

Drop in the Bucket
December 3, 2017
(c) Sylvia Stocker

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

Be a drop in the bucket, and a bucket in the pond,
and the pond fills the river, and the river rushes on.
And every river swells a river, 'til the power can't be stopped,
and what becomes a mighty ocean started as a drop.
– Mitch Barrett, singer and composer

Note: This service was based on a song called “Drop in the Bucket,” by Kentucky musician Mitch Barrett. A group of parishioners learned the song and sang it at the start of the service. At the end of the service, the congregation sang it together. You can listen to Barrett's band, Zoe Speaks, perform the piece here: <https://zoespeaksmusic.com/track/998557/drop-in-the-bucket>

Here are the lyrics:

*It's a crazy world we live in. Bad news all around.
Brothers and sisters, if we're going to make a difference, we're going to have to stand our ground*

*CHORUS (and be a) drop in the bucket, and a bucket in the pond,
and the pond fills the river, and the river rushes on.
And every river swells a river, 'til the power can't be stopped
and what becomes a mighty ocean started as a drop*

*Down in Alabama a lady boarded a bus
The driver said, “You're black, you've gotta sit in the back.” Rosa said, “I've had enough.”
CHORUS (She was a) ...*

*Great Britain ruled over India, made them slaves to the goods they bought,
'Til Ghandi took his people to the ocean, He said, “Look! Free salt!”*

CHORUS (He was a) ...

*In the alleys of Calcutta Mother Theresa lived her life.
She did much more than feed the poor; She taught us how to shine our light:*

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

CHORUS ('Cause you're a) ...

Invocation in Hard Times, by Maureen Killoran

Welcome, you who come in need of healing,
you who are confused, or have been betrayed.
Welcome, with your problems and your pain.
Welcome, too, your joys and your wonderings,
welcome your need to hope, your longing for assurance.

Instead of answers, here may you find safety for your questions.
Instead of promises, may you find community for your struggles,
people with hands and hearts to join you
in engaging the challenges and changes of our day.

Hymn *Singing Through the Hard Times*, Utah Phillips

Sometimes our living gets so dark and lonesome,
it seems like there's nothing we can do.
So we reach out to each other,
raise a song together,
let our voices carry us through.

CHORUS: We are singing through the hard times,
singing through the hard times,
Working for the good times to come. (Repeat)

And when the war clouds gather it's so easy to get angry

And just as hard not to be afraid.
But you know in your own heart no matter what happens,
You just can't turn your back and walk away. CHORUS

So hand in hand together we help each other carry
The light of peace within us every day
And if we can learn to live it – to walk and talk and give it
That world of peace won't be so far away. CHORUS

Reading

Reflections on Ringing the Salvation Army Bell
by Helmut Schmidt of “the Forum” of Fargo, ND

(a seasonal drop in the bucket)

MOORHEAD, ND –

When Dale Stenerson goes bell-ringing for the Salvation Army, he doesn't ring the bell a whole lot. But he sure can talk. And the 80-year-old can still carry a tune.

"Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!" Stenerson boomed out Thursday night as customers walked by him and his ringing partner, Samuel Majak, at the Hornbacher's store in the southside's Azool center. Stenerson's eyes sparkle and cheer rings in his voice.

Whether he's singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem" or sharing stories of growing up in the Red River Valley, Stenerson has passers-by smiling and tossing in spare change and bills. And before they know it, they're in full-blown conversations.

"We just stopped by and put some money in ..." said Abby Johnson, who stood by the red kettle with her friend Nicole Branstadt to share in Stenerson's stream-of-consciousness banter.

A minute later, Stenerson took a few steps with his walker to loosen up a leg that was damaged by polio when he was a child. "Over the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we went!" Stenerson began singing.

A couple of verses later, he opened a lid on the walker's seat, pulled out a page of lyrics and handed it to Majak as an invitation to sing along. Then he grabbed his cellphone, and declared that he could use some help using it to get a photo of him and Majak. Johnson took several photos as he sang "We Wish

You a Merry Christmas!"

Stenerson, who lives in a Fargo retirement community, has been helping the Salvation Army for 40 years by his reckoning, starting with dropping off food at the downtown Fargo headquarters. He said he added bell-ringing to his to-do list a few years before he retired in 1998.

The thing that keeps him ringing is the goodness "that just oozes from people. The little kids and grandmas coming and stuff. Enthusiasm and love just oozing out. Yes, yes, yes. What a great country we have!" he said.

Stenerson's joy is infectious, and Majak, who does the bulk of the actual bell-ringing for the pair, shares it with "Grandpa Dale."

