**2018 Orientation Community**

**Ilana Weber**

This Spring, as I had the honor of interviewing some of you as you applied to JVC Northwest, many of you just out of college, I felt curious to remember what I had been thinking and feeling when I was in your shoes. I went deep into my Google Drive and found my application to become a live-in assistant at L’Arche Portland and quickly became reacquainted with my 22 year old self. Younger Ilana was so full of aspiration- I wanted to do something that would truly change me and help me become the person that I wanted to be. For those of you who are unfamiliar with L’Arche, L’Arche communities are small communities around the world where people with and without disabilities live in intentional community together. Understandably, the L’Arche application had asked me why I valued community, and I was entertained to see that I gave all of the right answers. I knew what to expect from community; it was going to be hard, messy, and beautiful. I had been in residence life in college, I had close, intentional groups of friendships, had spent summers at camp, and even knew to throw in the b-word, “boundaries.”

Looking back at my eager self, years later, I still think that my answers were good ones. Only now, I feel like I would add about five asterisks after each statement I made. There is so much that I wish I could tell my younger self as I began that L’Arche experience. It *was* hard, messy, and beautiful. And, it was so much more than that. While I had the right answers on paper, knew vaguely what to expect, and was pretty well-equipped for intentional community, there’s something I wish that I would have been able to tell myself, and that I offer to you now: Community really isn’t about having the right answers to what makes a community. A thriving community appears when you’re willing to be surprised, to not know the answers, and to welcome the unexpected.

You may have been in great communities before, like I had been, but each group of people is different and offers new opportunities and experiences. I am getting married next month and during this past season of premarital counseling my partner and I have been constantly discussing the unique space between us that is ours, and only ours. What do we each bring to the space between us? How do those dynamics form and shape the other? Are there things that we have yet to welcome into the space? We revel in the mystery of our sacred connection.

And just like the romantic friendship between my partner and I, each community has a space that cannot be recreated or molded to fit expectations. In L’Arche, there were many moments where I held so tightly to my expectations of community that I missed the community that was right in front of me. Other times, I felt swept up in the magic of community happening *to* me despite my efforts. There are a few surprises that I would like to share with you, in hopes that you also experience them this year.

First, even though I expected conflict to happen, I was surprised by it when it did. I spent my first few months at L’Arche observing and getting acquainted with the culture of the community. After a few months had passed and I had become comfortable with routines and community meetings, I started paying more attention to my own feelings. I started noticing that there were communication styles and cultural values of my community mates that differed from my own. One housemate in particular had a strong, passionate, and intellectual demeanor, and I often left meetings feeling like I had been bulldozed by his intensity. I really appreciated and admired this person, but the complexity of relationship was setting in. I realized that I could like him and be hurt by him at the same time. Eventually, a situation between us called for a long conversation. It was my first opportunity to use the communication tools that L’Arche espouses and it was a hard, vulnerable conversation. That first conflict ended my blissful season of conflict avoidance and opened up true, complex relationships with this housemate as well as my other ones. There were many, many conflicts to follow, and I was surprised by the end of my years there to notice that while I had grown in many areas, conflict and conflict resolution were the most prominent growth that I had experienced. Each conflict was an opportunity for deeper relationship, and there were times that I was so frustrated that the conflict was happening that I did not take advantage of the possibilities for new depth and understanding. If we’re too caught up in our expectations of what community should be, we just might miss it.

I was also, and still am, surprised by the amount of time and energy that healthy community requires. Team meetings were long and tedious, and we would often revisit the same conversations after I thought we had reached a conclusion weeks before.  Turns out that creating a culture where everyone’s voice is heard takes a lot of time. I’m going to say that again: creating a culture where everyone’s voice is heard takes a lot of time. Often my white cultural values of efficiency and task completion competed with my deeper desire for my community mates to feel safe, heard, and collaborative. Skipping to the result is not the point; The process is what actually matters. If we’re too caught up in our expectations of what community should be, we just might miss it.

