

Lessons from the Retreat

offered by Ellen Sherron

I volunteered to cook for the firefighters from December 29-January 6. At Sangha Week last June and previously in 2018, I was able to cook in this historic kitchen, where some of my culinary heroes - Ed Brown, Deborah Madison, and Chris Fortin - have prepared food over the years.

Each time I've cooked at Tassajara, I've learned a lot and deepened my Zen practice. Here are a few of the things I learned this time:

At a recent sitting, Chris suggested we sit outside, in the dark, sometimes. I started doing it most mornings at Tassajara. I would get up very early, get my coffee, and sit in the dark on a bench on the bridge. Then I would do my daily meditation. At first, I was sort of scared—what's out there? Then it changed and I was able to sit more easily without knowing.

As I was sitting on the bridge, firefighters and Tassajara staff and volunteers walked by. We bowed to each other as we started our day.

When I was at Tassajara in June, the cooks chanted a part of the Tenzo Kyokun <https://wwzc.org/dharma-text/tenzo-kyokun-instructions-tenzo> at the start of each shift. One line jumped out at me, about "serving the community." I follow current events way too closely and am aware of the suffering of the world. But what, exactly, can I do? Cooking for others is a way that I, literally can serve the community. Sitting on the bridge in the morning, I got to watch the community I would be serving pass by.

The environment in the Tassajara kitchen is the exact opposite of any restaurant kitchen I've ever worked in: we are silent, except when necessary to communicate information; it is non-hierarchical, i.e., everyone does the dishes and puts things away whenever they are free; no one says unkind words to each other; and we all act as if we're part of something larger than ourselves and focus our energies toward

this goal. A Zen kitchen is truly a model for how people can work together in the “real world” to get important work done.

And, I learned to make a delicious mushroom-nut loaf that even meat-eating firefighters loved, blondies that we shared around the New Years Eve campfire, and a persimmon-chia pudding!

Looking forward to doing it again at Sangha Week in July!