

A Hill of Beans

The Grace of Everyday Troubles

Valerie Schultz

A Give Us This Day Book



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Dedicated to Randy, my soul mate,
my best mate, my far better half

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“Jesus does not want to come merely in the little things of our lives, but also *in our own littleness*: in our experience of feeling weak, frail, inadequate, perhaps even ‘messed-up.’”

—Pope Francis, Midnight Mass on Christmas, 2021

Introduction

You might feel it sometimes when you look up at a clear night sky, at the scads of faraway stars and the vastness of the universe: you sense your own smallness. It can happen when you lose someone you love, and you compare the short span of a human life to the millions of years of history. Or when you are stuck on a freeway and speculate about the identities and experiences of the hundreds of strangers whom you will likely never know, occupying the cars inching forward in the other lanes. You are conscious of the insignificance of the present instant in the context of all the past and future ones, and the irrelevance of one person, yourself included. It’s a humbling moment, perhaps tinged with melancholy.

This blue feeling reminds me of the dramatic climax of one of my favorite movies, *Casablanca*, when Humphrey Bogart as Rick tells Ingrid Bergman as Ilsa that “the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.”

Rick is right. Most of us are little people. Most of us do not have problems with any global consequence. But our problems can be enormous to us, and the way we solve or don’t solve them can determine the course of our lives. It occurs to me that we do ourselves an injustice by minimizing the issues we face to hill-of-beans status.

Because as people of faith, we know that God cares about the problems of little people. God knows every last little bean. God walks with us through our quandaries and difficulties and doubts. We may feel silly bringing our everyday worries to God in prayer, but Jesus teaches us that in God's eyes, we amount to everything. "Are not five sparrows sold for two small coins?" Jesus asks. "Yet not one of them has escaped the notice of God. Even the hairs of your head have all been counted. Do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows" (Luke 12:6-7). Setting aside the fact that sparrows are not on our shopping lists these days, we get the point.

The sacred texts often reassure us of how much we matter to God. Psalm 139, for example, reminds us that God sees us as we are: "My very self you know. / My bones are not hidden from you" (Ps 139:14-15). We begin to understand that each seemingly slight hill of beans in our lives is known and dear to God, because of God's unbounded love for us. The psalm makes our relationship to God personal: "Probe me, God, know my heart; / try me, know my thoughts. / See if there is a wicked path in me; / lead me along an ancient path" (Ps 139:23-24). The low altitude of our particular hill of beans matters not to our all-caring God, who will lead us if we ask.

Circling back to the lessons of *Casablanca* My husband and I are such fans that we danced our first married dance to "As Time Goes By." The song Sam plays under duress is our song. Yet when our youngest daughter finally acquiesced to watching this beloved old black-and-white movie with her parents, the ending horrified her. "Why do you LIKE this movie?" she asked us, utterly dismayed that the characters, upon realizing that their problems don't amount to a hill of beans, do not get the happy ending they deserve, the one she expected. Even so, the greater good is served, a beautiful friendship begins, and surely God notices their selfless act.

Because God notices all of us, in our goodness and in our struggles and in our failures.

“What is man that you are mindful of him?” asks the psalmist (Ps 8:5). I can almost picture God with a twinkling eye, answering with Rick’s toast for the ages: “Here’s looking at you, kid.”

Author’s note on my long-suffering family: I remember a moment of uncomfortable recognition when my husband and I saw the movie *Something’s Gotta Give*, in which Diane Keaton portrays a well-regarded playwright. Jack Nicholson’s character, Harry, is discomfited to find, almost verbatim, scenes from their past relationship in her new play. He feels exposed and embarrassed. But it’s not really him, the writer explains: the play’s character is named Henry, not Harry. Besides, Henry is killed off in Act Two (which doesn’t exactly set Harry’s mind at ease). I believe my husband found much with which to identify in that scene of the film. As did I: writers will mine the gems of life without mercy.

In nonfiction, however, the real-life subjects have nowhere to hide. My children have grown up with a mother who speculates about them and parses them publicly, and while they may think this is normal, it is something about which I am periodically seized with guilt. A writer, as Joan Didion noted, is “always selling somebody out.” I worry that I have shamelessly exploited our family experiences for the sake of a deadline. I worry that my loved ones appear in print more frequently than they might appreciate. But once, while visiting one of my kids in a college dorm, I was surprised and delighted to see a column I’d written posted on the door for all to read. So perhaps my darlings have not been scarred for life.

My husband and children are like the angels and saints in how they deal with having a wife and mother who uses them for raw

material. They are gracious in the face of exposure, and have definitely suffered for the sake of art. They love me anyway.

