

G.O.D.—GIFTS OF DESPERATION

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to the Unitarian Society of Menomonie, Wisconsin,
by Bob Bledsoe, CLLT.
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I want to tell you about the town of Argusville, North Dakota, this morning. It's a railroad town just north of Fargo, and like many Midwestern railroad towns, it's dead. Now, I've been in some dead towns in my time—places where people ride around the streets on four-wheelers and the bars open at six a.m. and all the children grow up with intimate knowledge of the effects of sticks on the inner workings of dead animals by the side of the road. But Argusville is a particularly dead town.

Normally, my practice on visiting a town is to park my car and walk around the streets, and I would have done that if it hadn't been so cold. So I drove around the town instead. It didn't take very long. Argusville is a collection of three-by-three streets nestled between Interstate 29 and the main county road. None of the streets are paved.

Aside from the three streets that meet the main road, not one street has a stop sign. All the streets empty onto one another with no warning, and it must be assumed that one driver never meets another at their intersections.

When I visited it had snowed the previous week and the streets were still unplowed. Their dirt was tramped down by truck tires and there were knee-high ruts in each street. There was a civic center—an elongated pole shed—and two churches. One, the catholic church, I'd expected to find, but the other was a surprise. It would have been too much to ask to find a Unitarian Universalist church there, and of course there wasn't, but the other church was a United Church of Christ. That was a surprise.

The city—and it was officially designated a city—was boundried on one side by the railroad, which still ran although the local mill was boarded up and the windows smashed and the grounds now served as a place for dumping dead vehicles. On the other side, the side of the interstate, the entire town was fenced, as if something was being fenced out. Or locked in.

There was only one business still in operation in that town, and that of course was the Happy Trails bar. I stopped in after I'd driven around every street and taken photos and notes. The bartender, a big, burly, mop-topped guy with a wheedling little-girl voice sat at a table with six other guys. They were all farmers in their 60s who shared the table at 2 o'clock on this mid-week afternoon, smoking and playing pull tabs and watching a Lifetime TV movie. Their conversation turned to the days when you could get yourself a "good-eatin' steak" for a dollar five.

The best I could hope for was a Grain Belt. I am a beer snob. When I switched my allegiance from tequila and pot to beer and coffee, I told myself I could only drink the

best of each since otherwise I would overindulge. This has served well to keep me relatively sober and decaffeinated. I tried to engage the bartender in conversation a bit, and for his part he tried a little too. We talked about the beer sign collection he and his wife had developed. There were old Hamm's and Milwaukee's Best and Schlitz signs and dioramas and lights and little movable tableaux on the walls and on shelves all over the place. That conversation lasted about two minutes. The bartender, whose name was Wally, did his best, but we were both painfully aware I didn't belong there. He knew I wasn't staying any longer than I had to and asked if I was heading north. Actually, I said, I'm heading back into Fargo. He nodded, and then went back to the farmers and their conversation. For the farmers' part, they didn't even pretend I had a place there. Aside from a quick glance when the door opened, they steadfastly ignored me, smoking and yanking pull-tabs and glaring out the window at the lousy weather and the damn dead town. I had only one beer, very unlike me, and took my leave. My Grain Belt cost \$2.50. I tipped the guy a buck.

I was in Argusville because of Louise Erdrich. Several of her novels are based in the fictional town of Argus, North Dakota, for which Argusville is the model. I'm teaching *Tales of Burning Love* right now, the fourth novel in Erdrich's tetraology involving the citified American Indians off the North Dakota reservation. One of the advantages, as many of you know, to being a teacher is spring break and the opportunity to do first-hand research, so I combined the two this week by driving up to Fargo for a couple days. I visited Argusville, stayed in a Super 8 Motel in West Fargo next door to Borderland Bar and Grill, model for the B and B Bingo Palace in her novels, and took lots of photographs.

