

Tasks That Give Dignity

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In the fall of 1970, a small girl danced and skipped and spun her way to fourth grade. She scuffled in gold and orange maple and oak leaves with her red shoes and took in all the delights that autumn had to offer. In her art class later that day, the project was to make a pumpkin out of construction paper. Every child was asked to take out their scissors and paste. Then they were given one sheet of both orange and black paper and then told to "wait for instructions."

The instructions were quite simple: using the whole page of orange paper, draw the shape of a pumpkin, then cut on the outline of the pumpkin. Draw eyes, nose, and mouth on the pumpkin, and also cut them out, being careful not to cut too far and cut to the edge. Then, when all the cutting was done, glue the orange pumpkin shape onto the whole black sheet, not using too much paste, because that makes the pumpkin all lumpy. With the two papers pasted together, the eyes, nose and mouth would show up from the back. It was a good plan.

The little girl thought about the instructions, and thought about them some more. In 1970, in her town, there was a lot of talk about *recycling*, and she had been told again and again not to waste paper. Wasting paper was *wrong*. She knew that. It seemed to the little girl that gluing one whole sheet of paper onto another was being wasteful. It was wrong. What if....? And the wheels inside her head started spinning. What if she went ahead and cut out the orange into the shape of a pumpkin, just like the instructions said.... and then *instead* of using the whole sheet of black paper behind it, she cut the *shape* of two eyes a nose and a mouth from the black paper? And then glued them on to the pumpkin shape? Then there would be a lot left over for something else. Hmmm.

She forged ahead with the new plan. From the leftover paper she made a hat, and curly black hair with bangs for her pumpkin. She wasn't wasting paper, and she really liked the way her pumpkin looked. She was very pleased with herself. Her teacher was not pleased and did not agree. She even told the little girl that she would not put the curly-haired pumpkin up with the pumpkins of the other children in the hallway because the little girl didn't follow the rules. She did not follow the directions. Her pumpkin did not look like the rest of them. It was different. The little girl's feelings were very hurt.

She thought she was doing a good thing, and here she was being punished for it. She went home that afternoon in tears. She poured the whole story out to her mother who promptly made a big shiny star and put it in on the pumpkin's hat, to show her daughter that yes, what she did was just fine.

I think all too often we are taught to limit the ways we see the world. We are encouraged to see terms of opposites, of polarities – black and white, republican and democrat, liberal and conservative, right and wrong, war and peace. We are only given two choices instead of a range of possible options. One of the casualties of such limited thinking is the irradiation of the shaded differences and diversity in between the two extremes. More often than not, there is more than one way of looking at a situation. Poets, artists, writers and other visionaries have for generations that there are many ways to see the world. They have learned to trust seeing with their hearts and souls as well as with their eyes. They trust the truth that lies behind the tangible and the visible.

When we step outside our normal experience of the world, we open ourselves to a different kind of seeing, one that embraces the whole of our being. This may be most important when we look at how we define ourselves and the work we do. Too narrow a definition and exclude many of the parts of our day which add color and meaning – not only to our lives but to the lives of those around us. Jeffrey Salkin, in Being God's Partner tells this wonderful and classic taxi cab story. He writes:

A few years ago, a young taxi driver drove me to John F. Kennedy airport on Long Island. After a few minutes of conversation, I discovered that Mike had belonged to my synagogue years before I came into the community. "So, rabbi," he asked while we sat in heavy traffic, "what do you say to a Jew like me who hasn't been in a synagogue since his bar mitzvah ceremony?" Thinking for a moment, I recalled that in Hasidic lore, the wagon driver is an honored profession. So I said, "We could talk about your work."

"What does my work have to do with my religion?"

"Well, we choose how we look at the world and at life. You're a taxi driver. But you are also a part of the tissue that connects all humanity. You're taking me to the airport. I'll go to a different city and give a couple of lectures that might touch or help or change someone. I couldn't have gotten there without you. You help make that connection happen.

"I heard on your two-way radio that after you drop me off, you're going to pick up a woman from the hospital and take her home. That means you'll be the first non-medical person she encounters after being in the hospital. You will be a small part of her healing process, an agent in her re-entry into the world of health.

"You may then pick up someone from the train station who has come home from seeing a dying parent. You may take someone to the house of the one that he or she will ask to join in marriage. You're a connector, a bridge builder. You're one of the unseen people who make the world work as well as it does. That is holy work. You may not think of it this way, but yours is a sacred mission."

(Jeffrey Salkin, in Being God's Partner)

We don't always see ourselves as doing sacred work, or even work that is important to the world, but if we believe that everything is connected, that all people are connected, then the work we do does impact the lives of others.

