

The Starfish and the Baby

The other day I think I did something pretty stupid, but I am generally a gullible kind of girl plagued by liberal, white middle-class guilt, so I guess I had it coming. A man came walking down the street as I was about to get into my car to go the church. He stopped me and asked for twenty dollars to make his rent. I explained that I don't give out money. "But I'm hungry," he said. And I explained that I could give him a banana and a granola bar. "I'm diabetic," he said, "I can't eat that stuff." Eventually we agreed I should take him to the grocery store and buy him something he could eat.

Fortunately, I had the wisdom to tell him while we were walking I was not going to get in the car alone with him, so we went to the Price Rite, and this is when I made my mistake. I said, "Buy what you need. I will pay for what you can carry." It didn't dawn on me until he had put about 150 pounds of sausage, bacon, pork chops, hamburger and chicken into the cart that he was a pretty big guy and could probably carry a whole lot more than I had imagined. In fact, he could carry a whole lot more than he could eat all by himself.

I like to think of myself as sort of streetwise, you know, sort of aware of life in the inner city, wise to the scamming ways of the world. But seven brimming bags and \$127 dollars later, I realized once again, I was just a chump. A well-meaning chump who was simply hoping to be a faithful person of service.

What does it mean to be a person of service? How do we serve the world? Questions this chump feels are better answered with stories than rhetoric.

Here's a story for you: Once upon a time a villager was walking by the river. The villager looked out over the water and saw a baby floating downstream. Horrified, the villager raced into the water, grabbed the baby, and brought the baby

safely ashore. Relieved, the villager looked back over the water and saw another baby floating downstream. The villager again dove into the water and rescued this baby as well. Once more, he looked into the water and to his astonishment he saw dozens of babies all floating down the river. And so he called out an alarm!

The entire village came running to the river to rescue as many babies as they could. The village was mobilized. Every person was at the river saving babies. The village got organized and every villager had a role to play in the great task. Babies were being saved. The village was improving lives. The village became famous for its baby saving ministry! And the village was feeling pretty good about itself and its good work. It wasn't exactly saving the world, but it was certainly making a big difference.

But one day, a young villager looked at his mobilized, organized, helpful village, put down his Baby Scooping Net, and began to walk away from the Baby Saving Pier. The Baby Saving Shift Organizer shouted at him, "Hey, where are you going? You are letting your quota of babies drown." And the young villager replied, "That may be, but I am going upstream to find out who is throwing all these babies into the river in the first place."

Sometimes, being a faithful person of service means going upstream to hold society's decision-makers accountable, and that might mean - in the short term - that while you are working on transforming society, the people, our neighbors, continue to perish around you.

Another story: Once upon a time there was a Sad Man. Because he was a realist and looked honestly at the state of the world, he was in an awful blue funk of hopeless despair. All he saw in humanity was a series of vicious interplays that led only to horror and destruction. During this terrible time, the Sad Man began

taking early morning walks on the beach. Along the strip of wet sand that marks the ebbing and flowing of the tide, death walks hugely and in many forms. The sand was littered with the debris of life. Shells are cast up in dead piles. There was a hermit crab, fumbling for a new home in the depths, tossed up naked, where the waiting gulls could cut him to pieces. And the starfish seemed to suffer the most. Their tiny breathing pores stuffed with silt. The rising sun slowly cooking their unprotected bodies.

But one day, during this Sad Man's early morning walk he encountered a fellow journeyer. The guy was looking at something in the sand. He stooped down, picked it up, and flung it far beyond the breaking surf. Our Sad Man walked up to him, while the Thrower was starting to kneel again. A starfish had thrust its arms up stiffly and was holding its body, as best it could, away from the stifling mud. "Is it still alive?" asked the Sad Man.

"Yes," said the Thrower, and with a quick yet gentle movement he picked up the starfish and spun it far out into the sea. "It may live," said the Thrower, "if the offshore pull is strong enough. The stars throw well, one can help them."

"But you can't help the all," said the Sad Man.

"No," replied the Thrower, "But I helped that one."

Sometimes being a faithful person of service means doing what you can where you are, understanding that the whole problem is too big to solve all by yourself. But that you can make a difference in at least one person's life at least once.