"When I come here, I get a lot of help. And I feel I want to help, too," Majak said. "You see people passing by. ... A lot of people are really good."

Stenerson then points to a little boy in a plastic car and cart combo being pushed by his mother. "You old enough to drive?" he asks the confused youngster as the boy's parents laugh.

A few minutes later, a middle-aged woman puts a bill into the kettle and starts walking off to shop.

"Your grandpa and grandma would be proud!" Stenerson said. And she smiles.

Another woman stops by and donates, then gives him a big hug.

Stenerson says bell-ringing is "getting to know the real people." "I'll ring as long as they'll let me," he said.

Sermon *Drop in the Bucket*
(c) Sylvia Stocker

I don't guess Dale Stenerson is the subject of sermons or even newspaper articles all that often. I suspect he's just a regular person wanting to do something good for others. Getting to know "real people," as he calls them, and seeing the good in them up close.

Now the Salvation Army might not be the organization you choose for your contribution. I know their track record on LGBTQ issues is abysmal, for instance. For me, the point is that Stenerson's story is

one of a regular person – not a queen or king or statesperson or famous entertainer – a regular person doing something he can do to help others.

My own soul is thirsty for such stories. I have grown weary of the polarized speech *du jour* and knee-jerk reactions that rob others of their humanity. These days it seems easier and more commonplace to lob a verbal grenade than to take a deep breath and try to understand. All you need to do is to read the daily newspaper to find those kinds of stories. I need some antidotes to curb my headlong dive into pessimism. So this past week I've been collecting them. Here are a couple.

A day or two after Thanksgiving, as I was over at Brooks Farm and Feed selecting some treats for my cats, I overheard one of the workers talking about her holiday trip, which had involved traveling a leg of the Maine Turnpike.

“When I got to the toll booth, they wouldn't let me pay,” she said. “They said the car ahead of me had paid it forward so that I could go through for free.”

Well, you know, why didn't I ever think of that?

A day or so after that, a couple of parishioners told me about picking up their turkey at Morning Glory. When they got to checkout, the clerk waved them through. The person ahead of them – a stranger – had paid for their turkey. Now that couple is contemplating what special thing they might do to pay it forward.

Those stories brought to mind others, many of them involving regular people right here in this church. Like the parishioner who intentionally drops quarters along the street because, as she puts it, “People like to find something bigger than a penny.”

Or the former parishioner, now moved away, who used to crochet hats, then attach little notes to them and leave them around town.

Or, last Saturday, there was Gemma C. hosting a memorial rock painting party in the May Sarton room after her grandmother's memorial service. You could paint a rock and bring it home with you, or you could leave your rock behind so that Gemma could leave it somewhere around town for someone to discover. I painted a rock with a message of peace and left it for Gemma. Last I saw, she had a pretty good collection to distribute.

The past two weeks have been very difficult for our congregation as as we have tried to make sense of

the baffling disappearance of one of our members. Ted Berrett was last seen the Friday before Thanksgiving. In the last couple of weeks, the Sagadahoc Sheriff's office and the Maine Wardens Service have systematically scoured the woods, finding only his shoes and belt beside a log. Their search led them ultimately to the water –and there they are still looking for him, even though the search has been officially called off. The loss, and the baffling circumstances surrounding it, have been difficult to take in and impossible to understand for everyone, Ted's family, most of all.

But regular people – not queens or kings or statespeople or famous entertainers – have reached out, starting off with the search and rescue workers, many of whom are trained volunteers and some of whom are still working on the case. Last Sunday, we held a more-or-less impromptu memorial service here for Ted. It was the one thing the family asked of this congregation – and despite the last minute request and the holiday weekend, many of you generously shared your presence, warmth, love, and stories about Ted. Each person gathered to remember, a drop in the bucket. Each story shared and hug offered, a drop in the bucket.

This past Thursday, I led a private service at the water's edge for the family and a few representatives from search and rescue. Each tear shed, a drop in the bucket.

On our way to the site where the family wanted to have the service, we stopped at the birch log where they found Ted's shoes and belt. The Sagadahoc county sheriff's office had placed a wreath and a basket of greens there. An officer read a short, heartfelt reflection about the search, then showed the family a plaque the sheriff's office had made for the site. The text gave Ted's dates, then said (more or less), “on the evening of November 17, Ted Berrett sat and rested here.”

I cannot begin to describe how moving it was to have the Sheriff's office so tenderly create a physical memorial where people could return to pay tribute. Another drop in the enormous bucket of healing. That bucket now may feel so empty, but, drop by drop, it will be filled over time.

