

My father's butcher shop: Lessons learned and unlearned

by [Eugene H. Peterson](#) in the [February 22, 2011](#) issue



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My father was a butcher. His meat market, within walking distance of our home, was just off of Main Street in Kalispell, our small Montana town. By the time I was five years old, I was permitted to walk by myself the five or six blocks from home to his market and work for him. Work at that time of my life consisted of accompanying him across the street to the Silver Star Café. He would have a cup of coffee with the cook, Phil, and take down the order for the next day's supply of hamburger, steaks, pork chops, sausage and liver. The waitress always brought me a donut and a glass of milk.

My father wore a white butcher's apron, even when he went across the street to the café. I wore one too. My mother made it out of flour sacks, identical to my father's except for its size. She made me a new apron every year to match my growth. When

I put on my apron in the butcher shop, I entered the adult world. And sitting on the counter stool in the café, being served alongside my father, was confirmation.

By this time I knew the story of the boy Samuel who had been "lent to the Lord" by his parents to live and work in the temple at Shiloh with Eli the priest. His parents, Elkanah and Hannah, visited him at Shiloh every year. His mother made him a priest's robe to wear, an ephod, as he assisted Eli. Every year as he added inches to his height, she would make him a new robe to fit his newly acquired stature. I knew exactly what that robe, that ephod, looked like—didn't I wear it every time I worked with my father? Didn't I get a new one every time I had grown another inch or two? I might have been the only person in our town who knew what an ephod actually looked like.

Shiloh couldn't have been that much different from my father's meat market. The three-year-old bull that was slaughtered at Samuel's dedication at Shiloh would become the hamburgers and sirloin steaks at my father's market and provided continuity between the shrine and the meat market.

I had no idea, of course, that I was acquiring a biblical imagination, finding myself in the biblical story, identifying myself as a priest.

As years went on, I graduated from the "work" of putting away the donut and milk that accompanied a business transaction to the beginner's work of grinding hamburger and slicing liver. One of Dad's butchers would pick me up and stand me on an upended orange crate before the big, red Hobart meat grinder, and I in my linen ephod would push chunks of beef into its maw. The day I was trusted with a knife and taught to respect it and keep it sharp, I knew adulthood was just around the corner. I was started out on liver (it's hard to mess up when slicing liver), but in a few years I was participating in the entire range of meat-cutting operations.

"That knife has a will of its own," old Eddie Nordcrist, one of my dad's butchers, used to say to me. "Get to know your knife." If I cut myself, he would blame me not for carelessness but for ignorance—I didn't "know" my knife.

I also learned that a beef carcass has a will of its own—it is not just an inert mass of meat and gristle and bone but has character and joints, texture and grain. Carving a quarter of beef into roasts and steaks was not a matter of imposing my knife-fortified will on dumb matter but respectfully and reverently entering into the reality of the material.

Hackers was my father's contemptuous label for butchers who ignorantly imposed their will on the meat. They didn't take into account the subtle differences between pork and beef. They used knives and cleavers inappropriately and didn't keep them sharp. They were bullies forcing their will on slabs of bacon and hindquarters of beef. The results were unattractive and uneconomical. They commonly left behind a mess that the rest of us had to clean up.

Not so much by words but by example, I internalized a respect for the material at hand. The material could be a pork loin, or a mahogany plank, or a lump of clay, or the will of God, or a soul, but when the work is done well, there is a kind of submission of will to the conditions at hand, a cultivation of what I would later learn to call humility. It is a noticeable feature in all skilled workers—woodworkers, potters, poets, pray-ers and pastors. I learned it in the butcher shop.

Years later I came upon the phrase *negative capability* and recognized that it was something very much like submission to the material, the humility, that I had had so much practice in on the butcher block. The poet John Keats coined the term to refer to this quality in the worker. He was impressed by William Shakespeare's work in creating such a variety of characters in his plays, none of which seemed to be a projection of Shakespeare's ego. Each had an independent life of his or her own. Keats wrote, "A poet has no identity . . . he is continually . . . filling some other Body." He believed that the only way that real creative will matured was in a person who was not hell-bent on imposing his or her will on another person or thing but "was capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable searching after fact and reason." Interesting: Shakespeare, the poet from whom we know the most about other people, is the poet about whom we know next to nothing.

All the while my imagination kept working on the priest theme with the slaughter of bulls and heifers, goats and sheep. We didn't offer turtledoves, but we made up for it with turkeys. All our sacrificed animals, cut up and wrapped and paid for, would be prayed over (I assumed that everybody prayed over meals), then consumed in our customers' homes.

