

## A HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GOSPEL

By Elbert Eugene Peck

ONE SATURDAY EVENING, several years ago, my Plymouth Duster threw a rod, stranding my brother and myself in Logan, Utah, without enough money for two bus fares to Provo. We spent the next few hours trying to catch a ride south using our thumbs and hand-made signs which read "Salt Lake" and "Provo/BYU" before we gave up and spent our money on a cheap motel room.

The next morning, as we again stood on Highway 89 at the edge of town watching car after car pass us by, it became increasingly difficult not to pronounce judgment on these "self-righteous Saints." After all, some of them had been to Church where they might have sung, "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief!" Indignantly, I thought about the parable of the Good Samaritan and how it has a very literal application in today's world. Yet these Mormons weren't applying it—even on Sunday! Weren't we stranded on a road, in need of aid? Wasn't the Samaritan, like these Mormons racing down the road, also on an errand? Yet he stopped when it was inconvenient. Even the oft-used excuse about concern for safety (which is a legitimate concern of women) is addressed and dismissed by the parable. The point became even more emphatic when, ironically, our long-sought-for ride south to Salt Lake was eventually provided by a non-Mormon female student from Maryland.

As the day wore on, I began to analyze the experience and became less concerned about the un-Christian acts of the drivers and deeply disturbed by my increasing anger towards them. I tried to change my feelings, but it was hard; especially while petitioning for hours in front of the stop light at the Salt Lake Sixth

South freeway entrance ramp, waving "BYU" and "MTC" destination signs with no result.

Trying to be charitable, I reminded myself that these "insensitive, judgmental" drivers were really the good people I associate with every day; if I were someone else, they could easily have been my mother or father, my sister or a friend—or even myself. Having recently been a driver, I tried not to take their rejection personally, knowing very well that when they drove past without even acknowledging my presence, they weren't intentionally confronting me. That thought helped, but it was not enough. The relentless

wave of car after car, stop light after light, hour to hour, rejection to rejection, was like the rising pounding surf slowly erasing the best defended sand sculpture. As well might man or woman stretch forth their puny arm to stop the Gulf Stream as for one to continue to love in such a situation.

Then I realized that I was in a minority; the "underclass" of people who must thumb for a ride. Although I knew the adventure would be brief, for the moment I had an intimation of how it felt to be in a minority and experience the cumulative effect of the acts of the unthinking, albeit non malicious, majority. I also noticed how quickly feelings change when perspective does.

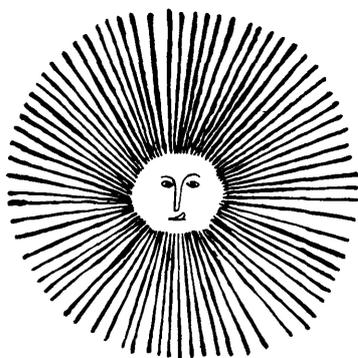
I think what irked me most was that I was being *ignored* by individuals in cars. It felt like I was not a legitimate road user; not a member of the club—a stranger, an outsider. The indifference offended me much more than outright conscious rejection, where at least there is communication, dialogue. However, when I was considered, I was rejected with stereotypes,

which I also resented. From this perspective it is easy and natural to make angry, defensive judgments which only increase the polarization. It is terrible to feel that the surrounding community has locked you out of the game, or doesn't even see you; and that feeling, like oxygen in the air, fuels the angry blaze with increasing gales.

Members of the majority, on the other hand, seldom perceive that their individual actions, when cumulated, have such an oppressive effect on others. For them, the passing by of a hitchhiker is a single private decision based on their own situation, void of any sense of guilt or systematic discrimination: "I'm late for the airport..."; "I'm not going far enough to be of help..."; "I'm alone, and they might have a knife..." Yet for the hitchhiker, the experience is a systematic rejection, a lack of trust by an empowered class of people. I'm sure this same phenomenon occurs in other situations with even graver results—with race, gender, culture, language and economic status—and that feeling of not being a full fledged, accepted, contributing member mitigates our efforts to be of one heart and establish Zion.

In part, I don't think the elimination of classes and material distinctions is necessary to avoid the polarization and hatred that the minority feels, although the Book of Mormon seems to indicate that that is the ideal (4 Nephi 3, 17). Hitchhikers don't need to buy or be given cars to feel legitimate and equal with drivers—sameness is not equality. What they need is to know that they are on the inside of society—given attention and fair consideration. The majority has the greater ability to prevent the social schisms in the body of Christ which St. Paul warned against. They liberate minorities from the destructive, polarizing perspective of being a foreigner in their homeland with acts which convey trust and genuinely include them (although doing so requires exchanging security for vulnerability). When that happens, equality is achieved while the differences remain: The hitchhikers' lifestyle hasn't changed, but they are accepted, legitimate, first-class citizens on the road.

