

When the garbage truck stopped coming

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Here's a story that did not make the news. It's about garbage, bears, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

The company that picks up trash in our county had a difficult time this summer. After losing two key employees, their collection schedule fell apart like a hungry four-year-old in a grocery store. People across the county went days and sometimes weeks without their trash getting carried away, and needless to say nobody was happy about it.

Out where we live, five different households leave their garbage cans and blue recycling bags at the corner of our lot. One week nothing got picked up, and the next two weeks the trash got collected but not the recycling. Soon there were more than 20 blue bags of newspaper, milk cartons, and empty cat food cans piled up. It was starting to remind me of a modern art exhibit, something Christo might install in Central Park.

But it reminded the bears and the raccoons of a lunch buffet. One day a neighbor's houseguest was heading out for a run but turned around when she saw a mother bear and two cubs rifling through the recycling. That was not the only time that month we had to recollect the recycling after the animals finished their scavenging.

Each week someone from our cove would call the garbage company and ask them to come for the recycling. Each week the company would say, "we're on it." And each week the pile would grow.

One afternoon my brother-in-law Mark, who lives up the hill, had had enough. He called the trash company and asked if he could bring the recycling to them. The woman on the phone offered an apology—by this point she'd become rather practiced at it—and told Mark where the transfer station is. Mark loaded his pickup to the brim and drove toward town.

Mark was pretty frustrated. He had a lot to do that day and was no more thrilled taking 90 minutes to haul off the recycling than you or I would be. So as he drove, his anger rose in him, and his thoughts filled with the words he would say to give those people a piece of his mind.

It felt good to be mad, he told me. Until it didn't any more. And then it felt toxic, like garbage, and he wanted to be free from it.

So Mark began to pray. I won't say how he prayed or what he prayed—he might tell you if you ask him—but I will say why: he wanted to be changed. And 25 minutes later, when he got to town, something had happened in him. He was feeling less like venting and more like being gracious.

He drove his small truck through a maze of giant trucks, the ones that reminded me of monsters with steel jaws when I was a kid. He parked beside the trailer that serves as an office. There was a car there, too, bearing the logo of the local TV station.

He knocked on the office door and was invited in. Two men dressed like workers, a third dressed like a company spokesperson, and a woman dressed like a reporter all looked at him, and he told them he had recycling in the truck. The three men leaped to unload it, and the reporter followed at a distance.

When the truck was empty and the men left, the reporter approached Mark.

"Did I hear you say you that your recycling hasn't been picked up in three weeks and you had to bring it in yourself?"

"Yes, you did. That's true."

"And how do you feel about having to do that? Are you mad? Would you like to say something about it?"

"What I'll say is: they're struggling. They've lost some key people in the past month, and it's been hard for them to get things straight. But I'm sure they're doing their best."

"But aren't you angry?"

“I was angry, yes. And then I realized that not having the trash picked up when we we’re counting on it—this is a first-world problem. It’s an inconvenience, but it’s not worth being mad about. “

Now the reporter looked bothered, like a bear who had come for garbage and found none there.

“I tell you what, though,” Mark added. “15,000 people in the world are gonna die of starvation today, and another 15,000 tomorrow. That’s worth being mad about.”

I am grateful for Mark and those 90 minutes of his life, and for all people who aim at a similar target. To do the right thing with their garbage; to see the bigger picture. To drive their truck from ill will to good will, from anger to kindness, from resentment to mercy. To attempt, even though they don’t always succeed, to meet their I’m-not-getting-what-I-want-and-I’m-feeling-mad-about-it moments not as opportunities to go off, but as occasions to go in—to seek release from the tight prison of ego, and deliverance to the open space of love.

Without them, this world would belong to the bears.