My children, in their blooming lives, have given and continue to give me plenty to write about. They do things of which I do not approve. They make choices that make me look bad. They mystify me and madden me. But they also make me proud and make me laugh, make me mindful and make me grateful, make my heart stretch beyond its limits and make my soul soar. They've even made me a grandmother. I pray that they will always recognize the hand and the voice of God in their lives. May they reach for the stars and walk on firm ground. May they be their best selves.

(And one more thing, a note on dates: Rather than organizing these essays chronologically, I've presented them by theme. To help dispel any timeline confusion, I've followed each title by the year in which it was written.)

Not Belonging/Alienation

The Message in the Machine

(2012)

My husband finally got me to see the movie *Hugo*. I'd had no desire to see it when it was first out in the theaters, because it had been advertised as a 3D film. In my biased mind, 3D means all show, no substance. Plus I don't want to have to wear cheesy glasses over my actual glasses for two hours. Plus the things rushing at me in 3D productions make me feel a little nauseous. I know: I'm old.

My husband really wanted to see *Hugo*, but I kept deflecting him. We finally saw it last week, sans glasses, and I've been thinking about it ever since. The joke was on me, because I adored this movie, possibly more than my husband did. I now recommend it to everyone. *Hugo* is masterful. It is visually lovely, well-written, beautifully acted, and directed by a pro (Scorsese!). It is sweet, funny, heartbreaking, suspenseful, educational, and the bearer of a fantastic message.

The movie *Hugo* is based on a book called *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. The author, Brian Selznick, wrote and illustrated such a beguiling hybrid of a novel and a storybook that he won the 2008 Caldecott Medal, which is normally given to a

traditional picture book. The plot centers on an orphan's tale. When Hugo's father dies, Hugo is taken in by a drunken uncle who makes his living by winding all the clocks in a busy train station in 1930s Paris. When the uncle disappears, Hugo continues to wind the clocks so that no one notices his uncle's absence. He lives alone in the walls of the station, steals food, hides on the margins, and breaks the viewer's heart. Hugo has inherited his father's love and talent for machines. With patience beyond his years, Hugo tinkers with and fixes all kinds of mechanisms. His true goal is to resurrect the strange, sad-faced automaton—a mysterious mechanical man—that he and his father had been working on together. Hugo meets Isabelle, a comparably lonely girl who loves to read, but who craves actual adventure. The rest of the movie depicts Hugo and Isabelle's adventure together, intertwined with the origin of Hugo's automaton and the history of the motion picture, but I will stop short of spoilers: I don't want to ruin it for anyone.

But see it! It's the message of *Hugo* that has stayed with me. Isabelle has also lost her parents, although she lives with her godparents. Hugo explains to her, in an attempt to assuage her sense of loss, that he has found comfort in the depths of his grief by imagining the entire world as a machine. Machines, Hugo says, only come with exactly the parts they need, and nothing more. "So I figured," he tells her, "if the entire world was one big machine, I couldn't be an extra part. I had to be here for some reason. And that means you have to be here for some reason, too."

It struck me as deeply spiritual, this young boy's attempt to make sense of a seemingly nonsensical existence. I like thinking of the world as God's machine, as a wondrous invention in which every part is needed. We are metaphysical cogs, souls with different abilities and attributes and functions, but somehow we all fit together. And we are all necessary for the grand machine to work exactly as it's supposed to work.

Isabelle's godfather is an older gentleman who exemplifies one of the pitfalls of aging, in that he no longer feels he is a useful part of society. Many older people, especially upon retirement, feel worthless, alienated, cast off by the lives they used to lead. My mother often spoke of feeling "like a leftover" after my dad died. It was like she'd lost sight of her proper place in the world, and instead saw a future in which she was an ill fit, an extra. Hugo tells Isabelle that it makes him sad when a machine is broken, because it can't perform its function. "Maybe it's the same with people," he says. "If you lose your purpose, it's like you're broken."

Hugo and Isabelle eventually offer an avenue of redemption for her godfather's brokenness, which is another reason to love this movie. Like Hugo, I don't believe we ever become spare parts. We are not created for despair. Our purpose may change, but we remain essential to the whole. Not one of us, in the divine scheme of things, is extra. We are needed. We belong.

If that's not a message from God, I don't know what is.



Daughter of Doubt

(2002)

It had to happen. Just as the shoemaker's children go bare-foot and the carpenter's children live under a leaky roof, I knew this day would come. I am a church worker whose child has stopped going to church.

My children have grown up with the church as their second home, as it was pretty much accepted that if I were not at home, I was at the church. In my role as a director of religious education, I've had small students ask me if I lived in my office, or if I were a nun. My own children have an easy comfort both with the church itself and the accompanying facilities that has always warmed me. They have helped set up, run, and clean up a slew of activities over the years, and with very little grumbling. They've also had fun with friends at different ages and in various programs. The church has been good for all of us, and vice versa.

