestic workers in Peru and New York City about their experiences of work, immigration, and exploitation on the job. I have found this useful in creating ties with my husband's family in Argentina, as we bond over pasta recipes and shared traditions, thousands of miles

apart. It is in the finding and forging of those connections through community that I felt less alone; that I felt more love and could empty out the rest.

Good and Hard Work, and Purposefully So

You're equipped now not just to *study* the social world, but to get involved and *change* it. We are accountable to each other in this respect. You are uniquely positioned to bring your personal ethics, your education, and your energy and enthusiasm forward, to do what Dorothy Day calls, "the duty of delight." Empty yourself of all that is not love. You have the chance now to think differently about class politics, the realities of racialized and gendered discrimination, and the hopelessness and loneliness that all of us feel, and to engage in the world in a different way because of that, now and for the rest of your lives.

I went back to Camden last August, and found myself walking the familiar path to North Gate with a spark in my heart, hoping I could see Pilar and introduce her to my husband, Nico. Sure enough, after buzzing her apartment, she came down from the 13th floor and joined us outside, squinting in the summer sun, and immediately inquired about my community members by name. She remembered which two had become doctors and which two were social workers, and she hugged Nico and bought us both a cherry water ice.

Pilar held onto the things that she needed back then, and she helped us learn how to hold onto each other. "It happened while we all sat there talking." I am more and more convinced that is the only way to make it through, and I hope that we can continue to do so, as we step forward and empty ourselves of all that is not love. We know there is work to be done. It is good work and it is hard work, and purposefully so.

Thank you.