

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Enlightenment to Follow

Dessert is my love language. I don't eat it; I make it. But for Thanksgiving this year, I had the idea to augment my baking by ordering pies — pumpkin and pecan — from Marion's Pie Shop in Chatham, because Marion's is famous: I think Oprah liked it.

I arrived for the pick-up at around 2:00 on Wednesday and found myself with plenty of time to count the people ahead of me: I was 58th in line. No complaining — it was cool and clear, and there was lots of good humor in the air; the guy behind me said when we got inside, we should all ask for an additional pie.

I was in and out in under an hour, arrived home with my fabulous loot, feeling exultant about the Thanksgiving dessert table ... and realized my wallet was missing. You know that sinking feeling when you go to where your wallet is — you're sure it's there — only it isn't?

I dumped out my bag, checked my pockets, checked the seats and under the seats in the van, and then all bets were off; it could be anywhere. But really, where did it go? The only place it might be was the other place I'd gone — the very last place I could imagine someone might actually turn in a wallet: Job Lot. I called and, sure enough, it wasn't there.

For the next three days, I looked. I looked and looked. No one was using my credit cards, but, obviously, I had to face it: My wallet was gone. The idea of making the time to replace the contents was daunting.

As we left the Cape, I asked Kem if we could detour through Chatham and retrace my steps, just in case it had fallen out of the car. We arrived at Job Lot in pitch darkness, hopped out into the pouring rain, and scanned the ground around where I'd parked. I know; it was ridiculous. My wife is a saint.

And then, only because I had to finish what we'd started, I went inside.

I find a guy named Max — the only staff member in sight. Max is probably my age; looking at him, it's not hard to imagine how he ended up working the late shift at Job Lot. Max says, "I really don't think anyone's turned in a wallet; in fact, I don't think anyone's ever turned in a wallet here. But let's ask Jess in Customer Service. She's up in the office." So he pages Jess, and asks. There's a long pause. And she says, "What's the name?" I thought that was funny, because it's not like she was going through a big pile of wallets that had been turned in, looking for the right one. I felt ridiculous wasting their time. My wallet had vanished.

I see Jess coming down from the office. Like Max, she looks like she's had a hard life. Neither of them has a lot of teeth. For a moment, I wish I were a dentist, and I feel very sorry to have bothered them. When she gets to where we're standing, she reaches out her hand. In her hand is my wallet.

I'm incredulous, and so grateful. I open it; nothing has been removed. Spontaneously, I take out all the cash, which is not really that much — under \$50 "You get the reward!," I say, and put it on the counter. There's a beat of incredulous silence, and then they both say, together, "You don't have to do that!" Max shakes his head and Jess starts to cry, which is killing me. She explains that both her kids have high fevers — it's probably the flu — and she has to miss work tomorrow morning to take them to the doctor, and her boss is giving her a hard time. So she really appreciates this moment.

I really, really wish I had more cash.

I leave them to go off to the back of the store to see if they've gotten huge bags of birdseed back in stock, and return to the register, where Max and Jess are standing there, talking. Max pulls himself up, licks his lips, and makes a little speech. "Kim, we really appreciate the reward, and we want you to know we've decided we're going to donate it to Three Square Meals — you know, Job Lot's charity for people who don't know where their next meal is coming from.

"So thank you."

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I feel at once elated and as if I might just start crying with no end in sight. And we all hug. Max says, "This is a great night."

My heart.

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I'm thinking about the North Indian guru Neem Karoli Baba. When his most famous student, Ram Dass, asked, "How can we know G*d?," Maharaj-ji answered, "Feed everyone."

Ram Dass pressed, "How can we become enlightened?" Maharaj-ji replied, "Serve everyone."

Feed and serve: Enlightenment to follow.

I know we all expect to hear this kind of thing in church, but the truth is, we should be hearing it — and repeating it — everywhere; I dove into the science on the benefits of helping and giving and the conclusions are incontrovertible. Here are just three of the numbers: Those who serve have 17 percent lower inflammation levels; 29 percent lower risk of high blood pressure; and spend 38 percent fewer nights in the hospital. The "helpers' high" is real — a rush of euphoria, followed by a period of improved emotional wellbeing. Serving calms the amygdala and reduces stress. Your immune system grows stronger. In fact, the case is clearly made that kindness is more important for our health and longevity than diet and exercise.¹

At the very least, it can't hurt to experiment with this and see how we feel.

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Martha Ruiz-Perilla is an artist based in New York City who grew up in Colombia. She was 21 years old and about to graduate from dental school when she was assigned to do her residency at a hospital in a small town called Neiva.

This was the Colombia of 1992: unmitigated government corruption; the drug lord and narco-terrorist Pablo Escobar; and the Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group FARC. It was a very dangerous place.

Martha spoke with her father. He asked her if she was scared. Yes, she was scared. And he said, "*M'ija*, you know I live here in Granada, and you know how violent and dangerous it is. You know why I stay? Because if the good people don't stay to serve, the bad people take over. So you go where you're being called to serve, and you help those who need you the most. Just be smart, be careful, and call your mother."

