

Reading: “Be Mine” By Paul Hostovsky

I love mankind most
when no one's around.
On New Year's Day for instance,
when everything's closed
and I'm driving home on the highway alone
for hours in the narrating rain,
with no exact change,
the collector's booth glowing ahead
in the tumbling dark
like a little lit temple
with an angel inside and a radio
which as I open my window,
a little embarrassed by
my need for change
(until the silence says
it needs no explanation),
is suddenly playing a music more lovely
than any I've ever heard.
And the hand—
so open, so hopeful,
that I feel an urge to kiss it—
lowers the little life-boat of itself
and takes the moist and crumpled prayer
of my dollar bill from me.
Then the tap, tap,
tinkling spill of the roll of coins
broken against the register drawer,
and the hand returning two coins, and a voice
sweeter than the radio's music,
saying, “Have a good one, man.”
I would answer that voice if I could—
which of course I can't—
that I've loved it ever since it was born
and probably longer than that.
Though “You too,”
is all I can manage,

I say it with great emotion
in a voice that doesn't sound like me,
though it must be
mine.

Sermon: Tolls for Thee

“Have a good one, man.”

A little while back I was at Walgreens standing in a long line. Of course they only had one clerk on duty and he was doing his best to take care of customers. This clerk was very deliberate in his motions, and was also very loud and chatty—to my inexpert eye, he seemed to be developmentally delayed or on the spectrum. He was trying, as he rang folks up, to make conversation. Most of the people in line seemed to be grumpy and in a hurry. I was no different but he was so cheery I enjoyed bantering with him as he rang me up.

When the clerk handed me my bag he looked straight at me and said,

*“I hope today
you have one of the best days
you have ever experienced.”*

Usually the “Have a nice day” stuff doesn't mean anything. But those words felt like a blessing. He was the checkout clerk at Walgreen's and on that day, he was my spiritual director.

The poet described a brief exchange with a toll collector, a person who probably has no idea that he or she has been immortalized into poetry. We might imagine a toll collector's job is boring and unremarkable and, at this point, replaceable by EZ-Pass, but their work connects them, face to face, to a stream of humanity.

In addition to the reading, I have two more toll collector-related stories today. I figured I better use all my toll collector stories before EZ-Pass takes over the world. The next one is from Buddhist writer and teacher Catherine Ingram.¹

¹ From her book, *Passionate Presence: Seven Qualities of Awakened Awareness*.

Every day Catherine drove across the Golden Gate Bridge to go to work. There was one toll taker who always gave her a sweet word or smile as she passed him her money. She found herself “making sure to get in his lane as [she] approached the tollbooth, and after a while it felt like visiting an old friend.

No matter the weather or the amount of traffic on the bridge, he was impervious to gloom. ‘What a beautiful day,’ he would beam. ‘So nice to see you.’”

She noticed over time that when a car had children in it, the toll taker would hand something to the driver, and one day she asked him about it. “Oh, that’s from my stash of Tootsie Rolls,” he said, showing [the] jumbo bag of candies. “I like to give the little ones a treat because some of them are on long road trips.”

Catherine Ingram writes:

“I tried to calculate the number of people with whom the toll taker might come into contact in an eight hour shift...

[and] how many people his friendliness might be affecting, if only a small fraction of them were responsive to it. ...

and I marveled at how much delight this one man, in an unenviable job, was potentially spreading around.”

Our worship theme this month has been “Work” and there is a reason I chose “Work” instead of the fancy five dollar word “Vocation.”

Vocation means a calling, a passion. As the saying goes, “Do what you love, love what you do.” But the fact is that 1) not everyone has a vocation, yet 2) almost everyone has to work and 3) even a vocation is work.

The metaphor that works for me is that Vocation is like a Hollywood romance and Work is like a real-life marriage.

In a Hollywood romance, it’s all hearts and stars and passion and swooning and then the credits roll. In a real life marriage there are some hearts and stars—maybe 5 percent of the time, but most of the time we are just living life and doing the things humans do...keeping house, raising kids, making breakfast, arguing over laundry, and, you know—working.

With the idea of Vocation, there is this idea that you love what you do so much that it isn't work. That you don't even care if you get paid. That you just go about your day whistling and feeling blessed.

Well, for all the people out there with jobs that are often considered "vocations"—like teaching, being a doctor or nurse, artists and musicians—I think you will agree with me that it isn't all whistling in a contented haze. There is a lot of work involved. Teachers have grading and dealing with parents; doctors have insurance companies and paperwork to deal with; musicians have to practice, practice, practice....

