

What's new? Keeping the heart open to good news: Keeping the heart open to good news

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

When people ask me why I do not watch television, I usually begin with the practical answer. I live nine miles from town, at the end of a dirt road, where cable is not available. Why don't I get a satellite dish? Because if I were in possession of 200 television channels, I would sit in an upholstered chair for hours surfing from one to the next until my head housed a whole convention of televangelists, Mafiosos, American idols and amorous emergency room doctors, all vying for my attention. I know this is true because it has actually happened to me in hotel rooms around the country. Believe me, the dreams are not worth it.

Another reason I do not watch television is because the commercials work so well on me. If I see a trim Samsung cell phone flying gracefully through the clouds five times in one hour, then I will have to have one. If I hear the symptoms of depression described even half that often, then I will remember the name of the pill that promises to restore me to my old self. I do not watch television because the world on the screen is not the world I want to live in. It is not the real world, but if I spend enough time watching it I know I will forget that.

I do listen to National Public Radio, and I send my local station a dollar a day along with my deep gratitude for protecting me from commercials. The only time I turn it off is during the news, at least after I have heard the whole loop once. If I listen any longer than that, my heart begins to shut down. I am equipped to grieve for many people at one time, even people I do not know, but I am not equipped to grieve the sinking of a loaded ferry in India, the victims of a serial killer in Texas, the failure of citrus crops in Florida and the starvation of small children in Sudan, all in a span of 15 minutes. I furthermore do not want to learn to do this, especially while I am washing dishes or driving a car.

Even twice a day is too often to take in all that I hear. In years past, when I listened even less, I learned about the fall of the Soviet Union from two men talking to each other at the gym. This struck me as proof that I could learn everything I really needed to know by listening to other people instead of the news. But I was not sure that I always wanted to be the last to know. What I wanted was to keep my heart open to what was happening all around me, without surrendering my outlook to those who made their livings selling bad news.

When a young girl was kidnapped from her bedroom in the Midwest, the details of her abduction flooded the news for days. Descriptions of suspects alternated with speculation about whether she was still alive. Her family's despair was unimaginable. In the midst of all this, I was speaking with someone who watches a great deal of television news.

"We live in a country where children are not safe in their own beds," this person said with monumental despair. While I knew I was meant to agree, I did the math and realized that I could not. Although the media's round-the-clock repetition of the story made it seem as if a thousand girls had been abducted instead of one, the truth was that the girl we were all worried about remained one girl. While the police searched for her, the vast majority of children were safe in their own beds, which seemed vital to remember in the face of so much fear.

There is always tragedy somewhere, as the news reminds us so well. But there is not always tragedy everywhere, which the news does not make quite so clear. The good news, also known as the gospel, is that where ferries are going down, brave people are diving into water to lift thrashing children to safety. Where crops are failing, generous people are providing relief for farmers and migrant workers, and where a young girl is kidnapped from her bed, an entire community is turning out to hunt clues, post flyers, cook food and keep watch with her family.

Meanwhile, there are entire towns where nothing terrible is happening for an hour or two, where parents are caring for children with remarkable tenderness, where nurses are tending patients, mail carriers are delivering packages, and at least one man who owns a small business is taking off work early to coach a girl's soccer team. Terrible things will continue to happen in these places, which the best efforts of such people will not be sufficient to prevent, but their bursts of gratuitous kindness are the mustard seeds from which healing bushes sometimes grow. They constitute the alternate reality that I want to live in, even if it means limiting my

exposure to other kinds of news.

When I resist the economy and despair of the dominant world in which I live, I resist from a minority viewpoint that I learned in church. In that alternate reality, which operates on the divine economy, human beings are worth more than what they can buy or sell, and suffering breaks open as many hearts as it breaks down. There are many kinds of evangelism, I know, but here is one I can embrace: in a culture of fear, addicted to the bad news of sin and death, to keep telling stories of human kindness and divine grace—without commercials of any kind. In a world like ours, the church may be the only corporate sponsor that can afford to deliver such good news for free.