I expected this to happen when my oldest daughter left for college. After all, one of the first things I let slide in college was Sunday Mass, or even faking going to Sunday Mass, which I had perfected in my last year of high school. But my oldest found a Saturday evening Mass with music she liked and still attends regularly, even adding her hard-earned minimum-wage dollars to the collection. She has made me happy and proud to be such a good mother.

So what do I do with another daughter, a senior in high school who will leave home in the fall, who has been confirmed and co-teaches a kindergarten religious education class, and who faked sick three Sundays in a row until finally admitting that she just doesn't think she buys into this Catholic jazz? Scratch that bit about being a good mother.

My first reaction was the typical "As long as you're under my roof, you'll do what I say" approach. But interestingly enough, it was my husband, whom our children see as the stricter parent, who questioned the wisdom of force-feeding faith. It's not like she's a young child, he reasoned with me. She made the choice to be confirmed as a Catholic last year. Now the decision really is hers, if we practice what we say we believe.

And there it is. It is so much easier to preach things when they pertain to other people's children. How many parents I

have counseled to let their young adult children find their own way, to be patient and hopeful, that as parents all they can do is model their faith by the way they live their lives: I should listen to myself! But this is my kid, and I find my heart is breaking.

When we finally talk, my daughter is angry. The rampant revelations of sexual abuse by priests have fueled her doubts; certainly the hypocrisy she perceives in supposed people of faith who conduct themselves as people of hate violates her sense of justice. I have no good answers for these indefensible human acts. I understand her doubt because I have been there. That, alas, she cannot see.

I wonder how many other people see me as she does: upright, strong, committed perhaps to a fault, faithful without doubt. It is my veneer. She doesn't see that I wrestle with some of the same issues she does. In fact, as much as my oldest may get her unquestioning Mass attendance from me, this daughter may get her discomfort with the zealous from me. I have seen her squirm at Youth Days in the face of boundless, hand-clapping, Hosanna-shouting energy, as well as when an acquaintance peppers her conversation with holy ejaculations ("It's a beautiful day, praise God! Praise God in Heaven!!"), and so do I. I just hide it well. She doesn't see it or believe that I could possibly understand.

And part of me doesn't understand. Life without the Eucharist seems a barren place to me, and I have to remember that her denial of the sacrament is not permanent. She assures me at the end of our conversation that she is not closing any doors. She believes something, even if she doesn't know quite what that is. She still wants to work at the soup kitchen, and I am relieved that her sense of social justice, always a bright light in her, seems undimmed.

Perhaps she will find God in other places. I hope that perhaps someday, a whiff of the smoky incense she once carried

into church as a young dancer will remind her of where she truly belongs. Perhaps an Angelus bell ringing in a distant city, or the face of Christ at a soup kitchen, or her love for ritual and poetry will call her back. Perhaps a future crisis will provide her with her own pair of spiritual ruby slippers, which she'll click all the way to the altar as she realizes that there's no place like home. And that our Church is a place with ample room for flaws and doubt and darkness, as well as plenty of faith and light. For people with struggling minds and suffering, loving hearts, just like her.

For now, her empty place in the pew each Sunday is one of those sad thorns among the lovely roses of motherhood. Praise God.



My Burden Is Light

(2014)

This is usually how I operate: A dilemma arises, over which I worry and fret and make lists of pros & cons and lose sleep. I debate, I research, I agonize. Then, when I am at my wits' end, I remember to take a breath, and pray.

Why is prayer so often my last resort rather than my first? My life pattern is that at each crisis or turning point, I must relearn that I need divine help. Over the years, the following verses, drawn from the Gospel of Matthew, have helped me to remember to pray: "Come to me, all you who labor and are

burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light” (Matt 11:28-30).

I love this Gospel reading. It reveals the tender side of Jesus, the Jesus who so obviously loves us, who comforts us and shoulders our baggage and sits with us when we most need a friend. This is the gentle Jesus, the “humble of heart.” This is the Jesus I find in prayer, if I only take the time to pray. I recently came across a page in an old journal where I had copied these verses from Matthew, and later penciled below it, “Keep saying it, Jesus: I forget.”

“Come to me,” says Jesus, inviting us to lay down our worldly burdens and exchange them for a lighter one. Prayer is how we send an RSVP to his invitation. When we are world-weary, we long for the rest that comes from a spiritual embrace. No wonder we refer to a life-altering change of heart as a “Come-to-Jesus” moment. By responding to an invitation, we are transformed. When we do come to Jesus, the sense of completion is revelatory. The epiphany dawns, the light shines, and we finally find that rest because, as St. Augustine pointed out, our hearts are restless until they rest in him.

