Finding the Center... what an insightful title for the first-ever (at least in my tenure) religious life newsletter at Macalester College! Over the past years we have been blessed with amazing students who know the difficulty of finding their center amidst the many surface demands that keep us all busy on the circumference of life. They know the challenge of constantly responding to the multiplicity of pulls, tugs, awakenings and insights that a Macalester education occasions. To find the center, the anchor, the place where students and the entire Macalester community can hitch their lives may provide the much-needed pause for new insight to arrive or for integration to begin. I trust that this newsletter can be a resource for the Macalester College community as well as those who are our community partners, serving as yet another way that our work lives out the very best of Macalester’s educational excellence!

VULNERABILITY AS KOSHER
BY RABBI BARRY CYTRON, JEWISH CHAPLAIN

This past fall in Minnesota, marking the holiday of Sukkot was almost ideal. Because the holiday came so early in the autumn, the weather was pretty good, and you could actually enjoy a meal outside during some of the evenings.

But that’s not always the case, especially here in the Northland. Many of us can recall shivering in winter-like overcoats while making the blessings over wine and Hallah, and then scurrying inside to retrieve some warmth. On one of those frigid Sukkot nights a few years back, a friend said: “If the Holy One is trying to encourage religious practice, this weather won’t do it. God better get a better PR firm!”

No doubt my friend is right that typical Minnesota fall weather makes observing the holiday a trial. And just wait until next year, when the holiday doesn’t begin until October 14th!

But that might be just the point of the holiday! The ancient rabbis gave specific guidelines about the proper way to construct a sukkah. They said it had to have so many walls, be so many lengths high, and have such and such type of covering. It’s the roof, in fact, that’s the most unique part of the structure. The rules require that it be OPEN to the elements, that the roof be porous enough to allow in some sunlight, a few stars, maybe a little rain, even a few snowflakes. The only sukkah that is “kosher” is a fragile one, one that is NOT impervious to the world outside.

That, as the noted scholar and public leader Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches us, is the real purpose of the sukkah. On this holiday, quintessentially about the fall harvest, great abundance and the blessings of life, we have to go out to a sukkah that is exposed to the world, one that reminds us of our vulnerability. “We are,” says Rabbi Greenberg, “vulnerable — vulnerable to the elements, to history, to life, to its many twists and turns.” The sukkah, in other words, teaches us to acknowledge that susceptibility, and rejoice despite it — to embrace the blessings of life, and never take them for granted.
This semester, Mac Protestants sponsored numerous events which have served as a platform for engaging with topics and questions relevant to the lives of progressive, Protestant Christians.

Mac Protestants began the year with a “Welcome Back Retreat” to Minnehaha Falls where they spent the afternoon hiking, reflecting on faith, and bonding. The park, which included a bubbling stream and lots of trees swaying to the whisper of the wind, was a wonderful reminder of God’s beautiful creation.

Since the retreat to Minnehaha Falls, Mac Protestants, along with other members of the Macalester community, have met each month to reflect and discuss different faith issues over delicious home-cooked food. Besides the delectable food and the enlightening conversation, the event serves as a fellowship event for all who attend.

During the month of October, Mac Protestant members have been volunteering at Project Home, a program that houses the overflow of homeless families in the Twin Cities. The program is hosted by different churches each month. Volunteers can work one of two shifts— the evening shift, from 5:30 pm to 8:30 pm or the overnight shift from 8:30 pm to 7:00 am the next day. Mac Protestant members have volunteered during both shifts in which they have assisted children with homework, talked and listened to parents, prepared snacks, and organized games.

Besides these events, Mac Protestants also meets the first and third Sunday of every month at 9:15 pm in the CRSL. Future plans for the group include a Christmas Service Project, an Advent Dinner with Mac Catholics, an off-campus retreat, and visits to local churches in the Twin Cities. For more information about Mac Protestants or our upcoming events/meetings, please contact: Kristin Riegel, kriegel@macalester.edu, or Elissa Butler, ebutter@macalester.edu.

Greetings! My name is Caroline Rendon and I am the Program Assistant for Peace and Justice in the CRSL. I work here because I am deeply passionate about the connection that I see between people of faith and peace and justice action in the world. Only last month the world watched as hundreds of Buddhist monks marched in protest of Myanmar’s repressive military regime. The School of the Americas Watch in the United States was founded by a Catholic priest, and hundreds of religious bodies have stood in opposition to the war in Iraq.

Dr. Omid Safi, who was here on October 18, spoke of the need for social justice advocates to learn to speak not of “my community” but of “our community.” The true test of our justice is if we are willing to stand up for justice not only when we are victims but when we are perpetrators. Our shared humanity is reason enough for our action.

At Macalester, we are fortunate to have a great religious and spiritual diversity that is only beginning to be appreciated in spaces such as the Multifaith Council. The work of multifaith dialogue is difficult and complicated, but that connection between people of faith and justice action opens up new space for dialogue and establishes common ground from which we can work for change in the world.