Argusville is a dead town and the characters in Erdrich's novels lead dead lives. Or at least it seems so to those of us on the outside. As my class, a six-nurse unit, is learning, the desperate characters that populate Argus, North Dakota, have lives of tremendous inner vitality that belies the smudge their lives on the outside appear to be. In the same way, the Happy Trails Bar, a mix of plaster and exposed plank on the outside, was full of color and movement and light on the inside. There is a liveliness that is born of desperation that we get to see on occasion, if we are fortunate.

In her book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott writes of how the letters "G," "O," and "D" must be an acronym for "gifts of desperation." It's what writers call a throwaway line, what we put into a piece to add life to it. It's the same thing I did earlier in this sermon when I threw in the line about finding the UCC church in Argusville. It's an observation that adds an extra, complex dimension to the story.

Here's the line from Lamott: "In my experience, there is a lot to be said for desperation—not exactly a bright side, but something expressed in words for which 'god' could be considered an acronym: gifts of desperation."

That's it. Very little. A one-sentence throwaway, a twenty-one word phrase that, had it been excised from the final draft, would have altered the original meaning not a whit.

But it stuck in my head, that phrase, and I wrote it down in my little notebook in which I write such things. It has remained in the back of my mind for about a year now, during which time I've expanded on the notion and tried to work out what it might mean. Seems like an awful lot to give a simple little throwaway line, doesn't it, until you think about how I'm an English teacher, trained in exegesis, which means to take a single word

and expand on it until you've got the full-flavored meaning behind it and suggested by it. Leave it to a teacher to complicate the matter. Normally this is done either with the Bible or with some canonical work, like Shakespeare. But we've seen this practice put in use lately when trying to decipher the infamous sixteen words of George Bush's State of the Union Address—hardly up there with the Gettysburg Address—and I figure if Martin Buber can get a book out of the phrase "I and Thou"—three words—I have a certain freedom to find meaning in twenty-one words.

Lamott uses this phrase in the midst of telling her congregation a story about Rahab, one of many important prostitutes of the Bible. The others include the unnamed mother of the hero Jephthah, the unnamed mothers who ask for Solomon's help (do you see a pattern developing here?), and, arguably, Lillith, Tamar, and Mary Magdelene. Then of course there are the temple prostitutes who pop up everywhere. Anyhow, in the Book of Joshua Chapter 2, we're told the story of how the Israelites came out of the wilderness following Moses' anointed, Joshua. He has brought his army to the River Jordan across from their intended target, the city Jericho. Two spies are sent to Jericho to scope the opposition out.

They don't want to attract attention, so the obvious thing to do is to visit a local prostitute Rahab, where likely most males of town will be, and they'll be both likely to overhear things and to be, in effect, invisible, since what happens in Jericho stays in Jericho.

But it so happens that the local spies are also visiting Rahab—this was one very, very busy woman—and they suss out Joshua's spies and return to their king with word

that the opposition has people staying with Rahab. A phalanx of palace soldiers are sent to demand her to turn them over.

But Rahab—and do you notice that, coincidentally with what comes next, there is only a single letter separating her name from being “Rehab”—has heard that the Israelites are under the protection of a just and loving god. There’s the parting of the Red Sea, the smiting of their enemies, the wandering in the desert, Moses, the Commandments, and she’s heard about all that. Rahab is a prostitute, not the secure position to be in in the first place, and there’s a war coming on, and “Rahab feels something in her heart that tells her to align herself with the people of god.” When the soldiers arrive, she lies, telling them that the spies had already left before the city’s gate was shut the previous evening. In reality, she had hidden them among stalks of flax on her roof.

Now, Lamott’s question: “Why did she hide them, since, by the calculus of the world, that act endangered her?” Lamott’s answer: “She did it because she was desperate and so she listened to her heart.” Fair enough.

Rahab points out to Joshua’s spies that she’s just saved their bacon and she wants recompense from them. She wants a promise that she and all her household, her father and mother and sisters and brothers and all her servants, will be saved in the coming battle. They tell her she and all her family will be saved by a red cord she’s given to let hang in her window. Rahab’s apartment is along the city’s walls, with a window looking out of the city, and the spies are let down by a rope, they make good their escape, Joshua’s army fights the battle, the walls come tumbling down, and Rahab and all her family are saved.