Although we are commanded to "live together in love" (D&C 42:45), it is easy to estrange and be estranged by common things, the same everyday social things for which we all beg: to speak and have others listen, to act and receive a response, to be sought out and included in community discussions—to be treated as if we mattered. Emily Dickinson understood how from such daily beggings comes the unimagined and glorious Kingdom of God:



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As if I asked a common Alms,  
And in my wondering hand  
A Stranger pressed a Kingdom,  
And I, bewildered, stand—  
As if I asked the Orient  
Had it for me a Morn—  
And it should lift its purple Dikes,  
And shatter me with Dawn!

(*Complete Poems*, 323)

It is arrogant and presumptuous for the comfortable ninety and nine in a ward to even unthinkingly expect the one to conform to their norms in order to be accepted and, more importantly, valued. The concept of value has been cheapened by our meaningless overuse of the word "appreciate," which we often use to excuse our exclusive behavior ("I appreciate your situation, but..."). Appreciate means to regard highly, and to truly value a person requires that we approach them assuming worth in their *current* station.

In a recent *Yale Law Journal* article, Robert Burt persuasively argued that "the underlying goal" of Jesus' parables is to "lead the listeners to acknowledge their vulnerability....that there are none *but* outsiders....there are no righteous people without the need to repent....no faithful elder sons....no sheep but those who are lost....The parables in effect only teach the proper question so that...the true initiates teach themselves the proper answer." Having the sense that "we are all beggars" allows us to see, understand, and embrace the strangers not in our majority.

My brother and I finally got a ride in the late afternoon to Provo only after I spotted and flagged-down a fellow-worker from the Missionary Training Center. After a night and a day of separation from society it felt good to be in the car of a comfortable friend—I was part of the system again, but the experience has been molded into a powerful personal myth which pricks my contentedness. Now, I always give hitchhikers a lift. The last one was so solicitous and grateful I was embarrassed; I felt like a Southern white man being pandered to by a slave. So I said, "Hey, we're all in this life together, only we beg for different things."

I wish I could see the beggars in need of the intangible social lifts as easily as I now see thumbs out on the roadside, and then have the courage to overcome my insecurities and act. Occasionally, friends who feel they're on the outside, like many women in the Church, share their experiences and, as with the parables, I vicariously feel their painful disenfranchisement. That does help, but what I probably really need are more desperate, begging personal experiences.

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## TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

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*Kira Pratt Davis*

# A PROMISE THROUGH THE VEIL

THIS IS WHAT it feels like to go bald: first your hair goes limp, as if the follicles all at once lay down and gave up. The scalp feels strange, like the feeling when you have worn your hair one way for a long time and then you suddenly change it—as if it is bent the wrong way, only it feels that way all over. Then it begins to come out. It comes out in wet mats after you wash it that first time. It feels slippery, running your hand down the back of your head, because it's all loose hair, and when you take your hand away there is the mat of hair. It itches. It is obsessive. You mourn and look for the bald spots in the mirror, but you can't resist the itch of something loose, something that is itchy; unconsciously you stroke it and look at the handfuls of hair.

Mark put a paper sack next to the computer: "If you're going to be a shedding cat" (my metaphor, the morning we woke up and our pillows were covered with fur like the inside of a cat's bed), "then you might as well be a responsible one!" A place to put the handfuls I absently stroked out, stared at, winced, and tossed on the floor here in the attic.

But then it stops itching. There remains a thin mist of hair around the revealed contours of your head. The scalp is slightly gummy. It is cold, especially at night.

The mirror is unforgiving: the long maroon scar where the breast used to be, the wild bald head, even the pubic hair is thin. I look pitiful and stripped as a concentration camp victim. Only my bones don't show so much.

But once it is done, it becomes a brute fact. It is almost funny. And I wear scarves, paisley or red with gold bangles. People tell me how good I look—I have good cheekbones, good eyes, they say. They are glad it is happening to me and not to them because I look so good in

scarves. I say thank you. I don't mind the slight death wish behind the compliment because I am getting a thick hide. And I like dressing like a gypsy. The rubber breast under the bulky sweater, the long swishy skirt, the scarves, boots—I feel very much at home, as if it took this calamity to bring me to my fashion senses. I feel big, flashy, a little rebellious. I take bigger steps. I have stronger opinions.

I went to the temple today. I called there yesterday and asked if it was okay to wear a white scarf over my bald head. I told each different sister I was transferred to that I had cancer and had lost my hair from the chemotherapy, and was it all right to wear a scarf in the session? I told my little story five times to five different sisters who didn't feel qualified to answer my question, until finally I was transferred to the temple president. I told him my story and slowly, as if he was testing it around his mouth, he pronounced that as long as it was an all white scarf it would be all right. I asked him to please write me a letter stating what he had said, and could he please leave it at the front desk for me so that I could carry it with me to defend myself against zealous temple workers. I had thought at first, imagining the worst, how I would whip off my scarf defiantly if someone asked me in an indignant whisper to take it off. But then I thought it would be much more civilized and less humiliating to simply show the letter, smile apologetically, and pat them on the shoulder.