People with vocations also have bills to pay and mouths to feed. Even if you are "doing what you love," you don't always love what you happen to be doing at that moment. And the vast majority of workers in today's world don't love what they do at all, but do love having food in their bellies and a roof over their head. And of course there are so many people yearning for work, any work.

Mike Rowe, the guy who does the Discovery Channel Show "Dirty Jobs" has said that the worst job advice you can give is "Follow your passion." Rather, he says, when it comes to work, "Don't follow your passion—bring it with you." The intentionality, the spirit, the attitude we bring to our work is what gives it meaning.

My friend Shawn has said that he sometimes has daydreams about being a monk in a monastery. He said: "Buddhist monk. Catholic monk. It doesn't really matter." The appeal lies in "the daily rhythms of silence and meditation, of worship and work, of prayer and cooking and cleaning and sleeping and waking to do it all over again."

His husband Bob pointed out to him that he actually could do all those things every day. In fact, the cleaning part he could stand to do more often. But the fantasy persisted—if Shawn was a monk, surely he would be able to "find deep meaning in the chores that Bob can barely get [him] to do around the house now."²

Did I mention that Shawn is a Unitarian minister? Yes, people with a vocation still struggle to find meaning in their work—and housework.

Ultimately Shawn's fantasy bubble popped with this story from Zen Buddhism:

The one in which the student asks the master:

² Stories from Shawn Newton, senior minister of First Unitarian in Toronto, Canada.

“What work will I do as I *seek* enlightenment?”

And the master replies “Chop wood, carry water.”

“And what work will I do once I *achieve* enlightenment?” the student asks.

“Chop wood, carry water.”

The tasks are the same. The state of mind is different.

My third story about a toll collector. This one is from Charles Garfield, a researcher who has studied highly motivated people—as he calls them “peak performers.” He is driving over the Bay Bridge and as he approached one of the booths he heard loud music. And when he looked inside the toll booth, he saw the toll collector was dancing.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m having a party,” the toll collector said.

The driver persisted: “What about the rest of these people?”

“They’re not invited.”

And then, pointing down the row of toll booths, the toll collector asked, “What do those look like to you?”

“They look like....toll booths.”

“Noooo imagination!”

“Okay,” says the driver, “I give up. What do they look like to you?”

The man said, “Vertical coffins. At 8:30 every morning, live people climb in. Then they die for eight hours. At 4:30, like Lazarus from the dead, they reemerge and go home. For eight hours, their brains are on hold, they’re dead on the job. Just going through the motions.”

“What about you?” asked the driver.

The toll collector said,

“I don’t understand why anybody would think my job is boring.
I have a corner office, with glass on all sides.
I can see the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, the Berkeley hills;
half the Western world vacations here
and I just stroll in every day and [dance].”³

Toll booths aren’t the only vertical coffins out there. Do you spend 8 hours a day, brain on hold, dead on your feet? Are there ways you can find the music in your work and dance away the drudgery?

Even if we are chopping wood and carrying water, we can do it with our eyes open, as living, breathing people. We can remember that our every action affects the lives of other humans in ways large and small. As I said a few weeks ago, part of what we are asked to do in this life is to seek what really matters, figure out who we really are, ask what our existence means—and not let those transcendent questions get swept away by business and busy-ness.

I came across a wonderful prayer by the theologian and minister Walter Brueggemann, who has this book titled “Prayers for Privileged People.” He talks about “memos” but I think that can stand in for any type of work you do that feels deadening. So let’s end this sermon with prayer:

Here we are, practitioners of memos:
We send email and we receive it,
We copy it and forward it
and save it and delete it.
We move the data, and
 organize the program,
 and keep people informed—
and know and control and manage.

And then—in breathtaking ways—you summon
 us to song.
You, by your presence, call us to lyrical voice;
You, by your book, give us cadences of praise

³ *Charles Garfield, A Place to Stand.*

that we sing and say, "allelu, allelu."
You, by your hymnal, give us many voices
toward thanks and gratitude and amazement.
You, by your betraying absence,
Call us to lament and protest and complaint.
Our songs are toward you
In praise, in thanks and in need.

We sing and draw close to each other, and to you.
We sing. Things become fresh.
But then the moment breaks
and we sink back into memo:

"How many pages?"
"When is it due?"
"Do you need footnotes?"

We are hopelessly memo kinds of people.
So we pray, by the power of your spirit,
Give us some song-infused days,
Deliver us from memo-dominated nights.

And, may I add to his words of prayer, my prayer for you:

Whether you are chopping wood or carrying water,
collecting tolls or driving through them,
May you bring life and spirit to the task at hand.
You are touching more lives than you will ever know.
And so, my friends,

"I hope today you have one of the best days you have ever experienced."

Amen.