

# The Work of Our Hands and Hearts

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It was a night much like any other for Ashley Smith.

She was out late that evening.

Trekking back from the store, as she made her way across the parking lot of the Bridgeport Apartments, she came face to face with a man with a gun who said to her: "If you do what I say, I won't kill you."

He forced her into her apartment and tied her up with electrical cord and duct tape.

He then told her what she and most everyone in Atlanta already knew: that he was a wanted man.

That morning, almost eighteen hours earlier, Brian Nichols had escaped from the jail where he was being held, as he stood trial for the rape of his former girlfriend.

Starting just before 9am, in a matter of mere minutes, he had hurled the guard assigned to him against a wall, taken her gun, and made his way to the courtroom, where he killed the judge presiding over his trial.

When the court reporter, in horror, stood to check on the judge, he shot her, too.

As he bolted out of the courthouse, chased by an array of law enforcement, he killed a sheriff's deputy.

Once outside, he carjacked at least five vehicles and eventually turned to public transit to make his escape.

Shortly before ending up in Ashley Smith's parking lot at 2am, he killed a federal agent while attempting to steal the officer's car.

His face was plastered across television screens everywhere.  
The city of Atlanta was on lock-down—  
fearful of his next desperate move.

But there he sat in the quiet living room of a young woman,  
the single mother of a five year old girl.

A young woman who had held her daughter's father in her arms  
as he died of wounds from a knife-fight four years before.

A young woman who was battling demons of her own  
through an addiction to crystal meth.

After he had cleaned himself up, Smith told Nichols  
about her daughter, who was away at a sleepover at their church.

She explained she was raising her daughter on her own  
because her father had been murdered.

She insisted that she absolutely had to be there  
to pick her up in the morning.

To put it plainly, she was pleading for her life  
and the hope that her daughter would not be orphaned.

Over the next few hours, Smith and Nichols built up a strange rapport.

She slowly gained his trust.

When he agreed to untie her, she cooked him pancakes,  
since he hadn't eaten since fleeing the jail that morning.

And then she began to speak to him about her faith.

At one point, she went to her bedroom to get her Bible  
and came back with a book called *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

That book, by Rick Warren, the Southern Baptist pastor  
of the Saddleback Community Church in southern California,  
has sold more than 52 million copies worldwide and remained  
on the best-seller list of *The New York Times* for more than 100 weeks.

The book was on her night-stand,

as it was and is for many people around the globe.

Smith flipped to Chapter 33,  
the section she had been reading earlier that day  
and began to speak the words aloud.

After she read the first paragraph, Nichols asked her to read it again.

So, Smith started over, repeating the passage:

“We serve God by serving others.  
The world defines greatness  
in terms of power, possessions, prestige, and position.

If you can demand service from others, you’ve arrived.  
In our self-serving culture with its me-first mentality,  
acting like a servant is not a popular concept.”

Though I can’t be certain, my guess is  
that it was the part about power that touched Nichols—  
that spoke to him on a level he likely consciously didn’t even understand,  
that spoke to him of the profound sense of powerlessness he felt in his life.

A powerlessness that had driven him  
to assert with a gun some semblance of power  
in such horrifically violent and tragic ways.

In the wee hours of that night, the two of them talked about life—  
about God and family and about what is most important.

The hostage began to help her captor  
consider the feelings of the families of his victims.

Having lost her own partner to violence,  
she told him how it had felt going through such horrible loss herself.

She placed photographs of her family in his hands.

And he repeated over and over again  
that he did not want to hurt anyone else.

She had touched some chord deep within him.

Nichols told her that she must be an angel sent by God to help him see the pain he had wrought, the damage he had done.

He then asked if he might stay there with her for a few days, saying he just wanted to eat real food and watch TV and sleep and do “normal things that normal people do.”

And then Nichols confessed that he considered his life to be over.

He told Smith that he had already died.  
“Look at me,” he said. “Look at my eyes. I am already dead.”

She insisted: “You are not dead.  
You are standing right in front of me.  
[But] if you want to die, you can. It’s your choice.”

As the sun came up later that morning, Smith persuaded Nichols to let her go pick up her daughter down at the church.

As she reached the first stop sign on her route, she phoned 9-1-1.

When the police surrounded her apartment,  
Nichols emerged, waving a white flag of surrender.

Smith told reporters afterward,  
“I believe God brought him to my door  
so he couldn’t hurt anyone else.”

She called it a miracle.  
A sign of God’s plan.  
Confirmation of her life’s purpose.

There are days when I wish I had that kind of faith.  
Belief in a deity who was working things out, just so,  
just in the nick of time.

