

Along the Way

Written by Vivian Bikulege

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Every month, I visit with a few Bayview Manor residents on behalf of my church. For those of you in the Beaufort community unfamiliar with Bayview, it is a nursing home on Todd Drive, just off of Ribaut Road, and down Spanish Point Drive.

I go on Sunday morning around 8 AM replete with church bulletins, the Eucharist, my Art Institute of Chicago black canvas tote packed with an assortment of batteries, tacks, and magazines, and about a dozen and one-half fresh glazed donuts from Publix. By far, they are two hours of the best investment I make for others and in myself on a routine basis.

During my last visit, a ninety-five year-old German woman named Marianne was pretty down in the dumps. It is difficult for her to get up and down, and her over active bladder is challenging her stamina and dignity. We had a nice chat. I shared a bit of my trials and tribulations at work to commiserate with her mood. We prayed the Our Father, she took Communion, and with a shy smile, she choose two donuts over one when I presented her with the sweet options. Delivering joy rewards the giver and the receiver.

Toward the end of our visit, Marianne said something to me that I doubt I will ever forget. Quietly, after talking to me about her doctor's monthly visits, about her age and decline, after a story about her father, his faith and his good works caring for a sick young woman in their small European village, she simply said, "We do not know our way."

What is "our way"? Is it the journey? Is "our way" a straight and narrow path aimed toward a goal that evolves into our destiny? Is "our way" how we do things, or is it the idea that we are wanderers, always seeking, hoping that someone or something will show us the way?

There is a Bible passage (John 21:18) where Christ tells Peter, "when you were younger you

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dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." This passage always strikes a twinge of trepidation in me because it causes me to reflect on the people I meet along the way and I consider where time and age will take me, and who will be there to care for me . . . or not. After a visit to Bayview, I cross over the McTeer Bridge, inhale the expanse of water and marsh, note the osprey couple tending their tangled nest of sticks and return back to Lady's Island, grateful that today I am still going where I want to go.

We do not know our way.

Marianne's observation is deep and jam packed with wisdom. If we knew where we were going, the journey would be just about the most boring ride one could ever imagine. Daily, convictions we have clung to, are pelted by social confrontation. As we are changed by our circumstances, what we thought we were, how we respond, our dispositions – these are the road signs, detours and short cuts that carve the way that is our lifetime. Each of us is a living sculpture. We begin so fresh, so pliable, and open to new experiences. We are shaped by the thoughts and the people we encounter. We take shape, and at some point, instead of being molded by parents or teachers, we take control of the hammer and chisel and choose the next chip or slice that becomes our final character.

Eventually, we relinquish the carving tools, understanding that we never truly had as much, if any, control over our way. Our goals were always cast in time and time is never promised to anyone.

The same day I visited Marianne, I met with John, who wanted a hole on the back of his Elmo doll sewn up so that the stuffing would not fall out. Suzanne admired my earrings – inexpensive silver hoops from Target – and I gave them to her. Someone needed a push down the hall, another wanted a hug, and the glazed donuts were a treat to residents and staff alike. Simple acts, small kindnesses – smooth cobblestones of care paving the way.

In the last few months, I have lost friends to Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and cancer. Work has been difficult. My ego has been damaged and the need to push past old ways of doing business are challenging me to reshape who I am on the job and with my customers. Recently, I have had unique encounters with service providers to my home. Kenny, my propane delivery man, spent ten minutes talking about his friend Butch who is dying from cancer and how Kenny is his appointed caretaker and the executor of Butch's estate. Out of the blue, while upgrading my modem, the Century Link repairman told me the story of his seven-year-old daughter's death caused by a freshwater amoeba that entered her nasal passages as she swam in the warm summer water of the Santee Cooper in 2007. Maybe we do not know our way, but our stories

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crisscross in a weave of life and love that ultimately binds us together.

When I was little, I enjoyed puzzle books with pages of numbered dots I could connect with a crayon or pencil. Pictures that were invisible started to appear as I methodically counted 1, then 2, 3, then 4, moving my pencil from point to point until a puppy, or flower, or rabbit appeared. In a way, my journey is akin to connecting the dots. Each year moves me in one direction, then another, until a lifetime unfolds, sometimes in a blur, sometimes in very distinct directions, making the invisible visible. But Marianne is right. I do not know my way but it will find me. I know it is always waiting to be discovered.

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