What does it mean to be faithful person of service? I often feel torn between much-needed, hands-on direct service for the few (stocking food banks, housing the homeless, feeding the hungry) and the equally necessary systematic

transformation of society, such as working for racial justice, universal health care, and a living wage for all. In fact, I find myself so torn sometimes, please don't tell anybody, I get all wrapped up in myself, I sit down sad and frustrated and think "I'm too little, I'm too small – can't do anything at all." Then, instead of calling out for help, I go the easy way and do something stupid to make myself feel better. Sometimes, despite my natural joyful nature, I can get pretty bitter about the woes of the world, dis-empowered because I try to act for good and so often have no results. Fortunately, there is more to the starfish story.

The Sad Man continued to live and walk by the ocean shore. In spite of the suffering, he did not look away, and the memory of the Starfish Thrower kept coming back to him. Slowly, slowly Grace broke through. Grace broke through his awful blue funk and the Sad Man realized, "But I do love the world. I love its small ones, the things beaten in the strangled surf, the bird, singing, that flies and falls and is not seen again. I love the lost ones, the pained ones of the world." He pulled on his sneakers, went out to the beach, and picked up a still-living star, and only after he had thrown it, spinning it far out into the waves, did he allow himself to think, "The Star Thrower is no longer alone. After us there will be others." And despair became hope.

Always, being a faithful person of service means joining together in the task. For alone we are too weak to do all that must be done and our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen. But together our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

Amidst all the ambiguity – which is best? To serve one person at a time, one starfish at a time, or to work for systematic societal change, go upstream and find out who is throwing all the babies in the river? To be honest, neither is the best

way to serve. Both are necessary. But, amidst all the ambiguity about how best to be a faithful person of service, there is a deeper truth that may guide your efforts, a truth so solid that without it, all your ministry to the world will collapse like dust in the wind. Your service to the world must serve your heart and soul. Your service, whatever it is, must fill you with joy. Your service must allow your spirit to soar. Whether you are working for racial justice, or singing in the choir, you need to do it because you truly love the world.

This morning Doug read “Despair,” from a little book by Ruth Gendler called *The Book of Qualities*. In it, Gendler has written 100 little personifications of all sorts of emotions and virtues such as Pleasure, Fear, Patience and Confusion. I was a little surprised to find that in all her little vignettes she had not written a paragraph for Hope. So, given these stories about ants, starfish, babies and service I wanted to tell you this morning, I thought I would close by telling you about Hope.

Hope is a gardener, an old crone who lives on my street. When she was a girl in high school, she was very popular, not because she put people down but because she was smart, kind, and genuinely fun to be with. She had a great smile. But in college Hope began taking courses in ecology and political sciences. She stopped smiling, dropped out of school and one day found she could no longer leave her house. The only old friend who called was Worry, and after his visits she always felt worse.

One day, Courage and Joy moved in next door and Hope peeked at them through the shades. They had a child who played on every lawn on the block. That spring Hope opened all the windows in the house and walked barefoot to her garden to feel the earth against her skin. She vowed never to be imprisoned again.

On Wednesdays, Hope takes dancing lessons with Fear. They have a deep and complex relationship. He keeps her on her toes. Hope is a graceful partner, but always leads. She is irritated by her sister, Optimism, who wastes her garden with gaudy annuals like impatiens and petunias. Hope, on the other hand, grows hardy perennials – useful things you can't kill even if you wanted to – chives, potatoes, parsley, oregano and mint. Hope also grows vegetables for the local soup kitchen.

Gardening has taught her that bumper crops only come after experimentation and some spectacular failures. Now, when she isn't gardening, Hope reads all the newspapers. She also reads poetry and is especially fond of Emily Dickenson. She knows exactly what is going on in the world. Hope sits in a rocking chair on her front porch. As people pass they wave, and she waves back. The brave ones come up and sit with her. Some people think Hope is a witch, because if they sit with her long enough they discover they have an overwhelming desire to do her work.

For further study:

Eiseley, Loren. *The Starfish Thrower*. Mariner Books, 1979.

Gendler, Ruth. *The Book of Qualities*. Harper Books, 1988.