

Katie Founds – student speaker

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Parent's Weekend Multifaith Service: "Education for What?"

My Stanford Education turned me inside out, and made me believe in God. This happened the winter quarter of sophomore year.

I wasn't really sure what I believed religiously, but I was interested in Religious questions, so I took a class in the Religious Studies Department called "Dante's Spiritual Vision." It lasted two quarters and was taught by Professor Yearley, who wore a great white beard and quoted to us from Virgil and Saint Augustine. As a class, we climbed with Dante on his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, writing reflection papers and presenting projects about how the Divine Comedy troubled or uplifted or moved us. We were offered the opportunity to take on a major project of our own design, relating in some way to the text. I chose to concentrate on the Canto in the "Paradiso" about Saint Francis.

I wanted to devote my project to Saint Francis because I always thought of him as a friendly saint, a sweet man who spoke to the birds and called animals his brothers. I planned to study Francis by checking out books about him from the library and climbing up into the dry yellow hills around campus to read. I imagined myself sitting on a rock surrounded by birds, reflecting. Then I remembered the simple prayer of Saint Francis I had learned as a child "Grant that I may never seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love with all my soul." I wrote it down, and meditated on it.

I realized that if I was serious about understanding Francis, I should not sit by myself on a rock. I should reach out to others.

So I volunteered at a food shelter. I doled out stuffing and gravy to lines of hungry people. I bought cups of coffee for homeless people on the streets of San Francisco, and talked to them about their lives. Elated, I told my professor how excited I was about my project. He recommended I also practice reaching out to people in my everyday life. So I spoke to the quiet and shy in my dormitory, and wrote letters to my elderly relatives, and made a special project of helping my roommate quit smoking. Every time I helped someone, I was happy. I had always sought, in all my learning, for the right

way to live my life. But it was when I stopped thinking of myself, and sought to help others, that I found the abundance I had so deeply longed for. Everything about my St. Francis project compelled me to look for goodness in places where I did not expect it, and to look for a core of something loveable in people I was not naturally drawn to. I began to notice that everything was rooted in good, and that evil was only a twisting away of good. Once I noticed this, it was very easy to believe in God. I decided to become a Christian, and joined Cornerstone, one on-campus Christian fellowship group.

Reading the gospels, I noticed that Jesus said a lot of things about embracing the marginalized and meeting the needs of the poor. So I got involved with more on-campus service activities, and applied for a Fellowship through the Hass Center for Public Service in "Service & Spirituality." Through this summer fellowship, I was given the chance to work for a community organizing group, and a food and clothing shelter in East Palo Alto. I was also fortunate enough to become more deeply involved in the Hope House Scholars Program, through which Stanford Professors teach classes on Philosophy and Social Justice to the residents of a halfway house in Redwood City.

Along with the shock and joy of awakening to a relationship with God and an involvement with service has come struggle. I am struggling with what it really means to serve and empower another person, and what it means to be in authentic relationship with others and with God. So I guess that I struggle with a lot of things. I've realized that I have a lot of growing to do as a person and I have a great deal to learn! But I think that's good news. And if I can graduate from Stanford with that knowledge, my education here will have been worthwhile.