I would love to find a way to open up dialogue about peace and justice in faith communities at Macalester, and I encourage you to contact me with any ideas or questions. I work in the CRSL because I continue to believe in the potential of people of faith to bring peace and justice to our communities. Dr. Safi encouraged the audience to have our hearts be where our feet are. Our feet are at Macalester, and so in this community let our hearts be dedicated to making peace and justice a reality.
DISAGREEMENT FROM THE WOLF AND MOUNTAIN: FAITH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

BY K.P. HONG, PROTESTANT CHAPLAIN

Ecologist Aldo Leopold recounts a hunting expedition he made into the wilderness of the American Southwest in a campaign to eliminate the wolves. Spotting a wolf one day, he and his friends shot and moved toward their kill:

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter’s paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view. (from his book, A Sand County Almanac)

Leopold asks what it may mean to “think like a mountain,” or a cricket, a rainforest, a river or coral reef. How would we respond to their fierce disagreement with our aggressive consumption and unsustainable lifestyle? This question that became a slogan for the deep ecology movement reverberates with the wisdom of the world’s faith traditions. It reverberates in the wisdom of the Torah cautioning against the overuse of land:

Through the time that it is desolate, the land shall observe the restfulness that it did not have in the Sabbath years while you were dwelling on it. (Leviticus 26: 35)

It echoes in the profound biocentrism of the Ch’an Buddhist poet Su Tung-P’o:

The sound of the valley stream is itself the Vast Eternal Tongue;
Are not the colors of the mountains the Pure Body?
Since evening, eighty thousand verses;
Another day, how could I quote them to others?

Such wisdom beckons us to hear the disagreement from the wolf and mountain and take seriously the ecological crises that threaten life everywhere. Such wisdom cautions the Homo sapiens from thinking that the tree and whale are removed, separate, disposable objects “out there” in the world, and realize how intrinsic they are to our own vitality. Such wisdom points to inescapable mutuality that links creation together—from minerals to plants to animals to human beings—and the consequent vulnerability of our relationship with everything.

As with the wolf and mountain, the faith traditions of the world, in both differing and common ways, ask us to listen to the voice of the Other. They ask us to inquire about the neighbor and the stranger, inviting ever-widening circles of exposure, hospitality, care, and identification. We may readily identify with our possessions, bodies, immediate circle of relations, our socio-economic group or nation. But what about other members of the human species? Of non-human species? Of mountains and rivers? At each step of this ever-widening circle of exposure and identification, the obstacle is the belief that there is a completely separated self. But just here, at this point of fear and withdrawal, the wisdom of the spiritual traditions is “have no fear.” Rather, we can step forth into vulnerability and discover being connected in a radically interdependent cosmos, an interdependence that creates life and defines the very shape and purpose of life. An interdependence in which the wolf and mountain teach us what human life is, and the valuing of this sacred mutuality that is the pulsing truth at the heart of Life itself.

AN UPDATE FROM MAC CATHOLICS

BY STASIA VERDOLJAK, ‘09

Mac Catholics has been busy these past weeks of school! We have had Mass every Sunday at 11 am in the Chapel with students participating in ministries at Mass, such as music and lectoring. We have continued our tradition of monthly dinners by having a few students take on the shopping and cooking to provide a meal full of good food, company and conversation in the homely ambiance of the Cultural House. We took a trip one Saturday evening to the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis for Mass. It was quite the experience with the beautiful liturgy, not to mention the magnificent architecture. Our biggest event was our Welcome Retreat to a cabin on Deer Lake in Wisconsin for the last weekend in September. We had a great time sharing our personal stories of relationships with family, friends and God (Fr. Jim Radde, S.J., enlightened us about the good ol’ days with his school stories); being taught by Emery, ‘09, how to make name-sticks with string; cooking and grilling thanks to Ben’s, ‘09, mastery; apple picking, from which Stasia, ‘09, attempted to make applesauce; doing ice breakers — Max ‘11 went all out in singing his favorite song...

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Mac Catholic members Ruddi Tamakloe, Stasia Verdoljak and Seyram Addom take a moment to pose while at Deer Lake.
Center for Religious and Spiritual Life Staff

The mission of the Center for Religious and Spiritual Life is to recognize and affirm the diversity of religious and cultural experience at Macalester College. This includes nurturing students’ exploration of their religious tradition, helping express values by engaging in local and global issues with the aim of repairing the world and by participating in the educational life of the college by promoting critical study, spiritual conversation and faith exploration.

MAC CATHOLICS CONTINUED...

making s’mores, Ruddi’s, ‘11, first, specially made in the microwave!; and even swimming by a few brave souls (Patrick, ‘10, to beware next year—only one retreat are students allowed to evade their dips the lake)!

Our next big event of the semester will be our Advent Dinner with speaker Larry Gillick, S.J. The entire campus is invited for wonderful Italian food. So mark your calendars for Sunday, December 9 at 6 pm in the Weyerhaeuser Board Room!

UPCOMING EVENTS IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

- November 2: Día de los Muertos Service – 7 pm; Saint Paul Church on the Hill.
- November 8: Westminster Presbyterian: Celtic Evening Liturgy – 7:00 pm in the Westminster Chapel.
- November 9: Mt. Zion Temple: Wednesday, November 7th from 3-7 pm. Mount Zion Sisterhood Blood Drive.
- October 8- November 16th: Mac Plymouth United- “Peace and Violence in Our Religious Traditions” – An Interreligious Dialogue. Sponsored by several area congregations/organizations of different traditions, including Macalester Plymouth and the Interreligious Network of St. Paul (St. Paul Area Council of Churches). Contact Marc at MBlakesley@spacc.org, 651-789-3840, or visit www.interfaithings.org.

A note from the editors:

Thank you for taking the time to read the first-ever issue of the Center for Religious and Spiritual Life newsletter! It has been wonderful working with such a strong faith community, and we look forward to sharing in the continued success of Macalester students and staff. Because this newsletter is a work in progress, we would love to hear your thoughts and feedback! Thank you!

- Aja McCullough (‘09) (amccullough@macalester.edu) and Sarah Moskowitz (‘09) (smoskowitz@macalester.edu)