

Good Works

by **Kirk Boys**

The room is sharp with mildew, tomato sauce, melted cheese, days-old urine, and sweat. It is an all too human smell, not disguised by deodorant spray or scented soap, but one of grit with hard notes of melancholy. My wife and I have arrived here after years of conversation about doing good works. Here where our talking about wanting to do something good for someone else finally takes form.

The “here” is a church hall filled with people most of us only glimpse in the shadows of an alley, huddled under a blue tarp in a makeshift campsite, or sitting under a freeway bridge. Here at St. James Community Hall, well over a hundred homeless people stare at us. They are like ghosts, sitting on folding chairs that line the walls, their looks of distress or anger or resignation haunts me. They are intimidating. They dare us not to feel something. We have only walked through the front door, yet we are stopped, held hostage by those eyes. I do my best to disappear.

The door we have entered is dwarfed by St. James’ twin spires, which reach up into a cold, endless, gray Seattle sky. The bells within those spires peal across a city whose soul is being put to the test by a fast-growing homeless population. The city appears both disgusted and seemingly helpless to deal with the problem. More and more people show up on the city’s streets and there is no escaping their impact.

“Why don’t they just get a job at McDonald’s?” my friend tells me after a trip into the city from his manicured, suburban home. He sees no reason they can’t find work, but he makes his judgement from afar. He is not here. He has no idea, has not been held hostage by those eyes.

It is obvious to me standing within the reach of their eyes, there are no simple answers to their swelling numbers. Not money or rehab or housing or good intentions can, alone, solve this plague of desperation that crushes the human spirit. I wonder what these men and women think seeing us with our clean clothes and our haircuts? Do

they hate us? Do they hate people who have nice homes, safe places to sleep, food, cars while they have only what they can carry in a pack or bag or push up the sidewalk in a shopping cart? Do they hate us or only wish to be us?

Here at the cathedral hall they receive a small red ticket like you or I might use for a spin on the Merry-go-round or the chance to win a cake at a bake sale. This is not the County Fair. The ticket gets them a hot meal and shelter for a couple hours.

The hall has a low hum of activity as people shuffle in. There is the occasional scrape of a folding chair on the tile floor or the sharp clang of metal on metal punctuated by random shouts or an angry rant. A napkin and fork make a place setting on long tables for eight. There will be nearly 200 here tonight when all is said and done.

A tall, bearded man with glasses stands at the entrance handing out the tickets to anyone who walks in the door. He hands us a ticket. "We're here to volunteer as companions," I tell him. He points a crooked finger toward the kitchen. It is day one of our attempt at good work, and we have little idea what we are supposed to do beyond making conversation with those congregated, to make them, for a couple hours at least, feel as though someone cares. Or so we were told.

We are overwhelmed by the crush of bodies, the sheer physicality of their hardship and need. The same people I would have previously gone to great lengths to avoid on a city sidewalk I am now face to face with. It would be a lie to say that I am not frightened.

The kitchen at St. James is separated by walls and metal doors and it is a beehive of activity. Ten volunteers maneuver in the cramped space preparing the evening meal. It is hard work in the kitchen, but it is also a refuge, walled off from the harsh reality of what exists just outside. In the kitchen you can escape the vacant looks. In the kitchen you can exhaust yourself with food prep and cleanup. In the kitchen you are not surrounded by the smell of down-and-out of broken lives.

The kitchen is not our mission.

We are tasked, if only for a couple of hours, to build a bridge between their reality and ours: to witness their suffering, to acknowledge their humanity, to let them know, if only with a glance or a smile, that they are seen, that they are heard. We can't save

anyone, but we can acknowledge them. Such bearing witness sounded noble and good from the safety of our home or in a sermon, but now, faced with them, we want instead to stay safe in the kitchen away from that responsibility. There is just the two of us for two hundred. It is impossible to know where to start. I want to take my wife's hand and walk back out the door, away from this. No one would think worse of us. No one we know cares if we do this little thing. We have nothing to prove, yet there is something inside that pushes me forward.

We put on blue serving aprons which will designate us as "companions". We walk back out into the hall, like tentative swimmers heading away from shore for the other side. Uncertainty wraps itself around me as tightly as the smell of tonight's spaghetti casserole meal. I put on a smile, stroll between tables into all those watchful eyes.

My wife plants her hands firmly in her apron pockets and does the same. I fear for all five-two of her. Her courage inspires me. Most of the diners are men There are so many. I try hard not to see them as menacing and dangerous. What if one of them were to lose it, to lash out in frustration or psychosis? If she were to be hurt, I would never forgive myself. Anxiety steals up my spine. There are patients just released from the psyche ward at Harborview regional trauma center two blocks away dealing with serious mental health disease. There are substance abusers and petty drug dealers. Fortune has not smiled on those gathered in St. James Cathedral hall for dinner. There are veterans left to fight their own battles or people who've hit tough times or had a run of bad luck a lost job a divorce. They are all colors, races, and ages and have nowhere to come but here. They all have red tickets in their hand.

"Talk to them, help them get their meal if they need help, talk if they want to talk. Let them know we see them as people, individuals blessed by God's grace," we were told by our volunteer supervisor, but it is hard to imagine God here. There is no cloud of incense, no gold crosses, no choir singing hymns, no sense of well-being or of grace, just survival. We must find the commonality we share.

We are frightened glad-handers hoping to feel better about ourselves by braving the misery that surrounds us and with which we must come to terms.

