

**“When the World Wearies... There is always the Garden”:
A Brief Reflection on My Summer Internship with BCM**

by Russ Powell (BCM Intern, July 2010)

At the conclusion of my first year of seminary I was discouraged, disheartened and disappointed. My hopes had been so high.

In August 2009 I arrived at the Yale Divinity School fresh off graduating from a secular university where I had been thoroughly dissuaded from theological “God-talk” for much of my stay. Rather, at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte I was restricted to the esoteric discourse and methods of the academic study of religion. Sure, I received a wonderful background in the plurality of techniques that comprise a study Christianity, covering the authoritative voices that blazed the trail for the ways we have come to understand religious phenomenon today. Still, I yearned for more (*right, Russ and Kristy*).



I had to explore the great works of Christian liberation, discipleship, and spirituality outside the classrooms of my college experience. I desired to delve into these texts with others, to investigate the radical implications of Jesus’ teaching in community, and to stretch myself in the ways these new lessons might impact my life. Unfortunately, what I found in my first year at divinity school was a glut of reading, a hulking weight of stress, and the consistent pressure to make the grade.

Long before I had chosen to attend Yale I had emailed Ched to inquire about seminaries and divinity schools that he might recommend. Having read *Binding the Strong Man*, I eagerly anticipated his suggestions. Imagine my surprise when he not only replied *without* a laundry list of faith-based institutions to attend, but by suggesting that seminary or divinity school may not, in fact, be the best place to study the life, message, and gospel of Jesus! Having set my sights on the pursuit of higher education, I must admit I was a little disappointed. ‘How can seminary *not* be the right place to study faith and Jesus?’ I remember thinking. It took my first year at Yale to recognize the legitimacy of what Ched had suggested.

So at the conclusion of my wearisome first year, I thought it fitting – perhaps even poetic – to again email Ched, this time in search of a summer opportunity for an internship at BCM. Not that I hadn’t learned a lot about Jesus in my first year of school (though to be honest, I learned much more about myself than anything). But I had gotten caught up in the relentless drag of academic achievement, the lust for success and recognition, and quite frankly, I was exhausted and disconsolate. Ched’s work was something that had initially spurred my academic interests; maybe spending some time aiding his

operation and work, I thought, would reignite the fervor that had dissipated ever so steadily amidst my trying first year at Yale.

Given the ad hoc nature of my opportunity with BCM, I sincerely did not know what I was in for. During my time in Oak View I sometimes joked with Elaine and Ched that I was not *that* familiar with the aims and intentions of their work before showing up in early July. Still, I leaped at the opportunity to work with them, excited to pitch in and learn.

In Oak View not only did I find a space of spiritual nourishment and retreat, but of inner renewal and reinvigoration. Like Augustine's comparison of his conversion to a lazy man's rising from bed to take on the day, I rose from the irksome spiritual strain of my first-year experience at divinity school and embraced a renewed call to life in the Spirit. Not only was the warm dirt of the Southern California bioregion revitalizing to my psyche, but for a full month I settled into a place of nourishment and support that alleviated so much of the pressures I had grown used to in New Haven.

Fresh off my trapeze through the "distant country" of academic posturing, I landed in the cabin behind Ched and Elaine's home (a.k.a. "Croatan West"). There I came to feel more and more like the prodigal returning home to a newly resuscitated call to discipleship. During my time with BCM I helped Ched and Elaine with the garden, with the organization and development of audio and other multimedia, and with other responsibilities that contributed to the daily facilitations of their ministry. Along the way I was able to visit the Los Angeles Catholic Worker and meet a whole host of fascinating and brilliant people from all over the world who were passing through. I could not have asked for any more of my stay in Oak View. Moreover, from my experience I was able to see just what BCM does: to recognize the calling Jesus exerts on our lives as disciples and to equip others to follow that. This was exactly the experience BCM provided for me.

As I write this two months later, I am once again entrenched in the Yale Divinity grind – the same routine and slog that left me so defeated at the conclusion of my first year. This time around, though, things feel different. In Oak View I not only gained a perspective of my own call to radical discipleship; I also came into a greater understanding of the gifts, talents, and abilities I bring to the Kingdom of God. As they say, I came into my own.

My wife Kristy (who joined me for a week in Oak View) and I are proud to call Ched and Elaine our friends, and even prouder to stand side-by-side with them in the great work to which Jesus calls us to claim. BCM, Oak View, and Croatan West were instrumental to my reanimation in the Gospel this summer. For that, I will forever be grateful. *(Right: Russ in the cabin wearing the "Green Man" mask.)*