Instead, I’m more skeptical.  
My critical thinking kicks in and I wonder why it is,  
if God was using her for some grand purpose,  
that this same God didn’t see fit to somehow steer everyone clear  
of the tragic loss of life that unfolded earlier in the day.

There is a great theological flaw

in believing that some divine force pulls strings in our favour.

Clearly enough, it doesn't work for everyone,  
and it doesn't work for anyone all the time.

Things don't always break in our favour.  
Truth is, sometimes, things just break.

Tragedy has an inconvenient way of interrupting life.  
Heartache comes amid happiness.  
Suffering is woven into the fabric of the human experience.  
And bad things happen, alongside beautiful things.

The ability to see some divine plan in all of this has forever eluded me,  
though I can fully appreciate the burning desire one might have  
to discover a God-given purpose  
amid the bittersweet vicissitudes of this life—  
a way to find some deeper, clearer meaning for our lives  
in the midst of life's chaos and its clutter.

And, yet, I believe there is still something to be said for purpose,  
even if it's not divinely-ordained from above.

There's something to be said for the way  
a powerful sense of purpose can shape a life—  
and the world that surrounds it—for good.

As I reflected on the story of Ashley Smith,  
I wondered how we, as Unitarians, might have responded  
in the quiet hours of that night if we had been in her place.

I wonder what books we would have turned to—  
to what purpose we would have pointed  
the young man who said his life was done.

Now, I hope none of us ever finds ourselves at the end of a gun.

But the truth is that we live our lives  
surrounded by people desperate for hope,  
desperate for some glimmer of good news.

And, sometimes, those desperate people include our very selves.

There are people the world over—and people in this room—  
who are hostage to circumstance,  
to fear, to denial, to rage, to apathy and so much else,  
who seek nothing more than to know that life is precious and good  
and that our days upon this earth have a meaningful purpose.

Sadly, so much of what religion has had to offer in response  
is a narrow plan to merit divine favour,  
a tired script in which we find  
we are insignificant actors in an ancient story.

That is the story that Rick Warren tells once again in his book.

While there actually are some aspects of what he has to say  
that I do find agreeable, I ultimately can't buy what he's selling  
because it's built on a belief that God has a grand master plan  
and that each of us has a particular role to play.

For starters, I'm not so sure about God.  
And, if there is some grand plan,  
well, it doesn't seem to be going so very well.

...any god who is in charge of this universe  
has an awful lot of explaining to do.

There's a great New Yorker cartoon that speaks to this predicament—  
of not seeing any clear plan, and not quite knowing what to do without one.

The cartoon depicts a couple staring up at the stars.

It looks as if they're contemplating  
the great, eternal questions of life.

And then one turns to the other and says,  
"I'm not religious; I'm just scared."

In the face of the existential fear that sits at the heart of human being,  
it's natural to look for some design,  
for some meaning, for some higher purpose.

But as daunting a responsibility as it is,  
I think determining the design, meaning, and purpose of our lives  
is largely up to us.

And, I would suggest that this has always been true.

Very often what people have seen as God's plan or purpose is a pretty close reflection of their own.

Theologian Frederick Buechner says that our calling is that place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

For me, that speaks to our purpose and of how we are to go about finding it.

To consider: What moves us?  
What touches our heart? What brings us joy?

And how do our answers relate to what we see in the world around us?

Where is that sacred spot where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet?

Do you know? Have you found it?

For some it is in preparing food for Out of the Cold.

For others, it's putting their bodies on the line to stop the Mega Quarry.

For some, it's serving on our board or serving coffee upstairs.

For others, it's writing letters to demand the rights of Indigenous People.

And, for many in our congregation, as you've heard from Harold, it has been raising money and working in Honduras or Guatemala, for a week or two at a time, to build schools and community centres, and a better way of life for people we may not even know.

A purpose-driven life is to be found in the work of our hands and our hearts—through the possibilities that arise by serving something greater than ourselves.

It's not necessarily discovered in grand plans and hidden schemes, but is more likely uncovered in bringing to the needs of the world, the gifts and skills we have to offer.

Setting theology aside, that's exactly what Ashley Smith did.  
She acted with compassion, treating her captor with dignity,  
when he had forfeited his own.

She shared her pain and revealed the depth of her faith  
to a wounded, wounding man.

And it made a meaningful difference,  
bringing his spree of violence to an end.

Where some see a divine plan in this turn of events,  
I see, instead, a woman with the courage to be the right person  
doing the right thing at the right time.

There is purpose to be found in living that way.

May each of us be so bold.

May we summon such high resolve.

And may we commit ourselves to this sacred task:  
to engage our great gladness and the world's deep hunger  
that our lives might speak to our moment in time  
with both power and with purpose.

Amen.