We are all capable of being those kinds of drops in the bucket – capable of doing some unexpected good deed, offering some gentleness, some kindness to the ones coming along behind us – or to the ones right in front of us. It's a question of choosing to do it. Of tuning our antennae to the needs around us – and acting on what we pick up. The more we cultivate the skill of sensing when a compassionate response is needed, the more we propagate a feeling of fun and satisfaction.

(Who enjoyed it more? The person who paid the extra toll, or the person who sailed through the toll booth for free?)

The more we add those kinds of drops to the bucket, the more habituated we become habituated to doing so.

Years ago, before I became a minister, I attended a homecoming service at my local UU church. The minister was conducting a water ceremony that some UU churches hold on homecoming Sunday. Everyone was invited to bring water from their summer travels and experiences to pour into a common bowl. (Some ministers then boil that water down and use it during the church year to bless babies at baby dedication services.)

Well, on that Sunday, one by one, many people came forward to describe where their water came from and what it signified.. People spoke of sacred places, far away places, their own back yards, and special, meaningful moments as they poured their water into the common bowl. Until one man, near the end of the line, stepped up and poured an entire bottle of some fake bright blue sports drink. The man then proceeded to lecture about pollution and how one drop can foul the well. We all sat, dumbfounded, as the water turned from clear to blue and an unbidden and unwanted sermon issued forth. His water ruined the ceremony. So did his behavior. There would be no using that water for baby dedication services!

Not every drop in the bucket is a good one. A stream of bad drops can spill over into pond, river, and ocean, just as a stream of good drops can.

In just this past week, the United States president tweeted white supremacist videos to his millions of viewers. The air raid sirens were activated in Hawaii for the first time in decades. Congress passed a tax overhaul that will reward the wealthy at the expense of everyone else. The former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI. He apparently committed greater crimes, but he won't be charged for them as long as he talks.

“It's a crazy world we live in, bad news all around.” Drops of fake blue water added to the bucket, one after another.

The unfortunate truth is that we are all capable of adding *those* drops of water to the bucket. It doesn't take a national leader to do so. It doesn't even require corruption to do so. The unkind words, the quick judgments, the resistance to listening, the refusal to try to understand, the unwillingness to forgive, the assumed ill intentions on the part of others, the headlong tumble to divisiveness.

And the thing is, the more we behave in those ways, the more habituated we become to those kinds of thoughts and behaviors.

Actually, no matter what we do, we are always adding drops to the bucket. The trick is to add the right kinds of drops so that the bucket that flows into the pond, rivers, and oceans is the one that contains compassion, justice, kindness, peace.

Mitch Barrett's song, "Drop in the Bucket" tells of Rosa Parks, Gandhi, Mother Theresa – giants in the world of peace, justice, compassion. I'll never be a Rosa Parks, or a Gandhi, or a Mother Teresa. Only they could be those people. But the song reminds me everyone can be drops in the bucket. We don't have to be famous or smart or well connected. We only have to be the best we know how to be, regular people, doing good, adding drop after drop to the bucket. Maybe it's only by adding those drops, one after another, that a Rosa Parks or a Gandhi or a Mother Theresa can emerge.

I listen to that song frequently, sometimes over and over again. For me it's another way of remembering to collect those stories of regular people doing good. I need that these days, when I find it hard not to collapse into cynicism, despair, or feelings of powerlessness. I need to be reminded to be a drop in the bucket. I need to be reminded I *am* a drop in the bucket. I need to be reminded to choose in the way of regular people – not queens or kings or statespeople or famous entertainers – regular people, trying to do good.

Rebecca Parker writes:

*Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or curse the world.*

*The mind's power, the strength of the hands,
the reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting*

*Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
bind up wounds, welcome the stranger, praise what is sacred,
do the work of justice or offer love.*

*Any of these can draw **down** the prison door,*

*hoard bread, abandon the poor, obscure what is holy,
comply with injustice, or withhold love.*

*You must answer this question: What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.*

*The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,
a moving forward into the world
with the Intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition, a confession of surprise,
a grateful acknowledgment
that in the midst of a broken world
unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.*

*There is an embrace of kindness that encompasses all life,
even yours.*

*And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil
there moves a holy disturbance,
a benevolent rage, a revolutionary love,
protesting, urging, insisting that which is sacred will not be defiled.*

*Those who bless the world live their life as a gesture of thanks
for this beauty and this rage.*

*The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude
to search for the sources of power and grace;
native wisdom, healing, and liberation.*

*More, the choice will draw you into community,
the endeavor shared,
the heritage passed on,
the companionship of struggle,
the importance of keeping faith,
the life of ritual and praise,
the comfort of human friendship,
the company of earth*

the chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.

Together—that is another possibility waiting.