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Arts and Media
Spirituality



Former Good Shepherd Volunteer Christina Hardebeck invited me to a gardening workshop hosted by Kula Urban Farm in Asbury Park, New Jersey. The workshop involved basic gardening tips, planting seeds and tending to the larger community garden. (Maddie Thompson)



by Maddie Thompson

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Editor's note: *Notes from the Field includes reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. A partnership with Catholic Volunteer Network, the project began in the summer of 2015.*

"Get out from your house, from your cave, from your car, from the place you feel safe, from the place that you are. Get out and go running, go funning, go wild, get out from your head and get growing, dear child."

This quote from children's author and illustrator Dallas Clayton has been tumbling around in my thoughts recently. I feel as though I have spent a lot of time in my head in the past few weeks, mulling over how this year of service might fit into my larger life story, preparing for the end of our school's marking period and the beginning of spring break, fixating on small annoyances or changes to my daily schedule, critiquing larger systems, mourning atrocities and injustices, engaging in self-reflection, and more. I personally find it easy to stay stuck in this headspace of thinking, worrying, complaining, festering and assuming.



Painting has allowed me to quiet my mind. Creating encouraging pieces for a friend, like this one, based on a quote from Glennon Doyle, challenges me to get out of my head and keep growing. (Maddie Thompson)

This quote from Clayton reminds me to get out of my head and step into the real world — to get growing right where my two feet find themselves planted. This is much easier said than done. Getting out of my head involves a physical experience of engaging with my body. Through art, nature, breath, exercise, food and more, I can begin to quiet my mind and awaken my body.

When reflecting on Clayton's rhyme, I recognize that his words might not resonate with everyone. How do we grow when we do not feel truly safe or have a place to be ourselves?

For many of our students, Collier High School is this place of safety, security and authenticity. At Collier, students can feel safe to drop any façade at the door and get growing in many aspects of their lives: in their classes, friendships, self-confidence, knowledge, mental health, social skills, future plans and more. The students continue to be my role models for growth in difficult times.

Growth feels difficult to measure or observe while living through a pandemic. Moments have arisen this year when I felt extremely without a place, disconnected from a town or city and isolated living on a school campus. During these times, I find it easy to get trapped in my thoughts. I am extremely grateful for opportunities like gardening workshops, film festivals, community meditations, pottery classes, and more that pull me from my negative headspace.

When I feel particularly stuck or disconnected from the outside world, physical practices like meditative deep breathing, walking, painting, or doing yoga have grounded me. Sometimes all I can do is move, even if I am just taking a small step.



Ceramics has been a wonderfully physical way for me to leave my thoughts and worries behind. The tactile-ness of clay and the full-body movements that occur when creating keep me grounded in the present moment. (Maddie Thompson)

The other day, I walked into class at Collier and was greeted by a substitute teacher. As the students began working on an assignment, I watched one student slowly shut down at their desk, tears pooling in their eyes. The student's request to sit in the main office at the beginning of class had been denied, as the main office was occupied. As the student began to cry, I approached and asked if they wanted to take a short break from the classroom and walk a lap outside on the property.

I was acutely aware of the scope of my work and boundaries as a volunteer and was looking for more adequate support for this student. As we left the classroom, I sent a message to the main office asking for the student's social worker.



Practicing yoga outside has been a great way for me to enjoy fresh air and get my body moving. On this nice day, a friend and I connected over Zoom and practiced yoga together. (Maddie Thompson)

We walked in silence around the front property while we waited. Each step entailed simply breathing in the fresh air and taking in our surroundings. As we completed our loop, the student was able to head inside to the main office and take a break.

Thinking back on this quick series of events, I was amazed at how quiet my mind was while walking alongside this student. The physical act of walking on a nice day

hushed my concerns for the student and my worries about not having a perfect way to respond. Yet the silence was not piercing or all-consuming.

I am not sure that walking that lap made any major change for the student I accompanied. I can only hope that the change of scenery allowed the student some sense of calm. However, I can say for myself that physically moving outside forced me out of my head and into the present moment.

Today, I am feeling particularly thankful for our students and the ways they continue to grow. I am also grateful for my physical body in all its capabilities and what it allows me to experience. I am aware that each of our bodies looks and functions differently. In a society that values certain types of bodies more than others, many face danger and prejudice. This reality urges me to work for spaces and communities where all can feel safe in their own skin.

As my mind continues to race with the little stresses of the day and the major injustices of our time, my physical body helps me to carry these burdens in unusual and creative ways. I lean into my vessel, my physical experience and my senses in hopes that I can truly embody Clayton's challenge to "get out from your head and get growing, dear child."

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