While I knew that I would grow while at L’Arche, and I wanted to grow, I didn’t expect to be surprised by myself in so many ways, particularly by my own shortcomings. I felt pretty great about my capacity for community when I joined L’Arche, and like I said before, I was in pretty good shape. And yet, there were some less-than-ideal moments. Like I said in my interview with many of you, I saw the best sides of myself in community, and I also saw the worst. In moments of stress or feeling scarcity, I would catch myself rationing grace and clinging to control. I would rant to my closest L’Arche mates about how other housemates cleaned, or didn’t clean; I would re-organize the dishwasher and refrigerator, I would feel stubborn toward other’s ideas at team meetings, and I would focus on how essential I felt to the community’s well-being. There were also some people that I just did not connect with. At L’Arche, people can join at any time, so my community was changing every few months. There was one volunteer from Germany with whom I really struggled.

She and I operated with differing communication styles, value systems, cultures, and interests. Despite a few attempts at hanging out and many conversations about our communication difficulties, I was so relieved when her year was up and she went back to Germany. To this day I wonder how I could have supported her better. I was too busy being discontented with our difference to allow myself to be surprised by her gifts.  If we’re too caught up in our expectations of what community should be, we just might miss it.

And finally, of course, I was surprised by connection when I least expected it. I had another housemate that was unlike me, and I had no idea how to relate to him when I first moved in. Over time, even though we never spent time together outside of community events, I developed so much respect for and appreciation of him. He was super into bikes, so much so that he has a podcast about them, and so when we did talk, it was often about my very limited knowledge and experience as a fair-weather biker. He was shocked to find out that I didn’t have a multi-purpose bike tool. A few weeks later, as I was checking my mailbox in the office, there was a bike tool sitting on top of my letters, with no note or any indication of who it was from. But I knew, and I remember feeling so moved by his act of care. In that moment, I was able to receive his small act of kindness in a way that was so him, and so different from how I would have previously measured kindness. If we’re too caught up in our expectations of what community should be, we just might miss it.

Even though I joined L’Arche with an idea of community, what I didn’t realize and soon would was that community is all about being open to surprise- to be surprised by conflict, and hopefully its resolution, surprised by the time it takes to have an inclusive space, surprised by our own areas for growth, and surprised by connection. I invite you now to think about your community mates that you met just yesterday. If you’d like, close your eyes and take a deep breath.

Upon first impression, who doesn’t seem kindred, relatable, or even likeable to you? Who left you nervous about what this year might look like as you fell asleep? I invite you to take another deep breath and say to yourself “let me be surprised.” Take a few breaths and repeat that to yourself a few times.

Then, once you start waiting to be surprised by community more than you look to have your expectations met, you just might find it. And I hope you do.

**2018 Orientation Social Justice**

**Kyler Liu**

When I started to write this speech I asked myself what does social justice even mean? Do I really know what it means to do justice work? Should I look it up in some dictionary written by radical activist folks? Instead of trying to tell you all what justice work is, I’ll share some thoughts and questions that I have learned in how I have approached this work. Going forward I’ll be using the term justice work to refer to work that is responding to the damage that “isms” do to our communities or trying to end those “isms” from ever happening. I am going to share my experiences with you because I am still not sure what it exactly means, looks like and feels like to do justice work. And maybe in this conversation it can help you reflect on what justice work looks like in your own life.

So, what brings you to justice work and why are you doing it? What motivates me to this work is the idea of solidarity, coalition building with others for mutual protection and support against the “isms”. Prevent systems of power from dividing and pitting communities against each other preventing them from satisfy people’s needs to serving power’s wants. But I did not always believe in this. The motivations behind my first year of AmeriCorps were mixed. It was a little of helping those like myself, wanting to save/help those less fortunate than I. I also had romantic ideas of being the savior, help fix these communities, be the hero type stuff. And it was self-serving, I wanted to gain cultural competency skills, help round out my resume. But most of these reasons for me were a loose foundation. And when times would get tough at service I would have to revisit my reasons for why I was doing what I was doing.

