

“A Few Worthy Things”

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Reading “Set in Stone,” *Walking Toward Morning*, Victoria Safford

In [an old] cemetery once, I found a strangely soothing epitaph.
The name of the deceased and her dates
had been scoured away by wind and rain,
but there was a carving of a tree with roots and branches
(a classic nineteenth-century motif)
and among them the words,
‘She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.’

At first this seemed to me a little meager,
a little stingy on the part of her survivors,
but I wrote it down and have thought about it since,
and now I can’t imagine a more proud or satisfying legacy.
‘She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.’

Every day I stand in danger of being struck by lightning
and having the obituary in the local paper say, for all the world to see,
‘she attended frantically and ineffectually
to a great many unimportant, meaningless details.’

How do you want your obituary to read?

‘He got all the dishes washed and dried
before playing with his children in the evening.’

‘She balanced her checkbook with meticulous precision
and never missed a day of work—missed a lot of sunsets,
missed a lot of love, missed a lot of risk, missed a lot—
but her [finances sure were] in order.’

‘She answered all her calls, all her e-mail, all her voice-mail,
but along the way she forgot to answer the call
to service and compassion, and forgiveness,
first and foremost of herself.’

‘He gave and forgave sparingly,
without radical intention, without passion or conviction.’

‘She could not, or would not, hear the calling of her heart.’

How will it read, how does it read, and if you had to name a few worthy things to which you attend well and faithfully, what, I wonder, would they be?”

Homily: “A Few Worthy Things”

Her name was Oseola. She was born in Mississippi in 1908.

Her lined, brown hands, gnarled with arthritis,
bore witness to the lifetime she had spent
washing and ironing other people’s clothes.

When Oseola was in Grade Six, her aunt,
who had no children of her own, took ill.

When she finally left hospital and couldn’t walk,
it was clear Oseola would have to leave school to care for her.

And so she did, never to return.

A few years later,
when she might have taken up her studies once again, she said:
“All my classmates had gone off and left me [by then],
so I didn’t go back.
I just washed and ironed.”

And for the next 75 years, that’s just what Oseola did.

“The customers who brought their washing and ironing
to her modest frame home... read like the social register of Hattiesburg.
She has done laundry for three generations of some families.”

She never married.

She had no family once her mother and aunt died in the 1960s.

She lived simply and saved much of what she earned.

She had to be convinced by the people down at the bank to buy herself an air-conditioner, though she would only turn it on when company came calling.

Even in her late 80s, she pushed her wire cart to the Big Star supermarket, almost two kilometers away to get her groceries.

Needless to say, it was something of a surprise to everyone, in 1996, when Hattiesburg's long-serving washerwoman took her life savings and made an extraordinary gift of \$150,000 to the nearby University of Southern Mississippi.

The gift endowed the Oseola McCarty Scholarship, which gave priority consideration "to those deserving African-American students enrolling at the university who clearly demonstrate[d] a financial need."

Though she lived less than five kilometers away, Oseola herself had never even visited the university prior to making her decision.

She said that she was too old to get an education, but hoped that, with her help, others might.

When she finally retired at the age of 86, the people at the bank asked if they could make the news of her donation public rather than waiting until after her death.

She didn't quite understand what all the fuss was about, but agreed.

The news of her generosity inspired matching gifts of another \$330,000 to the university.

And Ted Turner, inspired by her example, gave away a billion dollars to charities in her honour.

In the remaining few years of her life she received over 300 awards.

She was celebrated by the Congressional Black Caucus,
awarded the Presidential Citizen's Medal by Bill Clinton,
recognised by the United Nations,
granted an honorary doctorate by Harvard University,
carried the Olympic flame through her home state,
and invited to lower the crystal ball in New York City on New Year's Eve.

All of these accolades came her way because she realised
somewhere along the way, in that lifetime of washing and ironing,
that she was doing more than simply doing the laundry.

Another story.

This one in the form of a poem, actually—
a poem called "The Old Gentleman,"
by the Maritime poet Alden Nowlan.

If you want to ask
a question, the chairman said,
begin by giving us
your name and address.

So the old gentleman
seated near the back
of the auditorium,
when it came his turn, said
he was Louis St. Laurent
and came from Quebec;

and we all of us laughed:
because that's who he was
and it was the kind of little joke
one expected of an elderly
former prime minister;

but the next time
he said the same thing

and the time after that,
said it quite simply

and it became obvious
it wasn't meant to be funny,

wasn't meant to be anything
other than courteous,

like his holding open the door
for whoever happened to reach it
at the same time he did

and never lighting a cigarette
without offering the pack to
the person in front and the person behind
and the persons seated
on either side of him.

Last year about this time, I shared the reading that I read earlier—
the one about the tombstone and the epitaph that said
the woman it honoured had in her life done “a few worthy things.”

After that service, I was asked just what exactly were
those few worthy things for which any of us might be best remembered.

What is the real measure of our lives?

What warrants any of our actions being deemed “worthy”?

If we were to do “a few worthy things,” how would we even know?

This is perhaps the greatest question there is.

When we try to make sense of our lives,
when we wrestle with our sense of meaning and purpose—
what this gift of life asks or requires of us,
we are eventually led to consider the enduring impact
our life will have upon this world.

I'm sorry to say that I don't have an easy or simple answer to the question.

Besides, there's no one-size-fits-all measure for what qualifies as worthy.

I think, though, that we all have a rough idea.
We're well aware of some of the key standards
against which any life can and will be judged.

Bessie Anderson Stanley summed up a few of those standards
in her popular definition of success
(which is often but incorrectly attributed to Emerson):

“To laugh often and much;
to win the respect of intelligent people
and the affection of children...
to leave the world a better place...
to know even one life has breathed easier
because you have lived.
This[,” he said,] is to have succeeded.”

We know this.
It may sound trite and well-worn.
But, we know that these are the measures that endure.

One of the bittersweet privileges of being a minister is that I have occasion
to attend more funerals and memorial services than most people.

What I have learned is that the traditional outward measures of success
in our society are rarely if ever brought up at funerals.

The number of games won or books written,
the advanced degrees earned or million dollar deals closed,
frequently go without mention.

None of these things tends to get raised—
at least not as the evidence of a life well-lived.

What is held up instead is character—stories of compassion,
acts of generosity, moments of grace, demonstrations of love.

The achievements of a person's life are often only celebrated
if those accomplishments served a good greater than themselves.

I'm sorry to say that I can't impart to you a definitive list
of what is considered “worthy” in the grandest scheme of things,

but what I can tell you is that we talk a lot at funerals
about caring, kindness, and simple, thoughtful gestures
that show the reach of the human heart.

That's what I love about those stories
of Oseola McCarty and Louis St. Laurent.

What is remarkable about each is how they defied expectations.
How they overcame their station in life—be it low or be it high—
to be gracious and generous in what they did and in who they were.

A prime minister obliging rather than demanding deference.
A washerwoman magnificently wealthy despite her meager means.

Each choosing to tell a story different from the one
the outward facts of their lives might otherwise suggest.

Each seeing beyond their circumstances
possibilities that spoke to the potential of their character.

My pointing to these two examples is not to say
that the other achievements of our lives lack meaning or worth.

There is so very much to be done to make this world a better place.
And heaven knows that time's 'a wasting...

But these stories are a reminder that
what we do is less important, in the end, than how we do it.

May the few worthy things for which each of us will be remembered
speak of our care for this earth,
our care for each other, and our care for ourselves.

May our epitaphs read that we were gracious and kind,
generous of spirit and giving of what we had.

And long after we are gone,
may we be remembered for a legacy of love
that endured beyond the limit of our lives.

Amen.