

Vocation in the Wake of Destruction.

By Josiah Devine Johnson

Rain lashed down as we struggled to open the padlocked door on the second story of the ruined house. “Do you have a key!?” I hollered to Carmain, the 76-year-old, 5’2” Puerto Rican woman whose home we had managed to lock ourselves out of. I said to myself, “She doesn’t understand English.” Not that she’d be able to hear me either way, the crack of thunder promised the tearing open of the sky. Carmain’s laughter cut through the howl of the storm. Throwing her head back, lightning reflected off her sunglasses as if to thrust it back toward the heavens. Miming with my hands I made an unlocking motion: “The key, Carmain! We need the key!” and pointed to the locked door. Carmain made a similar motion, taunting me as she shuffled to a pile of rubble heaped against the battered wall. Picking up the splintered remains of a 2x4, and with as much care as one might take swatting a fly she brought the board down hard, knocking the padlock off its chain in one easy stroke. Carmain pressed the door lightly with her fingertips, prompting the wind to blow it open with a sudden gust. With a grand sweeping motion she showed the way inside, a gracious host and queen of her domain.

Driving back from Carmain’s roof my volunteer relief crew and I sat in soggy silence for several minutes as we found ourselves completely awestruck by everything that had happened, having left Carmain’s roof covered in tarps, convinced that she could be doing our jobs better than we could. My team and I were deployed in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico where Hurricanes Irma and Maria battered the island and this small town west of San Juan especially hard. Irma and Maria hit just two weeks apart from one another in 2017 unleashing unprecedented flooding that swept away cars, houses, and thousands of people. Carmain watched her neighbor’s head and limbs disappear and reappear among the whitecaps as he was hurled down their flooded street. Another neighbor across the street from her was found dead weeks after the flooding, having drowned in their house unable to escape their second story when the water rose past their roof.

I suspect that Carmain wouldn’t tell her story about being stuck outside on the roof with us that day with as much focus on the elements, because she’d already dealt with the worst that there could be. If Carmain were to tell this story I imagine it would be quite different: it would be in Spanish, for one, and would likely speak more about how a bunch of mainlanders and foreigners came to her house and got scared by a bit of rain. Her home was destroyed, her friends died; the second story of her home we were locked out of was set to be demolished by us. What’s

a lousy padlock to her but something in the way, something that she can easily beat. I tell this story because my time with her and her neighbors, immersed for months in their community, made something abundantly clear to me about “demonstrating care for others and their communities”: 1) Carmain and the people of Puerto Rico do NOT need “saving,” 2) as volunteers and community service members we are not there to do the work *for* them, we are there to work *with* them, and 3) their story is their own, and deserves respect.

As an ethnographic anthropologist I want to live out my calling to care for others by living among people whose stories are too often mischaracterized and misunderstood, and show the world the truth. The Puerto Ricans’ story is their own, and as an anthropologist I hope to act as an echo, a vice through which their voices can be heard by those who should be listening, but perhaps don’t even know where to begin. In my own case, I saw the devastation that Puerto Rico endured...and saw a staged political photo-op in which paper towels -- *paper towels* -- were thrown to people who’d lost loved ones, homes, food, everything. I saw disaster being ignored and people being disregarded. Our presence as volunteers who affirmed the Puerto Ricans that they weren’t forgotten, that we truly *saw and heard* them, perhaps meant more to them than the relief work we were doing.

Joanne Elise Engquist is an alumna of PLU and current pastor at Gethsemane Lutheran in Seattle, with whom I recently spoke about vocation and care. Gethsemane has a strong focus on engagement with its community, and on vocation. Before answering her call to work in Seattle, Joanne was a pastor in Boston where she brought vocation to the forefront of her congregation's mission. “Vocation isn’t just for theologians,” Joanne told me. “Vocation is what we believe we are called to be and enact. It is a continual reflective process. There are things that should shift in us as we do it, and it is up to us and each other to critically inquire what drives those shifts. It’s a reckoning of sorts with ourselves and our collective history.” Joanne acknowledged that vocation is about self discovery, but not pushing ourselves to the absolute limit in the quest for self- “It’s asking ‘Where do I have capacity and passion for vocation’ and also ‘where must I place limits to fulfill other aspects of vocation such as relationships, and having an acknowledgement of today.”

Joanne and members of her congregation took a group to Haiti in 2011, a year after a devastating earthquake that left 300,000 dead and millions homeless. Upon their return they debriefed about what they had seen and experienced; a grad student who had gone with presented to the congregation their filing of a “class action lawsuit against God” for killing and damaging all those people. Coming from their understanding of the world, this person exemplified vocation in her eyes. “They came at this situation- in understanding their experience with thoughtful inquiry, they looked at the care, sacrifice, service for others and connected it with why they do what they do- they got angry and sued God for the destruction of humanity, for the murder of her own creation. As a congregation we had to make room for them as we must for each person searching out- we have to be dependent on one another and accept we are bound to my neighbor, not bound to outside expectations. That’s how we bind ourselves to our true selves.” Similarly, my time working with and learning from Carmain and others in her community has forever “bound” me to them as my neighbors, whose care for me has helped me to become more truly myself.

The last thought Joanne left me with after our hour long interview was a question, “Where does your heart come alive to address this thing you care so passionately about? What is something you do not want to leave undone?” My experience witnessing the effect of our presence and our work on the Puerto Rican people brought my heart alive around the importance of letting others know that they were seen and their stories are heard. This experience made me need to become an ethnographic anthropologist, it made me find my vocation. By listening to and elevating the stories of others I hope to amplify their voices, honor their experience, and foster meaningful connection across barriers of “difference” in service to our common humanity.

(1,240 words)

Resources:

Johnson, Josiah Devine, and Joanne. "A Perspective on Vocation." 19 Apr. 2021.

Johnson, Josiah Devine. "Puerto Rico a Year Later." Gap Year Radio. Gap Year Radio, 2 Mar. 2020, Minneapolis, March 2nd, 2020.