After my two years of AmeriCorps, I had the intellectual understanding of why I was doing justice work. It was only when I was working at a non-profit with adults dealing a mental health diagnosis that I had a firmer understanding of my motivations. While writing a grant to access new funding for our organization members and staff listed out the unique benefits we offered to our community, a place to be understood, find community, have a cheap meal, get services, and do meaningful work. In this moment, I realized I was doing this work so one day it would be there for me if ever I needed the services we offered. I learned that by working to normalize mental health care for my members I was normalizing reaching out for mental health resources for myself whenever I was needing them. This is how I came to the reasons of why I do this work, the reasons why you do this work may be different for you. So what are they? And why do you do this work?

In realizing the connection and commonality I shared with others, I also realized there were differences between myself and my members. I could go home after we closed, but my members had to still face the stigma of mental illness. All of us were affected by stigma, for me, it manifested in something like “I can’t need help, I am the one who is supposed to help, I have to be strong for them”, for my members it was something different, sometimes life threatening. We carried the burden of stigma differently, and most of the time, if not all the time, they bore the heaviest part of the oppression. This led me to ask who in our communities are carrying the weight of oppressive systems? What do they experience and how are they effected by these systems? What is the role of folks who are not the direct target of those systems, and who may even benefit from that oppression, to do in the face of that injustice?

After AmeriCorps, I moved to San Antonio, TX I was looking for work and volunteer opportunities. In my search, I found the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center an organization doing work to preserve the Hispanic heritage of the Westside of San Antonio and fight against various injustices different communities faced. I remember talking with the Executive Director if they had any open positions and she mentioned how they prefer to hire women of color who were from the communities they were serving. When she said this my defensiveness creeped up, What! I went to public Ivy League (I went to that school to be a leader), I have great skills, why wouldn’t they want me? But when I allowed these thoughts to wash over me another set of thoughts lapped in. Well, I said to myself, that makes sense. This is their community. I just moved here! They know their community better than I do. I am here to aide in their efforts. During our conversation, we found a way for me to get plugged in and contribute some of my skills to some of their movements and projects. From that experience, I learned to ask who am I centering in my work? In general how do I show up to this work? What is my role in justice work and within communities that are different from the communities I grew up in?

After AmeriCorps, working in mental health, and volunteering on social justice initiatives, I thought I was a pretty woke individual when it came to the “isms”. In the 2016 elections, I learned that my learning was still needing to grow. I supported a male candidate over a female candidate for a contentious political position. The primary was heated. I would get frustrated at how others were supporting my candidate’s opponent. And some of my critiques were dead on, I had the evidence to show how the other opponent was influenced by special interests and maybe not the best candidate to support. During these discussions/debates with friends, they mentioned to me that I was being sexist. The comments and tone I had when discussing my lack of support for this person, were sexist. From those conversations, I learned that I was still sexist because I lived and operated in a society that is sexist. And I was still needing to do the work necessary to manage the sexism that I was exhibiting.

When doing this work, we don’t select our messengers. The people who help you realize you need to do more work or personal education are sometimes the people who aren’t our model citizens, kindest people or the best candidates. Sometimes the people who are hard to like or respect are the ones that we need to be aware of our “isms” the most. Now when I approach topics especially politics and campaigning, I ask myself who are the people that sometimes I right off? For what reasons? And what can they teach me? How are the “isms” involved in the decisions or thoughts that I make and advocate?

Through all of these experiences, I learned that it is going to take time for me to learn this justice stuff. Reflecting back on how I learned about social justice and justice work it’s been a journey, and a journey that may not have an end, have a certificate that certifies me as woke, or have that “I did it moment, I became un insert “ism”. I’ve accepted that I’ll have to keep learning so that I have the skills and knowledge to make a world that meets everyone’s and the planet’s needs. To finish with a quote about activism from Grace Lee Boggs an activist from Detroit. She tells us that “activism can be the journey rather than the arrival”. So what will your journey be like with social justice and justice work this year and beyond? Where do you want to start or keep going? What is it that you still want or need to learn?

