

know, we are all at heart beggars. What we do all of our lives is beg for inner peace, for love, and for salvation.”

I was deeply moved by his dramatic plea. It seemed to me an expression of the essential loneliness of being. Educated, worldly, successful, and wealthy though he might be, salvation—spiritual, experiential, or practical—remained elusive. It is not a surprise. So much of what we do in life with our families, our work, and our ongoing search for place and community, love and faith, is because we do not want to be lonely. The world makes it hard to find inner peace and salvation lies who knows where. My West Virginia friend is also not the first person to push back on “the heft of cathedral tunes.”

We have heard others speak of wanting to be more in touch with the center of their lives. They seek the alignment of individual convictions and beliefs with a broader community, or social or public purpose. The literal and spiritual journey of this West-Virginia transplant has finally found a home and with it a purpose for wealth in a place with great needs. The application of one’s knowledge, and skills, and life experience to the issue at hand is another common theme. Seriousness of purpose is also key for those who have made it work—this is not a game. When these elements come together, generosity of self, means, and spirit takes on new meaning.

It is how we come to the work. It is how we find purpose, how we find meaning. My West Virginia friend expressed it one way. There are others.

The Women Religious

Sister Margaret Leonard is, among other things, what might be called a piece of work.

A few years ago I arrived with my friend Dan at Project Hope, the remarkable organization founded in the 1950s by a community of the Little Sisters of the Assumption.

Sister Margaret belongs to this International Community of Women Religious who live and work in poverty neighborhoods in every continent of our world. Project Hope is in Roxbury, Massachusetts.

When family homelessness emerged as a major problem in their community, Sister Margaret and her colleagues opened the doors of their home and invited homeless families to live with them and called it Project Hope. Some of these individuals were part of the genesis of Paul and Phyllis Fireman’s One Family Campaign that has the goal of ending family homelessness in the state.

My friend Dan gives generously, and anonymously, to small, community-based projects and had been a long-term supporter of Project Hope. As we

walked into the house that feels more like a home than a shelter, Sister Margaret greeted us profusely. She is dramatic, a storyteller who openly shares her own visions, ideas, and knowledge of God’s mysterious ways. She can get you to throw up your hands and surrender faster than anyone I know.

“Let me tell you what we need to do here” is all I can remember, except for Dan writing a somewhat bigger check than he had intended.

That is one side of Sister Margaret, the practical missionary and salesperson, who is pretty adept politically as well. And here is another, the side that relates to purpose:

“Visions are in us as constant companions and we move toward their realization inch by inch and sometimes leap by leap. At rare and special times, our efforts reach a tipping point, which catapults us into entirely new ways of thinking and acting. In this way, visions call us into a future yet to unfold.”

Sister Margaret’s vision is of a world that is more equitable, just, and loving. She has held up this vision for nearly a half century, and it has called, inspired, and moved her to a series of choices. It has sent her to live and stand with families struggling with poverty as neighbor, friend, and colleague. Doing so she has learned the inch-by-inch lessons of HOPE in the work of justice and celebrated the leaps that have graced all of our lives in certain moments of history.

“I believe that justice and equity are inseparable. Justice means that resources are shared in a meaningful way. The pursuit of justice is the way to make that happen. In this sense, *justice* is not a noun but a verb. The reality of where I live and have spent my adult life is that people lack resources, and it has devastating results. Justice is the pursuit of resources to counter the devastation.”

“I have learned to look at the world through the basement window, through the lives of people at the bottom. Yesterday, I was talking to a neighborhood mother who has four boys about the new Silver Line buses, which are double-length and have huge windows. ‘Everyone is excited about the new buses,’ she said, ‘but my sixteen-year-old son is afraid to ride the bus for fear that he may be shot.’ Why should children have to grow up in neighborhoods where fear for their own safety is paramount, where fear saps their energy and limits their potential?”

