

An imitation of Christ

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [January 19, 2000](#) issue

Several years ago, when my husband's engineering firm was between jobs, a pipe fitter named Richard came to live in the small log cabin just down the hill from our house. He could have stayed in a motel until he shipped out to the next job, or spent some time with his family back in Arkansas, but he took one look at the rocking chair on the porch facing Yonah Mountain and said, "I believe I'll stay here."

He was 60 when he came to us, still healing from heart surgery earlier that year. He had given up smoking, drinking, and eating fried chicken. His only vice, so far as I know, was the chewing tobacco he kept tucked in his cheek, although he looked like someone with darker stories to tell. He was short, with bow legs and the strongest back I ever saw on a man his size.

He bought his clothes at yard sales and owned more tractor hats than shirts. He never went out without a hat set high on his brow, covering the top of his head the same way his gray beard covered the bottom. He stroked his beard when he talked, which was not often, but when he looked at you there was nothing missing. As private as he was, Richard was generous with his eyes.

Since there were no pipes to fit at our house, Richard reinvented himself as a farm hand. He fixed the old 1957 tractor and mowed the pasture. He built a stone wall to keep the creek bank from eroding. He mended fences, stacked hay, pruned fruit trees and tilled the garden. He never refused a hard job or complained about a messy one. He took pleasure in the work itself, and did it with such a willing spirit that he made me want to be more like him.

When his stay grew from weeks to months, I suggested some improvements to the cabin. "Wouldn't you like a telephone?" I asked him one day.

"Naw," he said. "I would just use it and run up a bill."

"How about a shower? It would be easy to add a pipe to the tub."

"There's nothing nicer than a hot bath."

“Could we at least get you a television?”

“To tell you the truth, I prefer the radio.”

He was a hard man to do anything for, not because he was a martyr but because his needs were so few. Everything he owned fit into two duffel bags. He would rather walk in the woods than go to a movie. He preferred a can of pork and beans to most of my cooking, although I did uncover a weakness in him for homemade brownies with cream cheese icing.

Richard was not what you would call a religious man. The first time he came to supper, I set the table on the front porch with baked chicken, mashed sweet potatoes and cornbread with greens. Richard sat down and we shook napkins into our laps. Then my husband said, “Let us pray,” and a look of panic swept over Richard’s face, as if he had just been asked to play a violin or fly an airplane. He quickly reached up, removed his hat, and bowed his head.

When the prayer was over I looked up to see Richard as I had never seen him before, with his head uncovered and his face in full light. He looked older without his hat, and more vulnerable. He was shy about his bald spot, and could not decide what to do—keep his head down, so that I could see it but he could not see me—or hold his head up, so that he could see me seeing him as he was, without his veil.

It was more intimacy than either of us could stand, so I understood when Richard declined my next invitation. We settled into a routine of food-sharing instead, whereby I left containers of chili and brownies in front of his door and he left baskets of tomatoes and blueberries from the garden in front of mine.

I grew to love him, although I would never have troubled him with that information. I had too much respect for his privacy and his silence, which enveloped him like a monk.

Two days before Christmas I said good-bye to him. My husband and I were headed to Florida for the holiday. Richard wanted to spend it on the farm, then go home for New Year’s Eve. I asked him if he would be all right alone and he said yes. “This is what Christmas is about,” he said, patting one of the dogs on the head. “Peace on earth, with animals. Don’t you worry. I’ll be fine.”

Richard collapsed the next day with a ruptured aorta and died two minutes after midnight on Christmas Day. Two of his sons arrived in time to be with him. The next day they drove their truck to the farm to collect his belongings, which did not take long.

As they were preparing to leave, his daughter-in-law turned to me and said, "You're the minister, right?" I said I was. "Do you know if he was saved?" she asked me, with fresh tears springing to her eyes.

I was dumbstruck. "I don't know," I said. "We never talked about it." I tried to tell her that I had never known anyone who reminded me more of Jesus—who had such a servant's heart, who was so free of desire, who showed me so well what self-emptying was all about. But that was not what she wanted to hear, and I did not have the other words to give her. When I lay my hand on her back, she pulled away from me and climbed into the truck with Richard's sons for the long ride home. As I watched them drive off, I wished I had just said, "Yes, I know for certain he was saved." How did I know? Because he lived like he was.