Musings inspired by canning carrots . . .

I spent yesterday morning with ten or so folks representing DU's Religious Advisory Council. We were at the Latter Day Saints' Cannery in Aurora working together to can carrots for distribution to the needy at Metro Care Ring and at the Islamic Center on Parker Rd. We were Unitarian, Methodist, Presbyterian, Buddhist, Episcopalian, Mormon and "other." We had a great time learning from one another and working for the common good. We also worked hard; breaking up a pallet of frozen carrot bits so that they could make it onto the canning table (above) was not work for the wimpy!

And we learned a lot. The LDS cannery does an incredible amount of humanitarian canning. Groups from all over Colorado come and can donated fruits and vegetables for distribution at many different food banks, some connected with faith-based organizations, some not. Much of the food comes via the Rocky Mountain Food Bank who "bids" on it from growers and other packers. It is the effort of a "village" to care for its less-fortunate. Whether or not that is "social justice" I'm not going to debate--there's enough of that in the blogosphere already. But if we were to allow popular culture debates and old assumptions to form our only impressions of the "Mormon world", we'd be way off base. We need to do our research to keep from imposing our biases on the faiths of others.

I was reminded yesterday of Maureen Dowd's op-ed piece, "Pilgrim Non-grata in Mecca" that came out earlier this week. She seemed to expect that her religious tourism would be treated like any other tourist activity: "pay the entrance fee and you'll be granted access." "Golly," she states, "You can get into the Vatican even if you're not Catholic! And, since you can have your picture taken with the Dalai Lama, you should be able, as a non-Muslim, to get into mosques in Mecca and Medina." Why, for Pete's sake (or anyone else's for that matter), should Muslim law and custom bow to Ms. Dowd's expectations that anyone should be granted access to any place? She seems to have thought that the only (or best) place to learn about a religion is at its "source." Why not, on the contrary, learn from ordinary people living out their faith in New York City or Detroit or Aurora, CO? She took her expectations and biases to Arabia (much as some folks may take their expectations and biases to the LDS Cannery) and came away a bit miffed that reality was different than her fantasy.

May we park these preconceived notions at the door -- as we leave our homes -- and be open to learning whatever we can from the gracious people who welcome us into their lives and work and homes. May we not go out as religious tourists -- hoping simply to learn a new fact about a strange place, but rather as religious pilgrims -- ready to be challenged and changed by a mysterious Divinity.

Blessings,

Gary