Reflection on Dan Barry’s “The Boys in the Bunkhouse”

Throughout Dan Barry’s “The Boys in the Bunkhouse,” we can see many repeated themes. A couple of these themes align well with important Franciscan values reflected at St. Bonaventure, including individual dignity, community inclusiveness, and service to others. Barry develops these themes and portrays these values on many occasions while telling the horrific story of Atalissa’s beloved “boys.”

The first of these values is individual dignity. Individual dignity played an important role in the lives of the men with intellectual disabilities in Atalissa. Even though their labor was often fruitless and met with very little compensation, the
men took great honor in their work. While working jobs that others would find unfavorable, undesirable, or just downright disgusting, the men took great pride in doing the best job that they could. Whether they were hanging heavy toms, plucking feathers, or tearing guts out, they never lost their individual dignity or valued themselves any lower in spite of their undesirable positions and subhuman wages.

However, the theme of dignity in “The Boys in the Bunkhouse” plays another darker role. While the men of the bunkhouse worked hard to keep their individual dignity, there were aspects of their lives that worked to strip them of it. In many ways the men were treated as subhumans. Not only did they earn awful wages, but they also endured mold, roaches, and rodent feces in their living environment. Not to mention they were constantly ridiculed and verbally abused by their caretakers. The men persevered, however, and clung to their individual dignity, refusing to let go.

The second important Franciscan value displayed by Barry in the book was community inclusiveness. In many ways, the men of the bunkhouse were a large part of the community of Atalissa. They were often seen walking down the road, waving at passersby. They attended church Mass regularly on Sundays, even
participating in the choir and reciting the Lord’s Prayer. They were a staple at community events such as dinners, celebrations, and parades. In the early years, when the bunkhouse was still in good shape, it was even known to host a Christmas party for the residents of Atalissa. The departure of the men was said by the townspeople to leave an unfillable void, one that turned the already-declining village into a sort of ghost town. Since the men had such a large role in the community, it is incredible that their abuse and mistreatment was never discovered or addressed by the residents.

Lastly, the Franciscan value of service to others is seen throughout the book. Closely tied to the ideals of community, service was portrayed in many ways. The first of these ways, and perhaps the most unfortunate, was the forced servitude of the men to Henry’s Turkey Service. However, service is portrayed more positively on many occasions. One example was when an older resident of Atalissa, known to the men as “grandma,” outfitted the men with clown costumes for the annual parade. Another example is an Atalissa woman who spent a year quilting blankets for each of the men.

Perhaps the greatest service to the men, however, was what had eluded them for so long. After various ignored reports and findings, the bunkhouse was
eventually investigated by Denise Gonzales, a veteran social worker. It was her actions that finally liberated the men remaining in the bunkhouse. Throughout her involvement, Ms. Gonzales continuously worked for the well-being of the men. Her largest service, however, was not their liberation. Ms. Gonzales was given the responsibility of deciding what should be done with the men who had no family to return to. She arranged for them to live cooperatively in permanent housing in Waterloo, Iowa. She, along with other social workers, gave these men the gift of freedom, the gift of a free life where they had the power to choose their daily routine, their employment, their leisure activities, and much more. To the men, this service was life changing.

Throughout “The Boys in the Bunkhouse,” Dan Barry excels in portraying the Franciscan values of individual dignity, community inclusiveness, and service to others. Although Barry gives tragic insight into the lives of Atalissa’s mentally disabled laborers and countless negative details, he still highlights some of the most positive and hopeful aspects of human nature.