

## **“What Have You Done For the World Today?”**

Rev. DC Fortune

UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

June 9, 2024

I remember her voice like it was yesterday.

She'd call on the phone, sometimes to speak to her niece, my partner, and sometimes to speak to me, and sometimes just to speak to whomever answered the phone. Annette was old, and we were young. She had wisdom to share and we had the kind of naïve, youthful exuberance that made her smile, despite our sinful lifestyle. It helped that I would bring her fresh vegetables from our garden and occasionally a dessert that would send her blood sugar into the stratosphere, which neither she nor I ever confessed to her doctors.

“What have you done for your country today?” she shouted into the phone.

Annette shouted because she was old, remember, and deaf, and she didn't like her hearing aids, especially in the summer, so she just yelled and required everyone else to yell back.

“What have you done for your country today?”

Was her stylized way of asking “what have you accomplished today that is worth talking about?”

Have you read the paper?

Made coffee?

Not killed anybody?

All excellent things to accomplish before noontime.

It was a question asked by a member of the greatest generation who understood that we all have an obligation to do something to contribute to society.

This was a woman who might have done anything had she been born in another age, but she was born when she was, and so her options were limited: nurse, secretary, housewife, nun. She chose to be a nurse. She told us stories of her father who owned a small local market and would trade ration coupons with some of the young salesmen so that she could get the silk stockings required of all nursing students. Her father was forever bringing home the salesmen that stopped at his store, to share a meal with his family. When his wife Alva saw him coming home with yet another stranger, she simply added a couple potatoes to whatever was cooking to make it stretch as far as it needed to in order to feed everyone at the table, and sliced the fresh bread a little thinner so that there would be enough for everyone to have at least one slice.

Annette lived in the nursing school dormitory, as I recall, and spent much of World War II working night shifts in the hospital, attending classes during the day, and rolling bandages for the war effort. I'm not sure how bandages rolled by nursing students in Waterville, Maine, may have made it to the front lines in Europe or the Pacific, but she and her nursing student colleagues rolled mountains of the things. Her sister, the mother of my partner, was considerably younger and still lived in the protective care of her devout family.

"What have you done for your country today?" she barked into the phone.

I say she barked, probably because of the volume of the call, but I could always hear the smile on her face. What were "the kids" (that was us) up to today?

We were always doing interesting things. I was teaching myself how to fish at the time and was still very bad at it. I shared my stories with her. My partner and I had gone what we called "yard sale-ing" for interesting treasures on a college student's budget.

My relationship to the family of my first partner provided me with a new understanding of how to relate to one's surroundings, be it family, neighborhood, community, and various gradations of public life. The family I grew up in did not speak plainly about service and good deeds. Volunteer

work was generally done through church or school, and was separate from our dinner table conversations. Nobody ever asked me “What did you do today that was good?” Occasionally I was asked if I had finished my homework or chores or similar, but never was I expected to find something that needed doing and to do it. In fact, any time I got creative about being helpful, I was more often scolded for doing whatever the task was incorrectly.

So hearing “what have you done for your country?” was a new thing. It prompted me to be mindful about my actions through the day. It guided me into a way of thinking that intentionally noticed people and things around me that might be helped or lifted up.

I grew a lot in that first relationship. I learned to make being helpful a habit. When visiting the aforementioned aunt, before I left, I would be sure to ask if there was anything heavy that needed to be brought up or down a flight of stairs, or anything reached down or put up from a shelf that was out of reach. Service in these small things became a natural habit for me.

I confess I am not as good at this sort of practice now as I was back then, perhaps because it seems to be that I, more often, tend to be the one who needs things carried up or down, as opposed to helping someone else.

One of the things I learned in that practice of intentional, simple service, was that little things make for big relationships.

Small kindnesses, offered and exchanged regularly, are the building blocks of strong, deep relationships.

Small acts of service let others know we are thinking of them and their needs, and it is human nature to like and appreciate someone who makes you happy, or more comfortable.

What might it take for us to develop the habit of asking ourselves, instead of “what have you done for your country today?” but “what have you done out of love for the world today?”

What might it take for us to ask each other this question?

What have YOU done out of love for the world today?

What kindness have you offered today that made the world a better place to be?

I remember sitting outside a little pizzeria with a friend during seminary. It was a warm spring afternoon, and we were waiting for our food. A man who appeared to belong to the local population of unhoused folks in the Boston area was picking up bottles and cans on the streets and sidewalks to turn in for the five cent deposit. He was fairly nondescript as many of the homeless folks are to those with more comfort and privilege. He was white, and had dark hair that was untrimmed and uncombed. His clothes were tattered and worn, and it appeared that neither he nor his clothing had enjoyed the luxury of a bath in recent days. He was neither high nor drunk that we could discern, but he may have had some mental health diagnoses beyond our expertise to recognize. He moved in the manner of someone practiced at being invisible, for being homeless, dirty, and poor in Newton Center will often attract the attention of law enforcement or wary shopkeepers. He puttered quietly at his task, separating his treasures into categories of glass, plastic, and tin cans to more easily claim his reward later on.

We observed him for a little while, likely discussing in lofty terms the injustice of capitalism and greed and the irony of an unhoused person in Newton Center, Massachusetts picking up bottles for spare change to scrape together whatever his needs for the day might be.

He pulled his little grocery cart along, and bent to pick up bits of trash that he put in the trash cans on the corner, and bottles and cans that he put in his cart. He found a discarded water bottle that was maybe one third full, and picked it up. He unscrewed the cap, walked to where there was a tree planted in the sidewalk, poured out the water at the base of the tree, and returned to his cart, where he stashed the bottle with its similar mates.

It was my lunch friend who remarked on his simple kindness: offering the water he found to the tree instead of merely pouring it out onto the ground to evaporate.

The tree could not offer this man anything in return, so his was an act of real, however humble, generosity, done without thought for recognition or reward. It was simply a kind thing to do.

What have you done to love the world today?

Acts of kindness and generosity need not be grand gestures like donating a million dollars to a particular cause. They can be as simple as watering a tree whose shade you may never enjoy.

Our theme for June is *Renewal*, and it has me thinking about ways that we can renew our practices of generosity and kindness.

How might we renew our commitment to love?

How might we renew our commitment to justice?

How might we train ourselves to offer kindness as an automatic reflex?

Do you need anything heavy moved before I go? Anything in the attic you need down here? Anything in the cellar you need brought up? OK, great.

I'm running out to the store for a few things. Need anything?

I'm hitting the coffee drive-through. Want me to pick something up for you?

We can offer this sort of thing to our spouses or partners, our parents or kids, our neighbors, our co-workers, or the tree planted in the sidewalk outside a pizzeria in a suburban town.

These acts of spiritual generosity are what connect us to each other in small ways that weave together to make deep, meaningful relationships.

I challenge us all this week to ask ourselves at least once each day "What have you done for love today? What have you done to make the world a better place, even in some tiny sort of way?"

May this be our practice and our prayer.

Amen.