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Do you want fries with that?

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"Do you want fries with that?"

Sometime while I was growing up that upsell tagline from the world of fast food became emblematic of all that a failed education could be. "Do you want fries with that?" was the thing that college English majors and high school dropouts could expect, a life of low-level, thankless servitude as a result of bad choices made before we could have expected ourselves to understand what we were doing. "Do you want fries with that?" hung over our heads, greasy and cold and thick, just waiting for a chance to ooze down and ruin our lives. "Do you want fries with that?" was not a phrase we ever wanted, by definition; like smallpox and the cooties it was contagious and insidious and disgusting; it tasted moldy and oily on our tongues--or so we were told. We never said it, ever, just in case it really was catching.

What a horrible class lesson. What a ridiculous set of ideas. What on earth were my parents thinking? They weren't alone, of course--in my upper-middle-class New York suburban hometown this was a story that many of us heard often. Our parents and teachers and guidance counselors told us fairy tales of what we could be if we were good kids and what would happen if we disobeyed, and the McDonald's' register became the modern equivalent of the dark forest, populated by ogres in polyester uniforms who would enslave us forever.

No one ever told me about McDonald's as a success story of American enterprise and inventiveness, or explained how franchises are a strong business model, or talked about pulling oneself up by the bootstraps by starting as cleanup crew and working up to manager and then regional supervisor. In the fantasy world painted by my parents, no one ever succeeded at fast food. It didn't help that fast food was known to be unhealthy food, food that was bad for our bodies and our lives; it didn't help that we were the first wave of the sedentary and unhealthy generation, hemmed in by overscheduling and the threat of child molesters, not to play in the

street or out of sight lest we be whisked away by kidnapers with a strange vendetta against rebellious ten year olds. Further, McDonald's and its competitors represented pleasure, unthinking pleasure, pleasure with no justification at all. It became a kind of underground possibility, a treat or a dirty secret between a grandparent and a child. No one was supposed to enjoy something just for the pleasure of it.

So here we have cultural asceticism running up against excess on the one side...and on the other side, encouragement to excess, to lots of money and lots of power if only we will stay away from seedy and seductive fast food service. To a 10 year old whose parents work in suits the uniforms are kind of cool; the idea of a job at all is thrilling; working represents freedom and adulthood, not a lifetime of drudgery. Our guardians were only trying to do what was best for us, but in the process they trained us to disrespect, misunderstand, and fear of an entire set of possibilities.

They closed the doors because they were so sure we didn't want what was behind them and they were afraid we'd wander in, get lost, and never come out.

Some of what they said was true: it is easier to have choices about work when you have more education--to a point. It is easier to have choices about life when you have more money. And working behind the counter in fast food--if you never get yourself promoted--doesn't usually pay enough to do more than just make it, if that. But that doesn't make the work less dignified. In a culture that claims to idolize hard work while spending millions on labor-saving devices, honest work for honest pay has basic value. Beyond that, service is a value that stretches across generational and cultural lines--when we give of ourselves to meet the needs of others that helps to knit together the fabric of our lives. What we do in church is not all that different from what happens at Burger King or at Hannaford when someone is buying food. There are people who have a need and people who help to meet that need. At some major big-box stores they now have self-checkout stations, where customers can serve themselves, but people still stand in line to have the help of someone trained and skilled. It's very much like hiring a DLRE or calling a minister or going to a doctor or consulting a lawyer who has training and skills.

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People sometimes say that we have far more specialization than we used to, that everyone used to be a generalist but there's too much information out there now. I would offer that the specializations have just shifted. Who here has a lady's maid? How about a footman? A haberdasher? Anyone?

Most of these are dying arts, if they are not completely dead. Fortunately for some, butling, according to the schools that teach it, is no longer a dying art. Butlers are alive and well. Time was when every middle-class household had at least one servant, and many had more, but when the industrial revolution produced factories, service was no longer the best of a limited set of choices. In manufacturing the hours were fixed and there was a good deal of freedom in controlling one's own wardrobe and housing. For a while it looked like servants were becoming a relic of the past. But then, slowly, slowly, those people who could afford it started reinventing the concept of "servant". Working under modern standards for wages, housing, insurance, time off, and independence, the new butler is a very respectable executive position. He--or she--may be the only employee in a household, or may manage a large household staff. They may be in charge of multiple properties, jets, yachts, and other accessories of life. They are almost certainly in charge of the wine cellar as well as household event planning, purchasing, budgeting, and probably scheduling. A well-trained butler also knows about security and bodyguarding, spit polishing shoes, answering doors, cleaning jewelry and laundry stain removing. She or he is a specialist in the fine art of running a large estate and looking good. In exchange a butler can expect the respect of their employer, very nice room and board on-site, a robust benefits package including at least one day off a week and several weeks of vacation, and a salary between \$50,000 and \$150,000 annually.