**2018 Orientation Spirituality**

**Maggie Ayau**

Spirituality can be difficult to talk about. We are not socialized in spirit-work, I think. We use many different names to talk about the spirit – its movements, its nuances, its shaping force on our collective principles – but on the whole spirituality maintains an air of abstraction, which for some can be intimidating. That’s okay. Part of why you’re here, why we’re here, is to peer into the abstraction, and to do so not in order to receive answers, but simply out of a belief that (to paraphrase Rumi) “what we seek is also seeking us”.

And so, as you prepare yourselves to lean further into your spirituality, I humbly offer you two prayers.

This is my first prayer.

When I came into my first JV year, I felt pretty certain I knew who God was. God had a language, a face, a name. That isn’t to say I had the mysteries of the universe figured out by any means. But I was emerging from a worldview where mystery was interpreted as obscurity, where it was important that my spirituality had a foundation – walls, ceilings, structural integrity – in order to withstand the tumultuous winds of immorality. So I believed that my spirituality needed to be very clearly defined. I expected that my experience living in intentional community would deepen and ultimately affirm for me the value system I had already accepted as true.

But, as I’m sure you’ve figured out, this is not actually what happened.

During a retreat facilitated by the legendary Carol Gabrielli, my retreat region and I were invited to go around in a circle and share names that we had for our understanding of a higher power. Then she challenged us to choose a new name.

This *really* bothered me. Why couldn’t we all decide on the same thing? Why couldn’t we employ a common language? The ambiguity of our naming made me so uncomfortable. It shook up the walls of a belief system that preached that there is only one way, only one truth. I clung. And also, I wondered.

Over my second year the walls continued to crumble – first slowly, then all at once. It was terrifying and also exhilarating, like the moment just before you come up for air after a long breath held underwater. I learned how to lean into changing winds rather than push against, push against. My JV community helped me approach my spirituality with softness, with sighing. My community in the sweat lodge helped me understand a spirituality that was dark and feminine.

I must admit that it was incredibly difficult for me to do this. It took me a long time to let go of the names I had clung to so tightly. And when the time came for me to recognize God in a new way I was unwilling and unable to do so. When I was invited to leave the comfort of the spiritually familiar, to experience something outside of the walls and ceilings of my spiritual shelter, I lacked the courage to accept that invitation.

Walter Brueggemann writes, “God hidden from us in Your myriad verbs, we confess You where we do not see you … we do not see You, but we dare to name You.”

We dare to name you. Spirituality is not a structure. It is an organism. We all have our own names for our gods and for ourselves. As our worldviews shift, so, too, do these names, like tectonic plates searching for a new place to settle, to make ground, to call home. This is both natural and terrifying. My name had stuck to an identity that I had clung to so tightly that I missed the myriad other identities that God inhabits, creates, and affirms.

I wish I had not been so protective of those names I had outgrown, those I needed to allow to change but resisted, stubbornly, out of pride or fear or preservation or perhaps just habit.

My wish for you is that you feel empowered to recognize love in a new way this year. You give yourself permission to locate the barriers within your own belief system break ‘em on down – to turn the walls into the soil, to let the forest grow. To harvest a love that is accessible and charitable for all people, even when it is a love that is too wild and untameable and unnameable for you to press into a single word.

But when you do, when you do discover a new word for love, my wish for you is that you cherish that and wield that. My wish is that this word would multiply, would live a life and give its life when it is ready, and would bear new life.

This is my second wish for you.

I’m learning that so much of spirituality is habit. What we say, what we think, how we prepare ourselves. “I measure my life in coffee spoons,” T.S. Eliot wrote. If there is any secret to the universe I suspect it begins this way.