Ours was a mostly storytelling church, but one year we had a pastor who specialized in the tabernacle, the temple and the whole Hebrew sacrificial system. He took on the book of Leviticus as his text and preached three months of sermons on it. I was immediately interested. I was an insider to exactly this sort of world: I grew up

experiencing the sights and sounds of animals killed and offered up. I had spent a lot of time by now in our local slaughterhouse and often helped with the slaughter.

But after a couple Sundays of Leviticus I lost interest in what our pastor was up to. This man knew nothing about killing animals. And though we never butchered goats, the rich sensuality of Hebrew worship was reproduced daily in our workplace. It never occurred to me that the world of worship was tidy and sedate. Our pastor had it all figured out on paper, but I knew it wasn't like that at all. I couldn't help but wonder how much he knew about sin and forgiveness. He certainly knew nothing about animal sacrifices. Sacrifice was messy: blood sloshing on the floor, gutting the creatures and gathering up the entrails in buckets, skinning the animals, salting down the hides. And in the summertime, the flies—flies everywhere.

My father had four meatcutters working for him. My favorite was Herb Thiel. He had a flat, expressionless face disfigured by a bad eye, milky and sunken. He didn't wear an eye patch. His face looked like a tombstone, with that dead eye engraved on it, so everyone called him Tombstone. Mostly we got the meat we sold in our market from the local slaughterhouse, but occasionally we would buy directly from a farmer in the valley. When we did that, Tombstone would go to the farm, kill the heifer or pig, dress it out and bring it back to our shop. The other meat cutters sometimes called him the Killer. I loved to go out with him on those jobs. He never talked. But I didn't mind that—there was something rakish about being in the company of a man sometimes called Tombstone and other times the Killer.

On one of these occasions we were out to get a yearling calf. When we arrived, the calf was already confined to a loading chute to facilitate our work. The farmer had a large family. When we got out of the truck, the children were all over us, begging Tombstone not to kill the animal. It was a 4-H calf and had become a pet of the farm kids. Some of the kids were crying. All of them were upset. Emotional anarchy. In a low voice Tombstone said to me, "I'll fix 'em." He took his Remington .22 and shot the calf between the eyes. As it slumped to the ground, Tombstone took his knife from its scabbard and slit the calf's throat to bleed it. As the blood poured from the cut, Tombstone knelt down, let the blood run into his cupped hands and pretended to drink it, the blood dripping from that flat, one-eyed face. The kids ran in horror to the farmhouse 50 feet away. We could see them watching us from between the curtains. We completed our work without interference. Tombstone wiped the blood from his mouth and chin, and we returned to the butcher shop.

That butcher shop was my introduction to the world of congregation, which in a few years would be my workplace as a pastor. The people who came into our shop were not just customers. Something else defined them. It always seemed more like a congregation than a store. My father in his priestly robe greeted each person by name and knew many of their stories. And many of them knew me, in my priest's robe, by name. I always knew there was more going on than a commercial transaction. My father had an easy smile and was always gracious, especially with the occasional disagreeable ones: Alicia Conrad, who was always fussy about the leanness of the bacon; Gus Anderson, who made my dad trim off any excess fat from a steak before weighing it. Everyone felt welcome. He gave people dignity by the tone and manner of his greetings.

Two blocks away on a side street there was a brothel. There was always a good bit of talk on the street about the whores and the cathouse and the red-light district that was a blight on the street. But not in our place: when these women entered our premises, they were treated with the dignity of their Christian names. I remember three of them: Mary, Grace, Veronica. When they left with their purchases, there was no gossipy moralism trailing in their wake. They were in a safe place. Sometimes the women would telephone their order and ask for a delivery. I was always the delivery boy. When I brought the packages, they always knew my name and treated me the way they themselves had been treated in the butcher shop, not as a customer—which I would guess is how most of the people who came up the stairs to their rooms were treated—but as a named person.

Oddly, the one person who seemed out of place in our market was a pastor we had for a couple of years. He wasn't a regular customer, but when an evangelist or missionary would come to town, that pastor always paid us a call. He would get my father off to the side, put his arm across his shoulders and say in the same "spiritual" voice that he always used when he prayed, "Brother Don, the Lord has laid it on my heart that this poor servant of God hasn't been eating all that well lately and would be greatly blessed with one of your fine steaks." My dad, ever generous, always gave him two. I never heard my father complain, but I could see the other meatcutters wink and exchange knowing looks, and I was embarrassed for my pastor who seemed so out of place in this holy place of work.