Reflect for a moment on the poem I read for you a while ago, “Filling Station.” The station is filthy, no getting around it. The father and his sons—we aren’t told how many, but they seem to go at their work joyfully—are filthy, the dog is filthy, everything is covered in grease and grime and the residue from hard, sweaty work. And yet. There are healthy plants. There is a taboret which is a small stool for displaying objects. There is the hand-sewn doily. I don’t think I’ve seen a doily in at least twenty years. Someone cares about this place, enough to put a little life and love into it. Somebody unseen. Somebody who, in Bishop’s words, “loves us all.”

Is that god?

Last week as I was returning from Fargo and listening to the AM religious stations, I heard a preacher say, in her best sanctimonious voice, “God’s love is precious.” And I thought, you dumb—person. To reduce what should be holy and full of life in all its dirt and filth and complexity to something “precious,” something you’d put in a box and tie up with ribbon to give your kid on his birthday. Rahab was doing nothing “precious” when she betrayed her city—she was acting out of desperation. The people who cling to Argusville, North Dakota, are not doing anything “precious” by remaining there—because I will tell you as I drove all over those streets I noticed that not a single house was abandoned; somebody lived in every building, and for every mattress or defunct washing machine on a front porch there was another with Christmas lights or a landscaped plot or a vegetable garden that touched on the street—they aren’t acting out some quaint, rural, theme park way of life. They are desperately clinging to the dying town they love, one they can’t afford to leave, maybe financially, maybe emotionally.

If the word god is to mean something—and I'm not talking here about some higher developed being or something ineffable, an old man with a beard and a robe standing around watching everybody, but about the word and the concept "god"—then it seems to me that "gifts of desperation" get it about right. If the Buddhists are right, if the Jainists are right, if the Hindus and the Vaishnavas are right, if the Mormons are right, if the Catholics are right, the Taoists, the Transcendentalists—that within each of us is a spark of the divine, then this is our entrance to it. We reach for it, not when we're comfortable, not when we're sitting in a hot tub with a cold beer, but when we are desperate.

It's in desperation that our best features come out. That may seem counterintuitive—think of the times we've been close to the breaking point and all we can do is bitch and moan and feel sorry for ourselves and snap at everyone and everything. But it isn't in us that those best features arise, but in the people around us. In the community. Think of the Boxer Day Tsunami, think of Hurricane Katrina, think of the tornadoes that ripped through the south just last week. Now think of those devastating images on our televisions and think of how many volunteers we saw scrambling around in the wreckage, the people handing out hot coffee and blankets, the neighbors taking victims in. These people are the gifts of desperation. These people are god.

Rabbis say god created people so he could talk to himself. The Quakers posit the divine presence is the community itself. Computer geeks, always on the cusp of things, have suggested that on the day every person in the world is logged onto the internet, the internet will become god.

What are the gifts of desperation? Lamott says, “The main gift is a willingness to give up the conviction that you are right, and that god thinks so too, and hates the people who are driving you crazy.” That’s a very hard thing to do. It means to act out of compassion and justice rather than out of a sense that yours is the right position. One of the commandments I try to keep is that in all my relationships I would rather be happy than be right. This is especially hard when I am trying not to remind my wife for the fourth time in a week that we agreed dirty clothing belonged in the hamper and not on top of the hamper. I like to think she is also trying to remember it when she reminds me for the fifth time this week that we agreed the cat box would be emptied three days ago. I don’t manage it all the time, of course, but it is something I try for.

All that’s asked of us by each other is the attempt. Something unseen lines up the Esso cans just right, tells us to lay out garden plots and display our collection of beer signs in Argusville, to take a stand in the conflict and bargain for the future of the ones we love. To congregate here every week. That something unseen *is* god. *We* are one another’s gifts of desperation.