Let me be clear: I am not a creature of habit, but when I was a JV in St. X I began, accidentally, to develop a morning ritual. I woke up, made tea, and wrote outside – or, for half of the year, inside facing outside. For a while I thought, “Hey, I’m doing this. Morning routines are great. Does this mean I’m an adult now?” But eventually I discovered that this precious time I had with myself and with my physical space every morning was also a spiritual time and space for me and me alone. I reveled in the slow process of boiling the water, steeping the tea, breathing in the steam, curling my fingers around the clay mug. How many patterns in nature mimic this quiet soothing?

I can think now of all the clutter we fill our lives with. What would happen if we reclaimed some of the tedium? These are the moments that define us. Thich Nat Hanh says, “Drink your tea slowly and reverently, as if it is the axis on which the earth revolves – slowly, evenly, without rushing toward the future. Live the actual moment. Only this moment is life.”

And even if it’s not a ritual that is repeated over and over again, even if it is just a moment that comes once and then passes, I believe that little things done with intention become the coffee spoons by which we measure our lives. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “There is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experiences of human life on earth.” She goes on to explain, “My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul…what is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world.”

I wish for you routines that become rituals. I wish for you deep and abiding meaning in mundane activities, and if not meaning than groundedness, and if not groundedness than something simply to busy your hands and minds, to engage your senses, to notice and nurture.

And, when the little things become the big things, my wish for you is that they abound in a life that is richly human, blessed beyond measure.

**2018 Orientation Simple Living**

**Sarah McKay**

When I started this job as a Program Coordinator two years ago I encountered many surprises (shout-out to Ilana – they never stop coming!). Perhaps the biggest one being that I did not anticipate how deeply I would continue learning what it meant to live the values of JVC Northwest. Nor did I imagine how I would become less and less able to distinguish between them. Yet I find myself now all but unable to disentangle simplicity from community. Community from justice. Our earth from our people. My action from my stillness or my faith from my consumption. This is a talk about simple living, but it may not always sound like it.

Having spent many a day driving through the fields and mountains of Montana thinking about our values since that first day on staff, I would hazard to say that in so many ways these values – and this life - begin with bread. Faith and community begin with bread, as a sacrament or around a table. At Sisters of the Road in SW Portland, a long-time placement for JVs serving folks experiencing homelessness, justice and hospitality are symbolized by bread. And at JVC Northwest it is bread that serves as our own emblem of Simplicity. So I want to talk about lessons I have learned… from learning to bake bread…

Step 1) Mixing

The simplest bread recipe I know is this: begin with 6.5 cups flour, 1.5 Tbsp salt, and 1.5 Tbsp yeast in a large bowl. Dissolve three to 5 tablespoons honey in 3 cups warm water. Pour sweetened water into the flour and mix, preferably with your hands. No need to knead ;) Cover the bowl with a towel and wait three hours for the proving. Pre-heat the oven to 450 with a sheet pan inside. Shape loaves. Bake for thirty minutes in a damp oven and enjoy!

I have baked this bread for prayer services and family dinners, for my communities in Connecticut, Montana, and Oregon. And the magic of this bread, yummy as it may be, is really in the story of where it began and the continuation of that story with every warm slice I offer and every note left behind with the recipe tucked inside. For this recipe to find ***me*** it traveled from an elderly neighbor to a JV in Yakima to the bellies and hearts of her community mates. It was drawn lovingly into a recipe book (an abundance of inside jokes woven throughout!), packed into a suitcase bound for Orientation and onto a Greyhound bus to Ashland, Montana. And finally, to the table of a new community of JVs passing bread and honey butter around and around with their grateful and curious PC until it was gone. This bread is love passed down in knowledge and nourishment for countless people. I call this “Emmy Bread” for my JV, but truly it is a reminder of this lineage. That I am able to share this bread because it was shared with someone else.

Simplicity is an invitation to community, to reliance on those around us, to learning from one another. To acknowledging that we are part of a whole. One slice in the loaf, as it were. And that as a whole, a community, we have what we need. There is enough.