“I think of the multitude of mothers who live with shame, lack of respect, and blame because they can’t provide housing for themselves and their children. Like Matilda, who works forty hours a week at a local bank but lives with her two-year-old in the hallway of an apartment building because she cannot afford housing. She, too, is a victim of fear—fear that if she seeks help, the state will put her child in foster care.”

"The faces of beautiful children full of spirit and potential fill my heart. If they were privileged to live in an environment with opportunities for development how different life would be for them. I think of Juan, a creative and artistic young man with a gentle spirit who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and ended up spending his late teens in a federal prison. I think of young mothers of poor families who could become productive leaders in our world, if only they had the chance for quality education, yet are reduced to a life of struggle."

This is life in the basement, and it is a global basement. Throughout the world, we have chosen to structure our national and international institutions and economies in such a way that more and more families lack the resources for human survival. Today we are witnesses to the greatest economic disparity among families in the United States and throughout the world.

"I can't reconcile these differences with a shrug and platitude like 'That's life.'"

If Sister Margaret is motivated by social justice, she is hugely influenced by her faith.

"My vision of the world was forged from the revelations of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the insights emerging from the New Story of the Universe.

"Early in my life, I discovered the God that Jesus called Father and God's dream for humanity 'that we may all be one.' In a deepening personal relationship with my God, I began to see the world through different eyes and to recognize how far we are from the realization of God's dream. I heard the call to strive to make it happen in history in this time and space which is mine and ours.

"I believe that our Creator God, One for whom we have many different names, created each of us with an interior spark of divinity and a mandate to image the One who creates, loves, and frees (Genesis). We are all sisters and brothers, 'siblings with one another and with beast and flower.'¹¹ Our mission is to create in the time and space which is ours a world, a universe, that is a family dwelling place where there is respect, love, and dignity for all its inhabitants. Genesis awakened me to this true purpose of creation.

"We need to internalize the precious laws of the universe and write them large in our human creations. What are these important laws: Interiority, differentiation, and communion?¹²

"*Interiority* means that every individual reality is its own self-organizing activity, its own interior center. There is a deep mystery at the core of each human being, a spiritual center and source of creative energy. How different our world would be if we revered the creative center of everyone and everything.

"*Differentiation* means that everything that is, is different from everything else that is. Difference is the intention of the Creator, and it is gift and blessing. Would incidents of war, racism, prejudice and all the other '-isms' of human history be reduced if we grasped this important truth?

"*Communion* is the third law. As we look at nature, the web of interconnection is everywhere. For every reality of the universe is intimately present to every other reality in the universe and finds its fulfillment in mutual presence. The entire evolutionary process depends on communion. Everything is oriented to communion that they may be One.

"So this is my vision of the world and these are my sources of inspiration and passion. They are within me. Each of us has a unique spiritual center and we must be in touch with that center. When we are, we can sense the civic forms that correspond to the spiritual principles. I don't mean to be too mystical here. We may think we understand how to organize a more just society, but we only know by experimenting and by evaluating the effects of our experiment. We need to ask all the time whether the civic forms are really working for the people who should benefit. We must always seek out new ways to organize communities to achieve justice, equity, and love among people.

"These are the principles by which I live and they are embodied in the organization we call Project Hope.

What would Sister Margaret's benediction be for those of us on this journey? It is this, from Denise Levertov's poem entitled "Beginners":

We have only begun
to imagine justice and mercy
only begun to envision
how it might be
to live together as siblings with beast and flower.

Becoming Ruth

When Angelica Berrie, a Philippine national and a Catholic, married her husband Russ, he asked whether she would consider converting to Judaism. Her answer was "I'm a better Jew now than you are! Why should I convert?" Evidence suggests that before Angelica and Russ married, he had not been a very observant Jew, and Angelica, schooled by the nuns in her convent school in Manila, thought that was terrible. Together, they began observing Shabbat every Friday and taking his children to High Holidays. Angelica in earnest and