

Feeding and being fed: A feast for those at the edges

by [Paul Gaffney](#) in the [September 18, 2013](#) issue



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As a street chaplain in Marin County, California, I join with the street community in San Rafael, California, every Tuesday. Our Wellness Group is made up of people who live in their cars, people who sleep in bushes and those who are newly housed. Some drink before noon, some are in recovery. We are joined by mental health consumers, retired clergy, lay monastics—and whoever else is moved to join us. In less than an hour we move together through the ritual we've built over the last ten years: we sit in silence, pray and discuss sacred and secular texts. Recently, we have concluded the time with a meal organized by members of our community.

Tuesday mornings I meet with Randy, Gary and Jay—cooks who happen to be homeless—and we plan the dinner. We scavenge most of the food from local service organizations and the St. Vincent DePaul Free Dining Room, and we have a modest budget for other ingredients.

Initially we planned only simple meals—bread and soup, salad and pasta. But the cooks were delighted with the host church's commercial kitchen and could not contain their enthusiasm. Spaghetti and meatballs led to pulled pork which led to coconut curry. Our simple dinners had turned into elaborate feasts. In the process we discovered another dimension of our practice: we were learning how to serve and feed one another—and learning how our service to others feeds us. Every week in

the kitchen we ask each other, “How can we do this more?”

While our Wellness Group usually attracts 25 to 35 participants, up to 75 people may show up for dinner. At first the participants in the Wellness Group were upset that some people came only for the meal, or ate more than their share, or critiqued the food. But as group members talked about this friction, we smoothed off some of the rough edges of the practice. Now we proudly feed everyone and anyone, not just ourselves, and our service has become infectious.

Grace shows up early to set out composting and recycling bins. Edward arrives with toasted bread and pounds of brie as an appetizer. Group participants and church volunteers arrive with salads and plates of cookies. During the meal we pass around a “gratitude bowl” and people make offerings from what little money they have. Afterward, without prompting, people grab brooms and mops and sponges and clean up. Everyone wants to see the meals continue, and so everyone contributes to the best of his or her ability.

In a *New York Times* editorial (July 15), Paul Krugman discussed the version of the farm bill passed by the House. Congress, wrote Krugman, is refusing to take responsibility for the health and well-being of the people they represent, choosing to spend tax revenue on subsidies for large corporations rather than on essential food for its poorest citizens. As a friend of mine put it, “The cost of capitalism is people forgetting how to feed each other.” In such a political and social climate (which is felt even in the supposedly liberal San Francisco Bay area), the greatest act of service I can do is to provide opportunities for members of the community to serve each other.

Over time we all forget that service is what we human beings are meant to do. We forget Jesus’ charge to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We forget the prophets, who urge us to open our cupboards to hungry people and provide shelter for those who are homeless. The culture of competition combines with fears of scarcity to overwhelm many people in supposedly stable situations. But those of us who live at the edges wait in lines every day to receive the scraps that the rest of us throw away.

Each Tuesday in San Rafael we experience what it looks like when we stop fighting over scraps and offer each other something substantial. We see firsthand what happens when we pool our resources and share our love and passion with each other. Together we create a sacred space that operates differently from our lives

outside of the circle: a space where everyone is invited to participate in every aspect of the feast.