"Trouble, a fight or someone gets agitated, don't get involved, call 911," the kitchen supervisor hurriedly walks out to tell me.

My wife has set off on her own, drawn to a tiny woman with white hair and lipstick smeared on her cheeks in a small circle. She appears to be well past seventy. She has a kind face. How can she be here? She should be baking cookies, playing cards with her friends, or surrounded by grandchildren. A tall young woman with “PINK” written across her butt brushes past and moves quickly to take a seat in a darkened stairwell. Her long, red hair pushed over her shoulder, she seems lost to the world. I watch as more people continue to pour through the door, take their ticket, and line up along the wall.

The hum of humanity has escalated to a low roar, as more flood through the front door with dirty packs, sleeping bags, and plastic bags stuffed full. A thin black man smiles at me from a chair and I decide to venture over. “The food smells good,” I say. I can see, “How’s it going” doesn’t cut it here. I scramble to bring on conversation, but I am inadequate. I tell him my name, and he tells me his, James. James has a warm smile; he’s painfully thin and has kind eyes. He reaches out a hand to shake.

“That’s Gomez,” James tells me pointing at a stout Hispanic man across the table. I reach to shake Gomez’s hand. He offers a weak smile.

“Gomez carries pieces of metal and rocks stuffed in the lining of his coat. From where he comes they believe it gives them energy. I heard the cops talking about him, how they wouldn’t let him into his court hearing. He set off the metal detector.” James laughs, “It’s a trip, man. Right, Gomez? A trip?” Gomez smiles, but it is unclear if he understands.

It feels good to talk with James. He lightens the mood, gets me out of my head. I feel the rush of connection to James and Gomez too. I realize I am up to the task, that they aren’t so different than me, only our circumstance.

Behind me the metal serving doors rattle open revealing servers, eight of them, like actors at the end of a play, they hold serving spoons and tongs. A curtain of steam rises from the spaghetti casserole. There is a slow march to the food, tables fill, and the high-pitch ting of forks on plates fills the room.

A tall, painfully thin man with scruffy black hair sits near the front reading a book, in no hurry to get his dinner.

“What are you reading?” I ask him.

He looks up slowly and turns the book's cover toward me, a rat-eared copy of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*.

"Wow," I say. I am shocked to find a Vonnegut reader. "He's my favorite author," I tell him.

"He reads just as delightfully when I am stoned as he does when I am not," he says.

"I feel the same way," I tell him and we laugh.

A man using a walker and wearing an Army Ranger hat asks if I will get him his meal and hands me his red ticket.

"Where are you from?"

"It would take too long to tell you," he says. "Can you just get my food?"

I get in line with the others. My anxiety is beginning to ease. I scan the room for my wife, who is still talking to the lady with lipstick on her cheeks. I see my wife grin. I shuffle through the line and take in the smell of coffee, the feeling of gratitude, the spirit of humanity. It hits me like a sledge hammer how lightly I regard the conveniences those here aspire to and I take completely for granted daily.

We are all at St. James for a reason. I can't say what the reason is for anyone else, but for me it is to find something in me that I have secretly feared I did not possess, a courage, a willingness to get involved. I want to believe that if there is a God, that I will see him in the face of a stranger. I want to believe there is an innate good in everyone, but more selfishly I am actually looking for it in myself.

"I like those glasses," a man covered in tattoos tells me as he passes. "Makes you look smart."

"Hey, thanks," I say. I get the man with the Ranger hat his casserole and a slice of pie and deliver it to him. "Thank you for your service." I tell him as I carefully slide the tray in front of him. "There might be enough for seconds."

"This is plenty," he says, waving me off.

Two hours passes, two hundred faces, give or take, have passed by and the hall is nearly empty. I'm not sure what we accomplished. Witnessing the hopelessness of life on the street, serving trays of food, small talk and smiles.

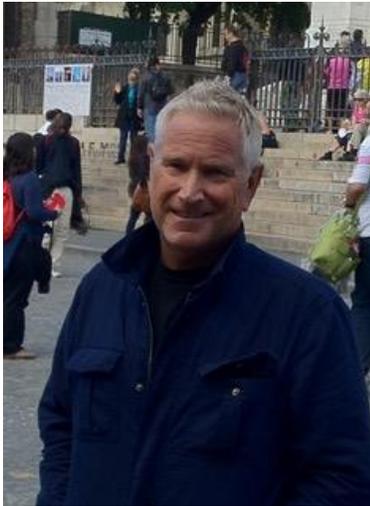
It's enough for our first time.

I think about the whole of it on our silent drive home. Nerves have been replaced by exhaustion. I imagine it will get easier. We are not going to solve any problems, but maybe we offered a human touch if only for a moment.

Maybe a flicker of good intention starts a small fire? I feel a sense of pride I didn't feel the day before. I saw the depth of my wife's heart, how caring she is, how she stood toe to toe with fear.

We got more than we gave.

We'll be back to Cathedral Hall in a week, wiser for our effort, fears tamped down, hearts in hand.



Kirk Boys' personal essays have been featured in *The Chaos Journal*, *Gravel Magazine* and *bioStories*. His fiction has been featured in *Per Contra*, *Thrice Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *Storie-all write #57/58* and *Storie.it/English Department* and in *High Shelf Press*. He has a Certificate in Literary Fiction from the University of Washington. He was a finalist in *Glimmer Train's* New Writers contest. He has two novels for which he is currently seeking representation. He lives outside Seattle with his wife and a tiny dog.