The sister at the front desk was concerned when she saw me in my red scarves with gypsy bangles and told me I would have to take off my scarf just to walk down the hall and up the stairs to the dressing room. I said, "But I don't have any hair. I am undergoing chemotherapy and it all fell out." I smiled calmly as I said this. She was disconcerted. She asked if I had an all white scarf, and I said yes. She took my arm, friendly, a little nervous, and led me to the first

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open door in the hall and told me to put on my white scarf at once. I did. There was a mirror. I tucked the ends back around under the front, for thickness. Still, there was a tiny bald spot, cool, in the back. It looked hospital-ish. I shrugged and left the room. The attending sister wasn't right there so I went up to the dressing room on my own, clutching my recommend and my letter from the temple president, should anyone stop me.

I expected to be stopped. No one did.

I stopped in the hall and filled out a little slip for the prayer roll. I put down my new baby niece, two friends who also have cancer, and myself "and family." Then I dropped it in the box. I ordered a dress, size small, and then realized as I was putting it on in the locker room that I had forgotten to order a slip. So I asked for help and a nice grandmotherly sister came over to my locker and I explained my forgetfulness and handed her some change to rent a slip for me. She came back in a few seconds and cheerfully handed it to me, holding the metal door of the changing booth mostly shut and have me my change. Then I came out, looking very hospital-ish indeed—tight white scarf, white dress, clutching the little gauze bag with my temple clothes in it, the temple clothes I was married in.

I watched and listened as attentively as I could. At first I found it strangely more violent, and harder on Eve, than I remembered. Then I nodded off in spite of myself. Blame the chemotherapy.

And then it was time for the veil. I waited behind a little old lady with gray braids up over the top of her head. She could not remember anything, and could hardly even repeat what the patient plump sister was telling her to say. I smiled at the anonymous pleasant sister next to me (she hadn't looked at me during the whole session as I was sitting by her—I wondered if I looked pitiful and horrifying), and said, with an indulgent chuckle, "poor thing." She gave me a slight thin-lipped smile and met my eyes.

Then the worker sister on the end beckoned me over and I remembered almost everything, but at the very end, the last words I had to say caught me up short, they seemed so aimed at me. Health and bone marrow were what I wanted, what I needed to live. I couldn't answer. I stood there in that embrace and bobbed my head up and down with my eyes squeezed shut. My sister patted my back and repeated it for me, trying to nudge me along. I finally blubbered it out and cried. The sister patted me, almost crying herself, and said "Oh,

don't do that! I was about to tell you how perky you were!" And I passed through the veil.

It was because I had come looking for reassurance, in spite of my rationalistic tendencies. Those words seemed like a promise to me, and it was too strong and sweet to bear for a few minutes. I sat in the celestial room and stared at the chandeliers as they waved and tinkled gently in the drafts from the air vents. Light winking in rainbows off the crystals. I spoke to my dead father and asked him why.

"Well sweetie, it's to make you strong," I imagined him saying.

"But Daddie, couldn't I have read a book or something?"

"No, honey, that doesn't sink deep enough. You're getting stronger already—I know you feel it. Don't worry. You'll be all right."

I have had these curious made-up, or dreamed, or—who knows?—real discussions with my father ever since he died two and a half years ago. Sometimes he doesn't answer. But I had him answer me there, I stood him next to me and made him talk. I sat for a long time, next to the cut, marbled mirrors that reach up like sharp peaks into the vault of the room.

After I was dressed and had my outrageous scarves on again I went down to the temple cafeteria. As I sat eating my pizza I watched the people around me. There was a table full of visitors from, I'd say Georgia, including the lady with the gray braids. They still had their white clothes on and were talking about how many more sessions they were going to do.

Then a sister, round in her white polyester dress, came up to me, touched me on the shoulder and said, "I'm so glad you came today."

"You are? Well, thank you! Do you know me?" I was wondering if she had been in our ward. She said no, "I was just glad to see you here today. Come back, all right?" I said I would. It struck me that they all easily guessed my troubles, smiling and gentle with me. No one wears a scarf to the temple unless they're bald, and no one my age is bald unless they have cancer. I wondered if they were so gentle because everybody gets something, every family has its tragedy; they knew, they were all weathered, they had seen. I felt kindness like milk flowing around me and my eyes began to sting. I didn't want to cry again, so I left.

When Mark came home that night I hardly recognized him—he had shaved off his beard (after four years!) and his lips were thin

and his poor chin was white—I recognized my old high school friend.

"I told you I was going to shave if you lost your hair!"

I laughed. "Come let me kiss your adolescent cheeks!"

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in a stone park  
wedged between asphalt trees  
two girls (pretty as boys)  
dance on benches  
under the summer sun  
to unheard music.  
men in suits & curious ties  
prance by, unnoticed.

—melissa sillitoe

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walking in holladay, utah

houses are guarded by fences  
but unassuming trees  
extend leafy hands

circles of houses  
stare boldly  
from shuttered eyes

at twilight foothills  
wrapped in cloudy shawls  
prepare for night

while the last ice cream truck  
gurgles manically  
of carnivals in france

—melissa sillitoe