

Thanksgiving contradictions: Confessions of a volunteer

by [Lydie Raschka](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

It's almost Thanksgiving, and soon my church in New York City will be serving turkey with all the trimmings to over 400 people. Members of the congregation will donate money, arrange flowers and bake pies. Eight extended families with old ties to our church will drive in from New Jersey, don aprons and fire up the ovens. A line of customers will form at nine in the morning; at 11 the pastor will say a blessing over the meal. Visitors will sit at tables adorned with fresh flowers or wait in the take-out line, a well-loved feature. Children of all sizes will dish up green beans and gravy and circulate with trays of sweets.

Ten homeless youth who sleep in our shelter year-round will be temporarily moved into the sanctuary, but a donation of \$200 has helped make the displacement more tolerable. They'll start the day with breakfast at the Metro Diner, then go to the movies. Thanksgiving night a volunteer will arrive two hours early so the youth can come in from the cold.

As church council president and coordinator of volunteers for the shelter I'm doing my part. It's the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, and I've gathered ingredients from home, including flour, butter, cinnamon and nutmeg. I've purchased three pounds of apples at the market and will bake pies with our shelter residents in our industrial-style church kitchen—an activity that's meant to evoke feelings of home and belonging. Soon I'll cook two turkeys and deliver them to the church. On Thanksgiving night I'll take the volunteer shift at the shelter, and while I'm there I'll clean the refrigerator.

I feel quite virtuous. At last, I tell myself, I'm learning how to feel useful during a holiday that is emotionally fraught for many. I'm having fun because I love baking, and I'm using my gifts. "I'm finding real meaning at this time of year," I think to myself with satisfaction. Hey, I realize, I've even left time for myself and my family.

While we could join the crowd for the community meal, I prefer being home on Thanksgiving. To tell the truth, the turkeys we serve at church are a bit “iffy”—soaked, as grocery store turkeys so often are, in a solution to “enhance moisture and flavor.” I prefer natural, organic meat and know that the salt in grocery store turkeys will make me crave sugar, and the sugar will make me crave salt. Besides, my son has asthma, and excessive sugar, salt and chemicals irritate his condition.

But my turkey thoughts bring guilt, and my spiritual equilibrium begins to wobble. How can I so willingly serve the community turkeys I do not see fit to eat or serve to my own family?

Suddenly the community meal is looking less like a joyful act of holiday giving than a thinly disguised act of “slumming.” Those of us serving the meal will be almost uniformly white, after all, while those being served will be mostly black and Hispanic. After the meal is over, the “out-of-towners” will go home and eat healthier, more gourmet Thanksgiving meals.

Soon I notice other signs that my halo is slipping. I catch myself gossiping with a church member about the superficial commitment of those who come for just one day to dish up food to the less fortunate. I am frustrated with my behavior, and worry about the impossibility of getting altruism, empathy and compassion right.

Other vexing thoughts creep in. When one young man wants to exclude a young woman from the cooking area because she’s sick, a less-than-saintly thought crosses my mind: *This volunteer work isn’t worth it if I get a disease.*

On Thanksgiving night, as I often do, I’ll feel fleeting fear when I’m the first to arrive to sleep at the youth shelter. The thought will cross my mind: *This volunteer work isn’t worth it if I get mugged.*

One night, when the shelter guests were arguing about space in the tiny room where they keep their belongings, one young man angrily tossed another one’s clothes off his own. I briefly thought: *This volunteer work isn’t worth it if I get bedbugs or lice from this unwashed mess.*

My son once had a dream in which “giant skeletons were popping out of the ground.” Giant skeletons routinely pop up in my church life: they are the moments of irritation, annoyance, duty, boredom and pride that challenge the strength of my

ministry.

Fortunately, absolution always arrives, although sometimes unexpectedly. Last year the Thanksgiving meal at church was in full swing, and a singer who had volunteered to entertain our guests was setting up her music stand and chair on our church basement stage. She wrinkled up her nose when she saw the old file cabinet, computers and books strewn about the stage: "Let's leave the curtains partly drawn," she said, "it's so messy back here."

At first I felt defensive—What does she think this is, Carnegie Hall? I was ready to make a sharp comeback. Did she have any idea how understaffed and overworked staff members were at this church? But I took a breath this time and let go of my anger. "Good idea," I responded, and jumped up to draw the curtains on the clutter. I let go of my defensiveness because without the singer and her tangled and imperfect motivations there would be no music. I let go of my judgment of the volunteers from New Jersey because without them there would be no one to warm up and serve the food. I leaned into the grace of a vision that's bigger than my turkey choices because without the turkeys there would be no birds of any kind, and no dinner.

After all, without letting go, without accepting forgiveness for the flaws in us and our ministries, how could we continue, day after day and year after year, to try again to demonstrate love and compassion and get it right?