(<http://www.butlersguild.com/index.php?subject=43&nm=General%20Information>, accessed Sept 13, 2008)

We could take some lessons. We all have people serving us, every day, and we are all engaged in serving. There is nothing--nothing--wrong with service, and one of the ways our society usually shows appreciation is through good compensation. Teachers, social workers, health care workers, cashiers, sales staff, burger flippers, clearly we've got a long way to go, but listen up: *thank you*. We're all in this together. This work is valuable. This work has

integrity. Whatever class-based nonsense has been spread around for the last 35 years, we've got to get rid of it together, and then we might be able to address the compensation issues.

At root it's about respect: we are all trained not to respect someone. It's ridiculous, but it's the way the culture works. If your parents don't teach it then your peers do, or the media does, and we fight it but it gets in there somehow anyway and we have to work to change the pattern.

Because as long as we are divided by class, we stand to lose too much to be motivated to dismantle the class system. Whether you're poor or rich, whether you're blue or white or pink collar, part of your identity comes from the class community with which you identify. It tells you how you speak, what you wear, how you celebrate holidays, where you shop, and how you think about and treat everyone else. It is a powerfully magnetic home base. Until we are mindful and graceful about the money and power differentials among us, we will be more comfortable in our old contexts and mindsets than we will be outside of them.

In her book, Nickeled and Dimed, journalist Barbara Erinreich (Erinreich, Barbara. Nickled and Dimed. May 1st 2002 (first published 2001) by Owl Books (Henry Holt)) took three months, one in each of three American cities, to see if she could get an "unskilled" job--one that used none of her higher education or work experience--and make ends meet on the proceeds. Her investigation had her waitressing in Florida, cleaning homes in Maine, and working for Wal-Mart in Minnesota. And her conclusion? No, she couldn't. My own experience was the same, working summers during college. The more of my skills I used, the better my chances of having money left--any money at all. After two holiday seasons in retail, which netted depressingly little, I discovered temp agencies and never looked back. The dignity afforded by the desk jobs was almost more important than the 20 to 50 percent pay raise I got by switching industries. At a temporary office job I could negotiate for my salary, I could earn more with more skills, I could sit down, I could go to the bathroom.

But most important, people trusted me. If I said something was wrong, my supervisor believed me and went about fixing it. If I left my desk to use the toilet, my employer took that as a natural consequence of having live employees. Unlike the retail establishments where I worked, there were no clear-plastic "break bags" to carry lunches in, designed to prevent us from smuggling

merchandise out with our tuna sandwiches. Who I was began to rise to importance, eventually pulling equal with what I could do, and with that change came treatment that honored the qualities for which I'd been chosen. I could type fast, I could answer phones, but I was analytical, creative, pleasant--and that was what made me desirable. The companies and executives for whom I worked treated me as valuable. It was good for my self-esteem. But it also correlated with my understanding of ethical behavior. For the most part, moving into the corporate world softened the daily sense of righteous indignation that came from being treated as a high-functioning robot. Thanks in part to the incessant McDonalds lessons of my childhood I thought it unlikely that this would become my permanent lot, but thanks to my Unitarian Universalist upbringing I was indignant that *anyone* was treated this way, that any employer would take the more than the time and attention the employee had intended to sell them. Service has a kind of embedded dignity which must be honored; perhaps nothing is more telling than ancient stories for that.

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Almost all old stories have at least one moral. Look at the collections from the Grimm brothers or the Blackfeet nation or the fairy tales of ancient Scotland or Scandinavia, and there are morals floating nearly on the surface, easily skimmed off and held in memory. It's the nature of oral tradition that if there's no point to telling a tale someone will put one in or the story dies out.

In a story I told last year about the origin of the Hindu goddess Kali, she has flown into a rage and cannot be stopped by anyone. The gods, including her consort, Shiva, are in awe and terror, watching her prepare to destroy the world. Finally in desperation Shiva lies down where she is sure to step on him, and when her foot touches his chest she realizes what she is doing and slowly calms down. Whenever I tell that story I explain that in India, far more than here, the ground and the floor are considered dirty and debased places. Only the lowest-ranking people in the room will sit on the floor; if a book touches the floor you pick it up and touch it to your forehead, as a sign of respect and remorse; when you greet an elder you touch their feet; and for millenia, men have outranked women and husbands have outranked wives. So for a wife to place her foot on her husband--or male consort's--chest is almost unthinkable. That it happens at all underscores how truly out of her mind she must have been, and how powerful Shiva's

sacrifice was, to lay down his dignity for the good of the world. It's a mind-blowing image that's repeated across the country in idols and paintings and temples, Shiva lying on the ground under Kali's upraised foot. On the one hand it is a subtle dig at the entrenched cultural patriarchy as it puts *something* above a man's need for respect. But it also honors Shiva for making that choice, for knowing that the world was more important than even his own honor, and (in some readings) taking responsibility for his partner's behavior. And why should he have that responsibility?

