

I heard a story once about a woman on a subway. She came to her station, and as she left the train in the crushed rush of people, she realized that she'd left one of her gloves on the seat. She could see it through the glass doors, but it was too late to run back. In a flash, she knew exactly what to do: just as the doors slammed shut, she tossed the second glove, the one in her hand, into the car. She saw it land beside its partner on the seat, and she saw, in her mind's eye, that pair of soft kid gloves, her favorite pair, warming someone else's hands. *[This story comes from the Reverend Phyllis O'Connell.]*

It looks like a frivolous gesture -- spontaneous, spur of the moment. But you know she must have been practicing a long, long time, all her life, maybe, practicing generosity of spirit, to be ready for just this opportunity, to know precisely in the moment how to bless the world then and there. It happened in an instant, but this was planned giving through and through. Something in her past, or everything in her past, prepared that woman for her gesture, some continuous spiritual discipline of gratitude and joy -- habits of living and habits giving refined and renewed her whole life long.

I think to some extent you must be people like that, you members of the Joshua Society. Something in the way you've trained your eyes to see abundance in the world, in your life, and long to share it; something in the way you've honed your listening to hear a call to possibility beyond the self, beyond your lifetime even -- because the kinds of gifts you're giving to this school are made not only for the present but the future: future ministers and ministries, congregations and communities whom none of us may ever meet (*Who knows where the gift will travel? Where the subway takes the glove to warm what stranger's hand?*). This way of seeing and being is an orientation of the spirit. It is a way of faith.

A few years ago, I clipped an obituary for a woman I did not know. (I read the obituary pages almost every day, almost religiously, before the headlines, which lately just assail us like the Book of Revelation. I turn to the obituaries for inspiration. There are clues there, between the birth- and death-dates, clues and messages from the dead about living: sometimes funny, sometimes poignant, sometimes there's an emptiness so lonely it could break your heart, and often, there is inspiration... I don't generally clip them out, but this time I did.)

“She died on February 4th at the age of 80, after having worked as a cost accountant for 20 years at the former [State Hospital.] She had also worked as a matron at the Statler Hotel, and as a factory assembly-line packer during the war. She was a gas station attendant, a taxicab owner and driver, a lampshade assembler and an attendant nurse, before becoming an accountant... She was a statewide labor contract negotiator... She served as president of a union local for 13 years and vice president for 5 years. She was a past chair of the union's statewide Commission on Mental Health. She was founder and treasurer of a credit union. She was a member and former president of the Lutheran Church of Our Savior ... She had been president of the Buffalo, NY chapter of the Campfire Girls, a leader of the Bluebird Campfire Girls, and the Horizon Group, and a den mother in cub scouting. She left a daughter, a son, seven grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren.”

There was a picture of a slender, strong African American woman, with a serious face, an open and attentive face, gently smiling; a humble human face. Her name, somewhat incredibly, was Beverly Victory.

I know nothing about her except what I've read here and what I read, with some speculation, between the lines. This was a woman who did justice, loved kindness, walked humbly, who gave half her life to hard and common work, respectable work, and half to the church and the union, and a third half, somehow, to her own and other people's children. Someone she left behind to tell her tale with dignity and style.

Somehow I think that this Beverly Victory understood what it means to spend your life in love, to lose your life in love and thereby find it. I think she was a dissenter, an apostate, from the dominant church of materialism, consumerism and secular self-interest. She gave back richly, abundantly, from very modest means. And she kept the Sabbath. In her face I do not see one of those hyperactive frantic people who lose their lives like busy gerbils on a wheel (a face I find, more often than I'd like, when looking in the mirror). I see a woman firmly planted in the fertile ground of faith and principle, quiet, joyful, richly blessed with a generous, generating heart.

I think I clipped it out because in the back of my own mind, in the shadows of my heart, there calls a question, always; it whispers all the time: What is this life for? What does this life require? What does the Lord require? What religion do I claim is mine, and what religion do I practice day to day? How am I spending my time (note the financial implication – *to spend your time*)? To what am I paying allegiance, or attention? Ms. Victory reminds me that you don't have to be a hero to live your life heroically, nor a prophet, to live your life prophetically. It is possible to answer the holiest of questions in the most ordinary ways. To ask these things out loud, with love and courage, is what we hope this school will teach new ministers to do.

These days you can read the news on any given morning and conclude that ours is not a generous age. You can listen to budget news this week out of the legislature in St. Paul or Washington and wonder what manner of people we've become. In Minnesota more than half a million people live in poverty. More than one third of all African American Minnesotans are officially poor; the numbers are even higher for Native Americans, and disproportionate for all communities of color. "Poverty" here is defined by an income of \$22,000 or less for a family of four. Who can say how many dwell in poverty of spirit?

This is not a generous time. There's a lot of loud talk about taxes and spending, and self-interest and self-reliance, that old bootstrap mythology which always was a cruel hoax and a false virtue. The commonwealth of any community is anchored in interdependence. The real security of any community lies in clear seeing, brave listening, shared sacrifice, humility, compassion, and vision, not the small, selfish illusions of scarcity and self-reliance.

It would be easy to conclude that ours is not a generous age, that these are fearful, guarded times. Yet all around us, and obviously, right here this afternoon, are dissenters from the creed of fear and isolation, singing a different song, telling a different story, which is an old story, of love and generosity and wild imagination. People are flinging their gloves into subway cars, or making

large and lasting gifts to train new religious leaders in the hard, holy work of building beloved community. You yourselves, therefore, are religious leaders, inspiring the rest of us toward lives of gratitude and grace, inspiring us to wonder what gifts we ourselves might bring to bless the world.

Elie Wiesel, the Jewish writer asks, *What then is sanctuary? The sanctuary, he says, is often something very small, Not a grandiose gesture. The sanctuary is human beings. Sanctuary is a dream. And that is why you are here and that is why I am here. We are here because of one another. In truth, he says, we are each other's shelter.*

For your generous imagination, we thank you.

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