

Working people: To serve with gladness

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [March 23, 2010](#) issue

When Studs Terkel, described by Donna Seaman as “oral historian, writer of conscience and raconteur-on-a-mission,” died on Halloween in 2008, he left a tall stack of books behind him. None affected me more than one called *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. The book led me to think not only about all the jobs I have worked in my life but also about all the people whose jobs make life in my small town work.

The day I moved to Clarkesville, I walked from the church to the post office, where I came up a quarter short on a book of stamps. “Don’t worry,” the pretty blond clerk behind the counter said. “Just bring it back before we close at five.” Her nametag said “Elaine.” When I brought the quarter back, I told her my name but she already knew it. Eighteen years later, I have learned to stand patiently in line as Elaine greets her customers by name.

Last week a white-haired woman lingered at the counter, speaking of things that had nothing to do with the U.S. Mail. There were six of us behind her, but Elaine never rushed her, never stopped smiling. When my turn finally came I raised my eyebrows as I slid my package across the counter.

“She lost someone close to her a while back,” Elaine said in a low voice so only I could hear her, “but I don’t mind. I like hearing the stories. Plus, I learned a long time ago that people aren’t going to stop talking until they have said what they want to say.”

And to think I paid perfectly good money to go to seminary.

Bunny works at the Laundromat across the street. When the water in my well is running low, she sometimes helps me with the sheets for a dollar a pound. Other times we stand around talking as we watch clothes go round and round in the dryers. This is how I learned that Bunny put up the posters with the face of a beat-up

woman on them, right above the telephone number of a shelter for women fleeing physical abuse. She knows all about that, she says.

Bunny lets other people put up posters too, but only if the signs are in Spanish as well as English. She says one regular customer calls every week to ask “when the Mexicans will be there” because they “make her uncomfortable.”

“I know it’s mean,” Bunny said, “but the man who comes with her has one leg and I thought about telling her that it makes people uncomfortable for him to be in here with one leg. When she calls now I just tell her that the Mexicans are here *all* the time.”

George drives a school bus, which is not how I know him. I know him because he also drives the college van when I take my religion students on field trips. These are just two of the three jobs he works since the economy tanked and his retirement evaporated. Before that he was a New York City cop, which explains both his natural authority and his accent.

Some drivers snooze in the van while students explore a monastery or museum, but not George. “I love learning new things,” he says, locking the doors and putting the keys in his pocket. On the long drive home, while everyone else is conked out, George never takes his eyes off the road. It is hard to believe he is in his seventies. Once he has delivered us safely back home, his shoulders sag a little while he says goodnight to the students who stumble half asleep off the van.

Cissy works for the vet. She checks patients in, keeps the bulletin boards up to date, asks clients how their tomatoes are doing, and signs sympathy cards for owners whose pets have died. She is also able to match descriptions of lost pets with found ones better than any computer. When a young female pit bull showed up at my house one day I described her to Cissy: white head, brown ears, brown spots, white tip on her tail. “I think the shelter got a call on a dog like that,” she said, and in less than an hour the owner was at my house rolling on the ground with her found dog.

Since this column is called “Faith Matters,” I am trying to decide where the faith is in these stories and why they matter so much to me. Perhaps, as Archbishop William Temple once said, “It is a great mistake to think that God is chiefly interested in religion.” What may matter more are the everyday ways we rise to our work, serving one another with gladness and singleness of heart, so that the life we share goes on working, not for any of us alone but for all of us together.