Well...she's *his*--in ways we don't usually like to consider. But clearly she's his partly because she chooses to be. It's complicated.

To me, the Western story most like this in terms of undercurrents and power choices is found in the Bible, chapter 13 in the Book of John, which I used for one of this morning's readings. The Book of John is the odd one out of the four gospels. It starts in a different place and seems to have an entirely different goal in mind from the others. The language is less concrete, and there's less correlation between it and the other three tellings of Jesus' life. As the scene opens we are somewhere around the Last Supper, either during the meal or after it, and Judas has already gotten the idea of going to the authorities, but has not gone yet. Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his outer robes, "girds himself with a towel" over his short under-robes, and begins washing the feet of his disciples.

Now as for the story of Kali, we need background. In the ancient Middle East, people usually wore sandals in the street, and both sandals and feet got really very dirty in a day's walking--not just dust, but dung and bodily fluids and rotten fruits. The streets were often a mess and the feet, consequently, could be really disgusting. When guests arrived at a house it was customary for the host to provide a servant or slave to wash the guests' feet, or, if none were available, water for the guests to wash their own feet. "Wives also did this for husbands, children for parents, and students for teachers." (Bible

Gateway <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/?action=getCommentaryText&cid=4&source=1&seq=i.50.13.2> accessed September 13, 2008) In other words, foot washing went up the social hierarchy, not down. Feet and earth were dirty and cleaning them was a sign of humility or the work of a slave. If the washer were a slave they would necessarily be a Gentile--that is, non-Jewish--slave and would ordinarily be clad in one short tunic. So as John

tells it, Jesus was engaging in a little guerrilla theater. While everyone else still sits at the table he stands up, dons the clothing of a slave, and begins a task that even a Jewish slave would not be expected to perform. If he had been concerned about clean feet he could have washed his own feet and stayed dressed. But the "evening meal was being served" and he elected to use his power to make a point. Some commentators elect to see him as lowering himself, but if we work within the Christian model and take as accepted the idea that Jesus purified, sanctified, and healed with a touch, then he himself cannot be defiled. Instead, as he performed service he dignified and elevated it to practice and religion and ritual, investing it with meaning and making the meaning retrievable by repetition and memory.

In both cases we have an old--ancient--story of a man-god literally getting down on the ground in an effort to save the world. In neither case do they become triumphant heroes--their dusty hands and dirty fingernails bear silent witness to their bold, outside-the-box choices. In both cases they set aside honor that their cultures could thrive, and in both cases the metaphoric ripples have tsunami potential...because both of them have set service above culturally constructed ideas of honor. By their actions they point instead to the greater good, the higher ideal, which is the possibility of long-term change for the better. The story will come and go, one's reputation can be rebuilt or definitions of honor can be changed, but the good of the world must be tended to *now*.

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We are all here to serve. And we will continue to fight our religious call, to wrestle with it, to struggle against it—until we learn to honor it. What we must learn to honor is service—the act and the actors, who are us. There is no shame in serving, voluntarily or involuntarily, when the end we are reaching for is noble and the means by which we reach are ethical. If we set service as a necessary evil or something below dignity we lose dignity ourselves, we lose trust, we lose faith in the goodwill of others. And that is the road to ruin. If we cannot trust, on some level,

that there are those who give freely for giving's sake, and if we cannot trust ourselves to be some of those people, then we are paving the road to a life lived in isolation and terror.

Instead we must each shed our robes and gird ourselves with a towel, we must each find the world's dusty feet to clean, and we must lift up those who wipe the dust from our tired heels. Not because the feet or the hands are our own. Not because there is some dank and desolate hell waiting. Not even for some eternal afterlife in the great beyond. We must wash feet and we must honor those who do because service is part of being human. It is part of who we are, it is part of how we have evolved, it is part of how we survive. It is part of our common life, and more important, part of our common pleasure. No long change for good ever came except by pursuing the pleasure it brought. The pleasure of giving rest to the weary, food to the hungry, and drink to the parched is the pleasure of meeting basic human need, and relieving suffering. It is noble work.

Perhaps the night shift at McDonalds won't change the world. But a lot of people come through those doors tired and hungry. Perhaps it will.