

“The Wheels on the Bus”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading

For nearly a year while living in the San Francisco Bay area, I would go from my home in Marin County into the city of San Francisco across the Golden Gate Bridge in the late afternoon. There was in those days a toll taker, an older man of infectious delight, who seemed to me an embodiment of awakened awareness. In the few seconds it took to hand him the toll or for him to return change, he always offered a sweet word and a smile. I found myself making sure to get in his lane as I 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.”

I noticed on quite a number of occasions that if the car ahead of me had children in it, the toll taker would hand something to each of them. One day when there was no one waiting behind me, I asked him what it was that he gave to the children. “Oh, that’s from my stash of Tootsie Rolls,” he said, showing me a jumbo bag of the candies. “I like to give the little ones a treat because some of them are on long road trips.”

Once, while sitting in traffic on the bridge, I tried to mentally calculate the number of people with whom the toll taker might come into contact in an eight hour shift. I tried to imagine how many people his friendliness might be affecting, if only a small fraction of them were responsive to it. I don’t remember the number of my estimate now, only that it seemed significantly high. I know that in my own case, those few moments of meeting him each day were a reminder of joy, and I marveled at how much delight this one man, in an unenviable job, was potentially spreading around.

From “Passionate Presence” by Catherine Ingram

Sermon: “The Wheels on the Bus”

I don't know about you, but every once in a while,
I give serious thought to becoming a monk.

Buddhist monk. Catholic monk. It doesn't really matter.

I find that I'm often drawn to a life of intentional, quiet contemplation.

I'm drawn to 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 all over again.

Now, that each of these activities is readily available to me
every day is beside the point.

That such a life is on offer to me—
whether I live in a monastery or not—
seems never to undermine the fantasy.

I always live with the notion in the back of my head,
that I'd be well on my way to nirvana,
if only I could steal away for a few weeks in a monastery.

I'm just certain somehow
that by engaging the cycles of a contemplative life,
I would suddenly find deep meaning in the chores
that Bob can barely get me to do around the house now.

And then I come face to face with that hard story from Zen Buddhism:

The one in which the student asks the master:
“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.”

In the Christian tradition,
the Rule of St. Benedict is a set of guiding precepts

that order the lives of Benedictine monks and nuns to this day.

This document describes three key roles of the religious order:
the abbot, the artisan, and the cellarer.¹

Though there is a hierarchy, one is not more important than another.

The abbot is responsible for serving as the head of the community, making most decisions and assigning the work to be done.

The artisan is a person with some special art or craft practiced in a way that contributes to the overall life of the community, by bringing in needed money or prestige to the order.

This art is to be practiced with humility. St. Benedict warns that if someone “becomes puffed up by his skillfulness in his craft, and feels he is conferring something on the monastery, he is to be removed from practicing his craft and not allowed to resume it, unless” he shows some humility.

Which brings us to the third role, the cellarer, as in one who works in the cellar, the ones who make sure the monastery runs smoothly—
that there is food to eat,
that the showers are scrubbed,
that the laundry is done.

Now, we, of course, as a Unitarian congregation don't live under this particular structure, though, if you are lucky, you may well be called upon to play any and all of these roles while serving this community over the course of many years.

There is the opportunity to serve the life of this religious order in many different ways.

Some may seem more glamorous than others, some more important. And, truth be told, some are. I can think of exactly one.

I believe I can safely say that if our coffee hour crew

¹ Robert Benson, *A Good Life: Benedict's Guide to Everyday Joy*, Paraclete Press, pp. 60-64.

didn't have things ready to go after the service,
this place would quickly come to a screeching halt!

The truth is, though, that undertaken with intention,
all of our work, whether paid or not, whether here or elsewhere,
amounts to chopping wood and carrying water.

It is all the stuff from which a spiritual life is made.
There is no real need to go off to a convent or monastery
in search of some hoped-for enlightenment.

If we are awake to it,
there is more than enough to work with here and now.

It's a question of how we choose to take up our work—
of whether we chop wood with resentment or with joy,
of whether we tote water with a bitter or a happy heart.

I was reminded by this morning's reading—of the man in the toll booth
handing out Tootsie Rolls to the kids in the cars coming through his lane—
of the story told by Charles Garfield,
a researcher who has studied highly motivated people.

Late one morning in 1984, he headed for San Francisco,
driving across the Bay Bridge.

As he approached one of the booths. He heard loud music.
It sounded like a party, or a Michael Jackson concert.
He looked around, but none of the other cars had their windows open.

He looked, then, at the toll booth,
and, inside, the toll booth attendant was dancing.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I'm having a party,” the attendant said.

And, looking over at the other booths, with relatively nothing going on,
the driver asked: “What about the rest of these people?”

“Oh, they're not invited.”

Pointing down the row of toll booths, he asked,
“What do those look like to you?”

Um, “They look like toll booths.”

“Noooo imagination!”

“Okay,” he said, “I give up. What do they look like to you?”

He said, those are “Vertical coffins.”

“At 8:30 every morning, living people [climb into them].

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.

Now, this guy had clearly developed a philosophy about his job.

When asked why it was different for him, he said:

“I’m going to be a dancer someday.”

And, then, pointing over to the administration building, he said,

“My bosses are in there, and they’re paying for my training.”

And, besides, “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, [and] the Berkeley hills;

half the Western world vacations here

and I just stroll in every day and practice dancing.”²

There are many ways to chop wood and carry water in this world.

This week in staff meeting, as I brought up this story, one person said she is always moved by the cheerful woman who works at her local Loblaws.

² *Charles Garfield, A Place to Stand.*

Without skipping a beat, another one of us piped up
that he knew exactly the person she was talking about,
and that he always made a point of lining up for her register
whenever he was paying for his groceries.

There is something to be said for developing a reputation.
There is an art to loving what you do—no matter what it is you do.

Whether it is the work you do here at First Unitarian,
the work that pays your bills,
or the work that fills the days of your retirement,
may that work be used to develop and deepen your own spiritual life.

And, may it be used in some way to bless the world around you.

Because, who knows?
Enlightenment may just as easily be found in a toll booth as a monastery.

In the meantime, let us chop wood and carry water—
And let us dance in the service of life.

Amen.