I am quite sure now that the way I as a pastor came to understand congregation had its beginnings in the "congregational" atmosphere of our butcher shop. Congregation is composed of people who, upon entering a church, leave behind

what people on the street name or call them. A church can never be reduced to a place where goods and services are exchanged. It must never be a place where a person is labeled. It can never be a place where gossip is perpetuated. Before anything else, it is a place where a person is named and greeted, whether implicitly or explicitly, in Jesus' name. A place where dignity is conferred.

I first learned that under my father's priesthood in his butcher shop.

I had learned much in my father's butcher shop that gave bone and muscle to my pastoral identity. I also learned something about work that could have destroyed it, something that I had to unlearn, with considerable difficulty as it turned out, 20 years later. It had to do with work, out-of-control work, work as a kind of painkiller which could well have caused a malignant cancer.

The focal point of the unlearning was Saturday, the climax of our work week. The unlearning happened like this.

When I was 30 years old, I was assigned the task of developing a new congregation in Maryland. I was still in the early days of having acquired a pastoral identity. But I was full of anticipation, energized by the challenge of working out my pastoral salvation in fear and trembling with a new congregation. I had never done this before. I was learning on the job, but I felt honored to be entrusted with the task. In those first months as I realized how daunting was the work that faced my wife, Jan, and me, the adrenaline receded and the fear and trembling that Paul had recommended when dealing with a holy God and a holy salvation was replaced by a very unholy anxiety. I anesthetized the anxiety with work, long hours of it. I worked out of fear of failing. I worked when there was no work to do, worked even harder when there was no work to do. Spinning my wheels. Grinding my gears.

After a couple years of this, I knew the work wasn't working. One day, in a kind of prayerful reverie, wondering how I had gotten off on the wrong foot so badly, I remembered Prettyfeather, and as I remembered, the details of what I knew of her arranged themselves into a story.

Remembering Prettyfeather started a process of unlearning a way of working that destroys life. This story became the text by which I unlearned what I had learned only too well in those formative years in the butcher shop. Here's the story.

Prettyfeather placed two buffalo-head nickels on the countertop for her Holy Saturday purchase: smoked ham hocks, two for a nickel. In the descending hierarchy of Holy Saturday foods, ham hocks were at the bottom.

Large hickory-smoked hams held center position in the displays in my father's butcher shop. Colorful cardboard cutouts provided by salesmen from the meat-packing companies of Armour, Hormel and Silverbow all showed variations on a theme: a father at an Easter Sunday dinner table carving a ham, surrounded by an approving wife and expectant children.

Off to the side of these displays were stacks of the smaller and cheaper "picnic" hams (a picnic ham is not, properly speaking, a ham at all, but the shoulder of the pig). There were no company-supplied pictures or even brand names on them. On Holy Saturday, customers crowded into our store, responding to the sale signs painted on the plateglass windows fronting the street and sorting themselves into upper and lower socioeconomic strata: the affluent bought honey-cured, hickory-smoked hams; the less-than-affluent bought unadjectived "picnics."

Prettyfeather was the only person I ever remember who bought ham hocks--gristly on the inside and leathery on the outside, but smoked and therefore emanating the aroma of a feast—on Holy Saturday. She was the only Indian I knew by name, although I grew up in Indian country. Every Saturday she came into our store to make a small purchase: pickled pig's feet, chitlins, blood sausage, headcheese, pork liver.

She was always by herself. She wore moccasins and was wrapped in a blanket, even in the warmest weather. The coins she used for her purchases were in a leather pouch that hung like a goiter at her neck. Her face was the color and texture of the moccasins on her feet.

Indian was a near-mythological word for me, full of nobility and filled with stories of the hunt and sacred ceremony. Somehow it never occurred to me that this Indian squaw who came into our store every Saturday and bought barely edible meats belonged to that nobility.

While she made her purchases from us and did whatever other shopping she did on these Saturdays in town, her husband and seven or eight other Indian braves sat on apple boxes in the alley behind the Pastime Bar and passed around a jug of Thunderbird wine. Several jugs, actually. As I made my backdoor deliveries of steaks

and hamburger to the restaurants along Main Street, I passed up and down the alley several times each Saturday and watched the empty jugs accumulate. Late in the evening, Bennie Odegaard, son of one of the bar owners and a little older than I, would pull the braves into his dad's pickup truck and drive them out south of town to their encampment along the Stillwater River and dump them out.

I don't know how Prettyfeather got back to that small cluster of tar-paper shacks and tepees. She walked, I guess. Carrying her small purchases. On Holy Saturday she carried four ham hocks.