¹ Please see Marta Zaraska, *Growing Young*

With that, Martha went to work in Neiva's overcrowded, underfunded hospital. During the week, she served in the clinic, practicing general dentistry. At night and on the weekends, she volunteered to be on call at the emergency room. She slept at the hospital with the window open; the temperature hovered at 105 degrees, and there was no AC.

One night, in complete darkness, she was shaken from a deep sleep by a man holding a rifle. He ordered her to get dressed, and hurry. In the shadows, she could see another man, also armed, guarding her door. Martha thought of the stories she'd heard of doctors and nurses being taken by the guerrillas, never to return. She asked her captor if she could leave a note for her parents. "No."

He rushed her out of the room and down the emergency stairwell, which was lined with men dressed like him, wearing rags that covered their heads and faces and left only their eyes visible. Martha averted her eyes. She didn't want then to think that she would be able to identify them. The men addressed her captor as Commander. This was not the army, though; these were rebels. They had seized the hospital.

When they got to her office, she found they had broken the doorknob. Inside, in the dark, two more armed men were waiting. The commander told her she had three hours to help him or she would have to come with them. Martha had never been so frightened.

Then someone turned on a flashlight, revealing a young teenage boy wearing a ripped teeshirt, dirty pants, and muddy boots. His face was completely deformed by an abscessed tooth.

The Commander freed her, but when she went to touch the boy's face, she felt the rifle pressed against her spine. "Can you help us or not?"

Martha says, "I had an idea what needed to be done, but I had never done anything like it. I'd seen it in books and in enormous slide projections in our oral pathology classes. I knew that if I made a mistake in my incision and touched the wrong nerve, half the boy's face would be paralyzed forever. But I knew that if the infection continued to progress, he would die of sepsis.

"I said, 'Yes, I can.'"

“They brought up the lights and I readied my instruments. The boy was burning with fever. I didn’t want to ask his name, so I called him *pelao*, which means “kid.” I grabbed a towel, wet it with cold water, and gently rubbed his forehead.

“I explained what I was going to do. I told him it was going to hurt — a lot — but then it would feel much, much better. His eyes filled with tears. He was terrified, and so was I.

“And so I began. It was terrible. I reached down for his hand and grabbed it. I told him he was a brave boy. He closed his eyes and nodded. We were both sweating profusely.

“I continued. He cried out, ‘*¡Ay, no más, Papá!*,’ and I realized whose child I was cradling in my arms. I felt the commander’s rifle on my back.

“I knew for sure that if this infection got worse, or if the boy died, his father would come back for me.

“As I pulled the offending molar, the barrel of the rifle shook on my back. The commander was feeling his son’s pain. And then finally, finally, I began to see relief on the boy’s face.

“It was close to dawn. I grabbed free samples of antibiotics and some medical supplies, explaining to the commander how to keep the wounds clean. In two weeks, his son should be okay.

“‘I hope so, *Doctora*,’ the commander said, ‘because I don’t want to come back, and you don’t want to come where we’re going.’

“He ordered his son off the chair, and the men and boy circled me. I felt the rifle pressure ease off my back. I closed my eyes and prayed he wouldn’t shoot me right there. He told me that if I didn’t speak or move for half an hour, I would be all right.

“I nodded, and the door closed behind them.

“I didn’t want to answer any questions about the incident. I didn’t even tell my parents. For the next two weeks, I was cold. I couldn’t eat anything. I couldn’t sleep. All through the night, I went over and over the procedure in my mind. Had

I done everything right? Had I forgotten anything? I stared at the bedroom door, afraid of another break-in. I was excused from the ER. Working in my clinic, I was terrified the commander would walk in.

“And then one day, a call came in from the front desk: A man had stopped by; there was a package for me. I froze. I went. There was a sack of oranges with a live chicken tied to it. And there was a note. ‘The *pelao* is okay, *Doctora* — no need to come back. *Gracias*.’

“That night, I burned the note. I burned it because it reminded me of my fear — that night, and for the last two weeks. I burned it because it connected me to those bad people.

“But then I thought, What bad people? In Colombia in the nineties, who knew who the bad guys were, and who were the good guys? We were all just trying to get by in this battle of warlords that no one knew how to stop. The people who had come in search of my help were just people — a son with a terrible toothache, a father capable of kidnapping and killing as well as love and gratitude in the midst of so much violence.

“The commander had risked his life for his son, as my own father would have risked his life for me. I thought about my father’s words, about serving those who need it most. Bad people, good people — if you’re gifted with the opportunity to help another human being, you do it; you help not a party or a faction or a cause, but human beings.

“That night, I returned to the ER to serve the people.²

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Beloved spiritual companions,

“How can we know G*d?”

“Feed everyone.”

“How can we become enlightened?”

“Serve everyone.”

Feed and serve: Enlightenment to follow.

Let every heart prepare!

² Martha Ruiz-Perilla, “Opposing Forces,” as told at *The Moth* at The Great Hall of The Cooper Union in New York City on 11/3/16. Please see *Occasional Magic*, ed. Gathering Burns, pp. 17-24