Step 2) Proving

Bear with me here! But, there is nothing "simple" about simple living. Before being offered a tutorial by my JV, I cannot tell you how intimidated I felt by baking a simple loaf of bread! I did not understand the alchemy that turned flour and water and yeast into delicious nourishment. So, for those who do not know, this is the science behind the magic of bread:

In order for bread to rise the yeast needs to be woken from its slumber to begin breaking down the sugar in the dough. For anyone who doesn't know, yeast is a single-cell organism that feeds off of sugars and breaks them down into equal parts carbon dioxide and ethanol. The CO2 moves the bread slowly as it rises, stretching and reconfiguring the gluten into a pattern that creates elasticity, while the ethanol develops flavor and creates moisture that will evaporate in the oven, lifting the bread to its full height.

To bake a beautiful loaf of bread requires precision and patience. If the dough is too stiff, it will not rise properly, if it rises too far, it will flatten to a dense brick. Try your recipe at the top of a mountain or in the depths of a valley and you can forget what you thought you already knew about baking! ***This*** is not simple. We call the rising of the dough a “prove” because it offers evidence that the yeast is alive and at work. This JV year is your proving year. It will bubble up ideas and possibilities in you; show you your own resilience; it is a year of practice, and I would urge you to believe that perfection is not an option.

Step 3) Baking

There is no such thing as failure in bread baking.

Now, I am fully aware that this runs contrary to all conventional wisdom and I suspect many, many memories of blackened pizza in dorm ovens and fallen (or entirely unbaked) cakes removed from the heat before their time. My mom tells a story about the first cake her brother, Mark, ever baked at 8 years old as it was pulled, still soupy, from the oven after three hours baking - only to discover he had poured four cups of water into the batter instead of the suggested four eggs – and then tasted generously by his parents and siblings with spoons rather than the traditional forks often used for solid food in the U.S. And, yes, as you may be thinking, this perhaps is not the desired result!

But while I did not know Mark, I have heard that story my entire life. I have eaten burnt pancakes and sunken dinner rolls, forgotten to pre-heat and used dead yeast, eaten years of gluten-free experimental pizza crust and crumbly muffins. And the point is never the product. The point is whatever results from the effort, whether it be a warm golden loaf of bread or the love demonstrated in eating what the baker calls a mistake. Bread was, after all, first a mistake. A forgotten vessel of ground grains and water pulling yeast from the air until discovered and tested. Proven, if you will, to be nourishing.

Step 4) Eating

As Greg reflected with us in his Examen last night, being open to a “yes” can make all of the difference. I know it is easy to see Simple Living in light only of what we give up; the value of forgoing; the value of “no, thank you.” What we will not buy. What we can go without. How few dollars we spend or coffees we drink. I want to invite you to crumple that thought now and toss it in the (appropriate!) recycling bin (or perhaps behind your dresser or a similarly dark corner of your mind). Maybe don’t forget it entirely. Yes, mindful consumption is a part of simple living. Yes, I hope you pay attention to the difference between what you need and what you want. However, what if simple living is not about giving up, but creating new options. Saying Yes. Moving toward curiosity about something new or re-imagining something long forgotten. Alongside bread baking I have seen JVs learn to make kombucha, cross-stitch, knit, play guitar, plant a garden, play Magic the Gathering, bead moccasins, run their first Marathon, discover reading aloud or writing poetry, and countless other endeavors. In order to live simply, you choose to say yes to creativity, yes to learning from one another, and yes to discomfort in a country where many of us experience having what we want at our fingertips: television, phone calls, Avocados in January... And these yeses, which as Jack reminded us at the very start of this week together mean many “no”s, sometimes make things a little more complicated!

If there is one thing you remember to do this year, I hope this: Pass your yes - your bounty of care, creativity, and curiosity - around the table. Be generous. Remember to break bread (both literally and metaphorically!), and to accept what you are offered graciously; with openness; with a yes to learning from your own experiments, mistakes, and from those around you. Remember that this can make all the difference.