

Watchers in the night: Faith at work

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [April 5, 2000](#) issue

"Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep." So begins one of my favorite prayers, from the service for compline in the Episcopal prayer book. What a good thing it is, before going to bed, to remember those whose rest comes with the dawn. I think it would be an excellent way of putting a child to sleep, to imagine with her not only those who go to bed when she does—her grandparents in New Jersey, her friends in the village, the deer in the woods—but those others who work and watch and, yes, who weep while others sleep.

The ending of another bedtime prayer—"Thy love go with me through the night, and wake me with the morning's light"—takes on new meaning when we recall those whose wakefulness is an instrument of "thy love." The nightlight above the bathroom sink is connected, as I myself am connected, to a stranger walking among the generators of a power station. And who knows but that the Gethsemane-like prayer of some tormented insomniac completes the unfinished petition that was my last conscious thought.

Whether we work the night shift or the day, our work comes with its own temptations. These are two of the worst: to believe that we work alone, and to believe that our work alone is what sustains us. You might ask what person with eyes or ears could entertain such thoughts, even in the form of a fleeting temptation. Well, the person in rush-hour traffic who has to get to work or get home from work and who drives as if this were true for no one else but him. Ever seen that guy? Ever *been* that guy? The person who regards every paid worker but himself as an imposter, who submits his bill as though it were a petition signed by all 12 apostles plus Jesus, Mary and Joseph, but who can never receive another's bill without regarding it as a case of highway robbery or mistaken identity.

And let us not forget the person who conveniently erases all fingerprints but her own from the proverbial bootstraps of success, who blithely repeats what must be the most sweeping blasphemy ever spoke, an affront to Creator and creation alike:

"Nobody ever helped *me*."

Now that I have told you my favorite bedtime prayer, let me tell you one of my favorite bedtime stories. They are of a piece.

My wife has a friend who once lived in the remote town of Victory, which has no church, no store and no school, and which is locally famous for two things: its sizable bog and its status as the last town in Vermont to receive electricity. During the course of earning her master's degree, this friend found it necessary to commute several times a week from Victory to the state university in Burlington, a good hundred miles away. Coming home late at night, she would see an old man sitting by the side of the road. He was always there, in subzero temperatures, in stormy weather, no matter how late she returned. He made no acknowledgment of her passing. The snow settled on his cap and shoulders as if he were merely another gnarled old tree.

She often wondered what brought him to that same spot every evening—what stubborn habit, private grief or mental disorder. I wonder if she didn't sometimes begin to doubt her senses, or believe in ghosts.

Finally, she asked a neighbor of hers, "Have you ever seen an old man who sits by the road late at night?"

"Oh, yes," said her neighbor, "many times."

Is he . . . a little touched upstairs? Does he ever go home?"

"He's no more touched than you or me," her neighbor laughed. "And he goes home right after you do. You see, he doesn't like the idea of you driving by yourself out late all alone on these back roads, so every night he walks out to wait for you. When he sees your taillights disappear around the bend, and he knows you're OK, he goes home to bed."

Even after we have named the obvious workers and watchers on a given night—the police, the third-shift nurses, the astronomers who make discoveries and the saxophonists who make music we will be happy to hear in the morning—how many others might there be who work or watch or weep, and by so doing sustain us? How many have we passed on the road, wondering at their eccentric behavior or their shabby clothes? *But when they saw him walking on the sea, in the fourth watch of*

the night, *they thought it was a ghost.*

Of course, the realization works two ways. Just as I am sustained by others, often without my knowing or taking thought, so my work, too, helps to sustain the world, even in the absence of appreciation, promotion or pay. What Jesus said about "giving alms" in such a way that our left hand doesn't know what the right is doing has an application much wider than the circumference of a collection plate. Lord, let me be able to recognize that old man by the side of the road, but let me also acquire some of his invisibility.

In "Those Winter Sundays," by Robert Hayden, the speaker of the poem recalls his father waking in "the blueblack cold" to start the household fire and shine the boy's "good shoes as well," though at that age he took both favors for granted. He concludes: "What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?" We have all been that boy, even in adulthood, and it would paralyze us with remorse to know that the number of times—if not for those other times of loving, lonely austerity, when we too have worked or watched. Or wept.