Finding God in Daily Life

By Marguerite Havlis, BA’87, MA’89, BSN’93

As a nurse practitioner working in an underserved community clinic, the poorest zip code in my border town, God is with me every moment. Before entering an exam room, laying hands on a patient, my whispered prayer is always the same: “God in my hands, God on my heart. Thank you, my Lord.”

I see bodies ravaged by unchecked disease, untreated ailments, teeth rotting in their sockets, festering and unkempt wounds. In my cobbled-together Spanish, I offer comfort and treatment, medicine samples scavenged and begged from pharmaceutical salespeople — who call on the clinic in their designer suits with $500 box lunches for the doctors — referrals and maps to the Catholic Charities clinics for emergency tooth extractions and skin cancer removals.

Women wrapped in hijabs have pressed wrinkled scraps of paper into my hands, prayers from the Koran scrawled with the curving, dotted hieroglyphics of their languages; weathered, weathered Mexican grandparents have given me their rosary beads and still-warm tortillas. The little kids tug on my white coat, digging in my pockets for stickers, and place my stethoscope around their necks, giggling and hiding their eyes. I am surrounded by God’s grace and solidarity by the humble gratitude of my suffering and poor patients. They offer me the constancy of their love. What I have come to know in my 17 years of practice, is that to be a true friend of Jesus is to be a friend to the humble, the suffering, the poor. “Blessed are the poor”...

It is in my volunteer work, the true work of my heart, that I find God’s presence lurking in the shadowy underbrush. Hauling plastic milk jugs of water over a dusty, barren trail in the desert, 107 degrees of searing, blinding desert heat singeing any sliver of my exposed white skin to blistering pink, I often — and so quickly — lose faith, repeating a litany to myself: “Does it even matter, bringing our measly jugs that are tearing my hands apart? I only get here once a week.”

Coming upon the water drop-off site is always a merciful relief, and I usually crumple to my knees, and say a quick Lord’s Prayer. More than once, thin brown-skinned men, women and children have warily stepped out of the mesquite bushes, their clothes shredded and sweat-stained from days amidst unforgiving cactus and thorny trees, their eyes wary, shy. Mine must reflect unabashed fear, tinged with the ever-present sorrow in my heart.

The migrants I have met in our unforgiving desert truly embody Christ: his humility, his generosity, his suffering. They have knelt with me, ignoring the jugs of icy cold water I’ve placed at the drop point, and joined in their broken English to finish the Lord’s Prayer with me before we part ways.

I wish them “Via con Dios.” They offer me sticky fruit candies from plastic bags containing their dearest possessions. More than once, one of the men has followed me the two miles back to my car, and stood silently as I make my way back down the bumpy gravel ranch road, before raising his hand, then touching his heart. I feel impotent, my offering to slake their thirst out here in the desert reservation land, paltry. I offer them the humble compassion of the Christ I have come to know, through knowing them. “Blessed are the humble”...

At the Food Bank, where I pack bags of food for our weekly recipients, the silent monotony of my assigned tasks invites God into my heart. As I count “two cans of soup, one of veggies, one bag of rice, two beans,” I scan the familiar faces and wave to the children lining up along the far wall, their punch cards in hand. This is my Thursday ritual.

I think of my overflowing refrigerator, the extra refrigerator in the garage that I sometimes use as my wine cooler for “the really good bottles,” and I feel nauseated. I never leave my afternoon at the Food Bank without stomach pain. My heart aches worse. I see God in my customers, their faces passive, their bodies needing basic nourishment, their hearts desiring solace, their situations grim. Their lips whisper “Thank you” and “Bless you.”

I am humbled to be blessed by those who have nothing; I have everything. They radiate Christ’s selfless love, and they reassure me, in their gazes, their soft touches and pats to my shoulder, that God is caring for them as well. I fast on Thursdays, my day at the Food Bank, my simplistic attempt to offer solidarity to the hungry and needy. I feel Christ’s love envelope me more tightly on those days, as my stomach rumbles and complains. “Blessed are the hungry”...

I do not sleep well. In the blackest night hours, I sit silently, and I pray for every person who has crossed my path that day, whether ill, hungry or leaving his home to potentially never arrive in “the promised land” for a “better job.” I am overwhelmed; it steals my rest, the magnitude of all human suffering. I attempt to conjure those moments of God’s graceful presence in their generous smiles, the slight lifting of their shoulders, the bit of life blossoming in their eyes.

God is with me in my daily life. He is with me in my dark, wakeful nights; his arms comfort me. His presence challenges me to wake in the morning, allowing him to again work through me to be an instrument of healing, of comfort, of solidarity, in my small ways.

About the author: Havlis holds three degrees from Creighton — a B.A. in creative writing (1987), an M.A. in English (1989) and a B.S.N. from the Accelerated Nursing Program (1993). She has worked as a critical care nurse, served at low-income clinics, operated private practices and taught nursing. Havlis has written articles, poetry and short stories for publication and pleasure. She enjoys participating in local volunteer work and traveling with her husband, Tony. “I am grateful for the Jesuit education I received at Creighton; it instilled in me the models of compassionate service and social justice which guide my daily professional and personal life.”