Tidy, not tidy

The truth of God's grace is always messier than appearances let on.

by Samuel Wells in the August 15, 2018 issue

Photo by Ruthson Zimmerman on Unsplash.

I was visiting a well-known social enterprise in the city. I'd used it as a customer: they did a nice line in lawn care and were a good source for picture frames. It was a great place to take students in my ethics and social engagement course.

I was met at the door by a neatly dressed man, the kind of person who takes a role on the board of a charity because his career peaks before he's 50 so he decides to take a salary cut and give something back. We were in a compound where all the residents were addicts, combining steady work with participation in a 12-step

program.

As he talked, I started to distrust him. How could this tidy man talk in such an easy way about people's trials and troubles, of the successes to celebrate and the failures to learn from, of the hope and the reality? Nonetheless it was an impressive presentation. The highlight was when he introduced us to a middle-aged woman. She began to tell her story about attending an arts school, finding her voice, and having some success as a performer. Yet she found she couldn't escape the chastening realities of her childhood, and she turned to drugs—first once in a while, then weekly, then day and night. Her life imploded, and before long the gutter was her only companion.

"But I'd like to sing to you," she told us, shyly. "I'd like you to know what it feels like for your childhood to catch up with you and yet still to feel a song in your heart. And how it feels for me to sing that song now—now that I know that I'm not alone."

And then she sang, and the whole room was convulsed like it was connected to the electric grid. "There's a man going round taking names. / He's been taking my father's name. / And he left my heart in vain." I'd never heard the song sung so slowly, so soulfully. It was as if each verse of the song (mother, sister, brother, and finally, "Oh, death is that man") was a year of her struggle—and a year of her recovery. After that, any cynicism abated. This was real. This was transformation. This was as deep as it gets.

After the standing ovation we wanted to know all about her. Would she now resume her career? What was the worst moment? Whose help had made the difference? What was it like to feel utterly alone? This mesmerizing figure embodied everything one could dream of about getting involved with a social enterprise. She was the talented aspirant struck down by childhood hurt and emerging fragility who, with the help of wise companions like the tidy man, found sanctuary, got back on her feet, and learned to sing again.

There was time for one more question. I asked the man, "What got you involved with this kind of work in the first place?" It was the professor's question, designed to show the self-absorbed students how to start on community engagement without giving up their professional trajectories. I felt I was concluding the visit well.

"Oh," he said. "I wondered if anyone would ask about me. I was like you guys. I was at college. I used to drink a lot, like people do at college. Except, when we all left,

and the others stopped, I didn’t stop. I went the other way. I drank more. I had a great life. I married a doctor, and her income meant we didn’t miss the money I spent. I held down my accountant’s job for an amazingly long time, even though I’d drive into town at four in the morning to find a place to buy booze. I can’t believe she stuck with me so long. She used to throw me out and I’d come back. Eventually she meant it. And I couldn’t see my girls. Let me get out my picture of my girls. I can’t talk to them now. I rang up on the most recent birthday and my wife put the phone down without letting me speak to them. I lost all my friends long ago.

“You probably think I run this place, or sit on the board. I don’t. I live here. I’m nearly done with my two years. My friend here”—he touched the singer’s shoulder—“washed up here about the same time. Took me weeks to sober up. It’s true I help with the accounts here, and some of the management systems, and they wheel me out to speak to guys like you because I don’t seem so threatening. But don’t get me wrong. I’m an alcoholic. I’m what some of you guys could become if you don’t get a measure of yourselves. Don’t be fooled. I can wear your clothes and walk like you. Maybe in a few weeks I could be living next door to you. But I’m your worst nightmare of your own future.”

The color drained out of the faces of every person in the room. Except the singer; she knew all. It was like the oxygen had evaporated and we were all gasping for breath.

But none more than me. I was the teacher. I’d taken the students to learn how to live tidy lives and still give back. But this man blew apart any notion I retained that social engagement involved the abundant reaching out to the needy. He was both—us and them. He was the incarnation of deprivation, taking on the robes of comfort. There is no tidy. The truth only appears when you see beyond appearances. What a mess. What glory.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Untidy truth.”