

During one of the evening vespers we went around the circle and each of us chose a word which described this trip. Well I was the 3rd person to share which immediately put me into a little of panic as it brought back memories in grade school when questions were asked, I'd pop up my hand to answer when they were always moving onto the next question...And then to befuddle me even more during this vespers, the first person to share, took the word that popped into my head! I don't remember the second word choice I came up with, but after my turn had passed and we circled around the room, the word that percolated up into my awareness, was "connection." I immediately knew in my core, yup, that's my word.

In different ways during the evening vespers, people described how despite long hours of hot, grueling work, which at times was frustrating working with inadequate materials and tools "to do the job right," we felt spiritually filled, energized and feeling a deep connection with each other through shared goals of service.

In my lifetime, the times I've felt similar feelings of being deeply, spiritually nourished and connected have been on service trips such as the New Haven Youth Mission Trips where we are immersed together in community for work, eating and sleeping for extended days. People talk about the benefits of mindfulness, which I have to admit alludes me, but during these trips, we're able to completely live in the moment, which by the way, I suspect has some similar components to being mindful.

What made our Puerto Rico trip different than other mission trips I've been on, was going to a completely different environment from the northeast; different foods and socioeconomic class than I'm accustomed to, and Spanish speaking, and yet is a US territory.

Taking in the beautiful, lush green hillsides and running around in a t-shirt and shorts while it was sleeting here, I have to admit wasn't too much of a hardship; and tasting delicious exotic fruits and traditional Puerto Ricans dishes was an easy trade off for not finding humus or bagels on the grocery shelves. It was actually the food that really fostered a connection with the families whose homes we worked on. On our last day at the home I worked at, when we arrived in the morning, the matriarch of the household was already cooking up a storm for the lunch she prepared for us.

One can still see a sea of blue tarps on roof tops in low income neighborhoods one and a half years post Hurricane Maria, (that's a whole other reflection about the rights "or not" of residents of US territories). Coming from a place of privilege, when pursuing a project, I'm used to having the resources available to me to complete it. We had no choice but to be resourceful during our work in Puerto Rico, which has made me ponder if resourcefulness ties in with resilience, which I witnessed plenty of, and if at times, less can be more. Food for thought...

I get a chuckle when I think about the story of Lucia wildly gesticulating while shouting "aroporto, aroporto" as the van passed the sign for the airport on the opposite side of the highway during their 3rd attempt to arrive at the airport. Well I must fess up that apparently my Spanish pronunciation rivals Lucia's, but truthfully, I think that's a lie. Despite the vast language barrier between Nino and I, who was one of three of our Puerto Rican group leaders, and the fact that she who was half my age, we fostered a connection through communication with a lot of body language and laughter. She managed to teach me 2 cards tricks, demonstrating how with finesse, you can flummox your audience. I tried out the card tricks on Todd when we got home, and he quickly figured them out. Guess I didn't quite grasp the finesse part...

On one of our last days, Nino gave me a painting, cementing for me an ever lasting connection with her, but I feel she also wanted us to appreciate, that despite hurricane disaster and vast poverty, citizens are proud to be Puerto Rican and with deep, spiritual roots. You can see the Puerto Rican flag and the 3 Kings as part of the Christian Epiphany celebration, which is one of the biggest holidays in Puerto Rico.

I came home from Puerto Rico feeling a spiritual renewal through deep connection in joint service with my husband, daughter, friends, and our Puerto Rican team leaders. We made a difference for a few families in Puerto Rico, but I also believe through genuine connection, we have the power to heal the world.