Alfred North Whitehead, one of the fathers of modern process theology, writes: “The human body is an instrument for the production of art in the life of the human soul.” (Adventures of Ideas, 1933) We are designed to transcend limited understandings and to engage with the creative life force that surrounds us all. This applies to everyone, not only to the artists and poets among us.

However, creative engagement is not limited to work with our bodies. The creative imagination, the life force is there for each of us to tap into in our own ways. Our skills and gifts are different, and we each engage the world using a different combination of insights, histories and truths.

The common factor is that we do engage with the world through our countless daily activities – the grand and the mundane. We engage through what we call work; what we call hobbies; what we call art. Each of those activities is an opportunity to look at the world a little differently – with fresh sight and fresh insight. Each is an opportunity to engage with creativity and commitment.

Our business is to create. We are meant not only to create works of art, but to struggle creating our own values, our own religious systems and ethics. We are meant to create, through the insight of imagination and the perception of our senses, we are constantly creating and recreating ourselves. To do so, we must be able to look into the depths of life, our own, and to struggle until we do understand.

I believe that it was Michelangelo who approached each piece of marble not with the intention of sculpting a particular shape or figure out of it, but with the understanding that his task was merely to release the form or figure being held within it. He did not see his task as to impose, but to release what was already there. It is a very different perspective.

That same holds true as we go about the purpose of trying to create ourselves over and again. In truth, our task is not to impose new structures upon the old, but to release the truth of what is inside of

us, to be able to see what is below and beyond. Blake's famous couplet's rings no less true today:

*To see the world in a grain of sand, And heaven in a wildflower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour.*

Blake saw the spiritual essence of things trapped in the material world, as Michelangelo their saw shape trapped in marble. When perception can move toward reality, it is one of the finest examples of imagination. One's life opens to all of life and we are able to encounter the sacred. We know because we are filled with wonder and awe. In each of our lives there are doors which may remain closed most of the time, but open when we invite awareness and an increased awareness of the people right before us.

I remember speaking with a dear friend who had been caring for her husband, who was slowly dying. To much of the world, his inability to verbally communicate was a barrier, and it often led to people forgetting that he was still there inside his body, even though his body was failing. One of her joys, and the door through which she choose to walk, was to remember every day, that he was still the same man she had fallen in love with and married, even though the exterior had changed. Behind the mouth that could no longer form coherent speech, and the intestines which had a mind all their own, was the dignified and kind man she married. She committed herself to honoring that man each time she fed him, or cleaned him, or helped move him from his bed to his chair.

I think of them often when I see medical professionals working with the elderly. I think of that couple when I see caring professionals and when I see ones who are overwhelmed and stressed by their case load and are unable to see the person behind the disease with which they struggle. For it does make a difference how we interact with each other; the same action can be carried out with love or disdain. Recipients and observers know the difference, even if they can't verbalize it. They know when there is real dignity being shown as well as respect.

When it comes down to it, this Labor Day is not about sales at the mall, or one last BBQ with the neighbors -- though both have their advantages. This holiday is about dignity and respect – for all the different kinds of work that are done -- physical, creative, heartfelt, voluntary and paid alike. The many different kinds of work we do may include teaching students to read so that they can go on and teach others or read the newspaper to their family. The work we do may include building or designing the cars which carry others back and forth to their jobs, their families or places of worship. The work we do may include helping an elderly family member bathe herself, so that she can retain some semblance of her own dignity – but with a little help from someone who cares. In all those different ways, we can choose to live life as a daily celebration, embracing the moment before us. We can choose to live free from what has been holding us back.

Our earliest tales tell of creation, of making something of worth and beauty where before there was a void. Some of those tales tell of divinity, others of atomic explosions beyond our wildest imaginings. All those are meant to inspire, but truly inspires me are the stories of men and women who face unprecedented situations and create something completely new and daring -- who are able to play a concert on three strings instead of four – who are able to see the act of driving a taxi as sacred work, connecting lives and stories. For me those ways of thinking take an understanding, an imagination and a willingness to rethink and reconstruct all that was previously known.

The various ways we choose to look at the world do not have to be as dramatic. There are many ways of seeing -- infinite possibilities. There are always more mysteries to be explored from the basic to the sublime. Dare to look for it. Dare to see it.

A few years back, the little girl's mother found this in her files; she had saved it all these years. The curls have long gone flat, but the star still shines. I am going to keep this pumpkin out as a reminder, to risk looking like a fool, for what I know to be true.

So may it be.