I had never heard of any Saturday designated as holy. It was simply Saturday. If, once a year, precision was required, Holy Saturday was "the Saturday before Easter." It was one of the heaviest workdays of the year. Beginning early in the morning, I carried the great, fragrant hams shipped from Armour in Spokane, Hormel in Missoula and Silverbow in Butte and arranged them symmetrically in pyramids.

I grew up in a religious home that believed devoutly in the saving benefits of the death of Jesus and the glorious life of resurrection. But between these two polar events of the faith, we worked a long and lucrative day. Holiness was put on hold till Sunday. Saturday was for working hard and making money. It was a day when the evidence of hard work and its consequence—money—became publicly apparent. The evidence was especially clear on that particular Saturday, when we sold hundreds of hams to deserving Christians—and four ham hocks to an Indian squaw and her pickup load of drunks.

I would have been very surprised, and somewhat unbelieving, to have known that in the very town in which I worked furiously all those unholy Saturdays, there were people besides the Indians who were not working at all, not spending, but remembering the despair of a world disappointed in its grandest hopes, entering into the emptiness of death by deliberately emptying the self of illusion and indulgence and self-importance. Keeping vigil for Easter. Waiting for the dawn.

And some of them listening to this ancient Holy Saturday sermon from a preacher now unknown:

Something strange is happening on earth today—a great silence, and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and hell

trembles with fear. He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow the captive Adam and Eve, he who is both God and the son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the cross, the weapon that had won him the victory. At the sight of him, Adam, the first man he had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone: "My Lord be with you all." Christ answered him: "And with your spirit." He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying "Awake, O sleeper and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." (The reading for Holy Saturday in *The Liturgy of the Hours*)

As it turned out, I interpreted the meaning of the world and the people around me far more in terms of the hard working on Saturday than anything said or sung on Friday and Sunday. Whatever was told me in those years (and I have no doubt that I heard truth), what I absorbed in my bones was a liturgical rhythm in which the week reached its climax in a human workday, the results of which were enjoyed on Sunday, and especially on Easter Sunday. Those assumptions provided the grid for a social interpretation of the world around me: Saturday was the day for hard work, or for displaying its results—namely, money. If someone appeared neither working nor spending on Saturday, there was something wrong, catastrophically wrong. The Indians attempting a hungover Easter feast on ham hocks were the most prominent example of something wrong.

It was a view of life shaped by "the Gospel according to America." The rewards were obvious, and I enjoyed them. Hard work pays off. I learned much in those years in my father's butcher shop, yet there was one large omission that set all other truth dangerously at risk: the omission of holy rest. The refusal to be silent. The obsessive avoidance of emptiness.

It was far more than ignorance on Holy Saturday; it was weekly arrogance. Not only was the Good Friday crucifixion bridged to the Easter resurrection by this day furious with energy and lucrative with reward, but all the gospel truths were likewise set as either introductions or conclusions to the human action that displayed our prowess and our virtue every week of the year. God was background to our business. Every gospel truth was maintained intact and all the human energy was wholly admirable, but the rhythms were off. Desolation—and with it companionship with the desolate, ranging from first-century Semites to 20th-century Indians—was all but wiped from consciousness.

As the story formed in my prayer, this most poignant irony became embedded in my memory: those seven or eight Indians, with the Thunderbird empties lying around drunk in the alley behind the Pastime Bar on Saturday afternoon, while we Scandinavian Christians worked diligently late into the night, oblivious to the holiness of the day. The Indians were in despair, religious despair, something very much like the Holy Saturday despair narrated in the Gospels. Their way of life had come to nothing, the only buffalo left to them was engraved on nickels, a couple of which one of their squaws had paid out that morning for four bony ham hocks. The early sacredness of their lives was a wasteland; and they, godforsaken as they supposed, drugged their despair with Thunderbird and buried their dead visions and dreams in the alley behind the Pastime, ignorant of the God at work beneath their emptiness.

People talk about steep learning curves. I was embarked on a steep unlearning curve. It didn't happen overnight, but it happened. Prettyfeather gave me the story that provided a text for the extensive unlearning before me, the unlearning that was necessary to clear the ground for learning that God at work—not I—was the center of the way I was going to be living for the rest of my life. Inappropriate, anxiety-driven, fear-driven work would only interfere with and distract from what God was already doing. My "work" assignment was to pay more attention to what God does than what I do and then to find, and guide others to find, the daily, weekly, yearly rhythms that would get this awareness into our bones. Holy Saturday for a start. And then Sabbath-keeping. Staying in touch with people in despair, knowing them by name and waiting for resurrection.

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