These words of Jesus seem simple, yet they are words of nuance and depth. Biblical readings can sound contradictory, and the preaching of Jesus is no exception. For all the gentle promise of his words, there are times when his yoke does not always seem easy, and his burden does not always seem light. Might not a yoke, after all—a wooden crosspiece that tethers a pair of animals to a cart or a plow—remind us of the wooden crosspiece that Jesus carried to his own execution? His yoke may be the crosses we must carry in our own lives. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,” says Jesus. We know from experience that when we rely on Jesus to help us carry the

crosses we encounter in our lives, they are indeed lighter than when we try to drag them along the path on our own. The burden of following Jesus, then, is a blessing of paradox.

Whenever I read this Gospel, I feel myself surrender. I have to think of the act of surrendering not as a weak or negative event, not as a loss in battle, but as an act of trust. When we come to Jesus, when we give ourselves over to God's will, when we accept that metaphorical yoke, we can find rest. I just wish that I could hold on to that elusive peace rather than find myself heavily burdened yet again by temporal cares and worries. It seems that answering Jesus' invitation to come to him must be a daily affair. If I am to learn from Jesus, every day must become a teachable moment, especially when I am such a dense student. When I am weary, when I am burdened, when there is nothing left to do but pray, when I finally take the yoke of Jesus upon me, this is the moment of conversion. What has been heavy becomes as light as breath, and I rest. I have come home.



Nevertheless, She Persisted

(2017)

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell inadvertently started something. I imagine McConnell might wish he had chosen less quotable words to compel Senator Elizabeth Warren to stop talking during a confirmation hearing for Attorney General Jeff Sessions. “She was warned. She was given

an explanation,” said McConnell in his signature monotone. “Nevertheless, she persisted.”

And that’s how a catchphrase is born. Also a slogan, a meme, a tattoo, a chant, a protest sign, a rallying cry. Online sites hawk t-shirts, sweatshirts, jewelry, and bumper stickers. Thus sayeth McConnell: *Nevertheless, she persisted!* It’s a phrase we women embrace, because persistence is what we do.

I am reminded of the time my daughter, when she was a teenager, used a biblical image to strengthen an argument. I can’t remember what she wanted at the time—a later curfew or a raise in allowance—but she kept after me about it, bringing up the topic repeatedly. Finally she said, “I’m the persistent widow, Mom.” And I realized she was alluding to the previous Sunday’s Gospel reading. She had actually been listening to something in church! I was amazed and impressed. So naturally I rewarded her persistence, and her tactics.

The widow my daughter referred to appears in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus prefaces the parable with our need “to pray always without becoming weary” (Luke 18:1). The widow does not give up on asking for justice from a corrupt judge. She does what women must do: she persists. She wears the judge down until he gives in and rules in her favor, just to get rid of her. The powerless overcomes the powerful.

Stories of persistent women abound in the Gospels. There is the woman in the Gospel of Luke who suffers from excessive bleeding. She has endured much at the hands of many doctors, but she has not been cured. Society shuns her as unclean due to the ever-presence of menstrual blood. She persists in getting close enough to Jesus to touch the hem of his cloak, believing in Jesus’ power to heal her. Her persistence and faith are rewarded (Luke 8:43-48).

There is the Canaanite woman in the Gospel of Matthew, a foreigner, who persists in believing that Jesus can help her

daughter. Jesus answers that he was sent only to the Jews. "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs," he tells her (Matt 15:26). The disciples want Jesus to get rid of this pesky woman. But she persists: "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters" (Matt 15:27). Because of her faith, Jesus heals her daughter. Her persistence validates Jesus' redemptive role for non-Jews.

There is the nameless woman in the Gospel of Luke, weeping and wordless, who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. She kisses his feet and anoints them with oil. She persists in caring for him, even when Jesus' dining companions condemn her as a sinner. Jesus forgives her sins, saying, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:50).

There are the women in the Gospel of John who persist in following Jesus all the way to the foot of the cross, when most of his other followers have abandoned him (John 19:25). Among them is Mary, the mother of Jesus, who loves her son with the persistent love we women hold for our children, and reflects the parental love that God has for us.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus blesses the persistence of women when he equates it with faith, with prayer, with not losing heart. Atypically for his time, and in spite of the men around him who prefer that women stay quiet and go away, he listens to women. He converses with women. He acknowledges the worth of women. He understands that persistence is deeply tied to faith. Indeed, to this day, persistence in the cause of love and mercy requires a lot of faith and prayer and heart.

We women persist. Isn't that our job? Throughout history, we have persisted in our quest for respect, for justice, for equal rights, for suffrage, for education, for enfranchisement, for recognition, for making our voices heard. In the face of violence, of opposition, of ridicule, of belittlement, even of jail time, nevertheless, we have persisted.

And it's not over. It is perhaps never over. The many struggles of women continue around the world. We may suffer dissuasion, discouragement, and defeat. We will be warned and given explanations. Nevertheless, we persist.