People want me to tell them success stories. I understand this. They are the stories you want to tell, after all. So why does my scalp tighten whenever I am asked this? Surely, part of it comes from my being utterly convinced I’m a fraud.

I find Bill Cain’s reflection on the Shroud of Turin very consoling. He prefers frauds. He says, “If the shroud is a fraud then it is this masterful work of art. If it’s the real thing, it’s just dirty laundry.”

Twenty years of this work has taught me that God has greater comfort with inverting categories than I do. What is success and what is failure? What is good and what is bad? Setback or progress? Great stock these days, especially in nonprofits (and who can blame them), is placed in evidence-based outcomes. People, funders in particular, want to know if what you do “works.”

Are you, in the end, successful? Naturally, I find myself heartened by Mother Teresa’s take: “We are not called to be successful, but faithful.” This distinction is helpful for me as I barricade myself against the daily dread of setback. You need protection...
from the ebb and flow of three steps forward, five steps backward. You trip over disappointment and recalcitrance every day, and it all becomes a muddle. God intends it to be, I think. For once you choose to hang out with folks who carry more burden than they can bear, all bets seem to be off. Salivating for success keeps you from being faithful, keeps you from truly seeing whoever’s sitting in front of you. Embracing a strategy and an approach you can believe in is sometimes the best you can do on any given day. If you surrender your need for results and outcomes, success becomes God’s business. I find it hard enough to just be faithful.

In the first chapter, I mentioned Scappy, whom I hired on our graffiti crew. He was the one, in a previous incarnation, who pulled a gun out on me and regretted the reputation he’d spent twenty years building. Just a few short months into his employment with us, he was gunned down at 5:30 in the morning while rolling a paintbrush over some graffiti in Boyle Heights. The detectives let me cross the police yellow tape and permitted me to bless Scappy. “He must have been killed,” the detective tells me as he lifts the tape and I climb under it, “by the gang whose graffiti he was covering up.” I think, not likely, as I see his head and what appears to be something of a clean execution. No one really knows exactly why this happened to him, though it seemed clear that it had nothing to do with Homeboy Industries and the removal of graffiti. Something evidently caught up with Scappy. Maybe his past, maybe his recent present. Perhaps the prospect of leading a life, devoid of “reputation,” by the rules, and in the slow pace of the right thing, was more terrifying than exhilarating for Scappy. Maybe he displeased someone along the way. Sometimes the only thing you know is what something isn’t.

Quite apart from the tragic blow Scappy’s death was for all of us who loved him was the heartbreaking fact that he’d missed his chance to live in another way. Like a child thrilled but terrified by his first swim in the ocean, floating, carried, restful because he was moving in a completely different way, the new scene, its strangeness, its immensity had scared him back into the life he knew. Was he a success story? Does he now appear in some column of failure as we tally up outcomes? The tyranny of success often can’t be bothered with complexity. The tote board matters little when held up alongside Scappy’s intricate, tragic struggle to figure out who he was in the world.

Two months later, another of our graffiti workers, Raul, was gunned down in one of our trucks, alone, parked/idling on First Street in front of the post office shortly after noon. Again, what one comes to know is what this death wasn’t. Surely, it was not about Homeboy or connected in any way to graffiti or its removal. Equally certain is that it had no connection to Scappy’s death.

Just before Raul’s death, I had walked the few short blocks from Homeboy to my Jesuit community for lunch, and as I’m returning, I see Hector, whom everyone calls Fro (for the enormous Afro he sported in those days) running toward me. My heart caves in as I see him, his hair lively, bouncing back and forth as he grows frantic to reach me. I go to the hospital, and Raul dies there, while his mother’s screams pierce our hearts.

I used to tell homies that one of the reasons they continued to gangbang was they were never around to hear a mother scream when she heard her son was dead. I became something of a dreaded figure, I suppose—not unlike the uniformed officer knocking on the door of the family of the soldier serving in Iraq.
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The mother pulls back the drape, looks out the window, and knows what news he's bringing. More times than I even want to recall, I've knocked on the door, anytime, day or middle of the night, when the mother sees me, I always just blurt it out: "Lo mataron a Richie." It seems kinder, in the end, not to cloud the moment with undue prelude. And the screaming is devastatingly painful to behold. More than anything I know. With Latinas, the screams become yelps, a primordial, indigenous sound. The mother's rocking back and forth, with continuous wailing, can be upsetting enough to alter behavior.

I remember once (and only once) seeing all the homies gathered together plotting vengeance, immediately after the shooting of their homie Victor. They were all "posted up" in front of his house in the projects, his mother sitting on the front steps, worried about Victor's condition. Then I arrive. I lean over and whisper to her (having just returned from the hospital) that Victor is dead. And this time the homies are there to hear. Instant wailing, syncopated yelps, screams that curdle your insides. The homies didn't do anything that night. They went home instead. The price of it all delivered to them, courtesy of a grieving mother's vocal chords.

After spending the entire afternoon with Raul's mom and family, I wanted to get back to the office before closing time. I knew that the homies needed to see me, and I, them. With ten minutes left on the day's clock, my workers filed into my tiny office, one by one, to hug, to cry some, and to take my emotional temperature. Each one attentive, tender, and consumed by a self-forgetfulness that only saints, really, are able to pull off.

Then I am there alone with the ache that doesn't leave you and the echoey silence of the vacated headquarters. Even the ghosts of the place seemed to have stepped out, when Freddy, one of my workers, appears, standing in my doorway. He asks how I'm doing, and I sigh, beckoning him to sit.

"I know your heart is breaking," he says, beginning to cry. "I wish I had a magic wand to pass over your pain." As an adult, I can't recall ever crying with another person more fully than at that moment. We both just lose ourselves in sobbing. Usually, I'd put myself, as the homies say, "on check status," but even I couldn't pull this off at the moment. I'd been holding this enormous, outsize grief "in check" for so long and had sudden permission to release it in the gentle urging and vast heart of Freddy.

At twenty-three years old, he had worked at Homeboy for some years now in a wide variety of sites and tasks, but his singularly spectacular temper required frequent changes of venue. First the silkscreen plant, then the bulky-item drop-off center, and now, here at the headquarters. He surely, at this moment, knew how to use his deep rage and essential wound to hold all that I was carrying.

"You know, all of us here are drowning," Freddy begins with difficulty, the tears a tide that he's swimming against. "And YOU...you just reach in...and sweep us up." We resume our wailing, holding our heads, rocking some, unable to speak. Then Freddy, with his teeth clenched, and something nearly resembling his frequent bursts of anger, points his finger at me with a holy determination.

"I swear to you," he says, "If someone offered me a choice—right now—a million dollars or a chance to swoop ya up—" Freddy stops and swallows hard against this overflow of crying, "I...would...swoop...you...up." Through my tears, I am barely able to eke out, "You just did...you just did."
Tattoos on the Heart

Sr. Elaine Roulette, the founder of My Mother’s House in New York, was asked, “How do you work with the poor?” She answered, “You don’t. You share your life with the poor.” It’s as basic as crying together. It is about “casting your lot” before it ever becomes about “changing their lot.”

Success and failure, ultimately, have little to do with living the gospel. Jesus just stood with the outcasts until they were welcomed or until he was crucified—whichever came first.

The American poet Jack Gilbert writes, “The pregnant heart is driven to hopes that are the wrong size for this world.” The strategy and stance of Jesus was consistent in that it was always out of step with the world. Jesus defied all the categories upon which the world insisted: good-evil, success-failure, pure-impure. Surely, He was an equal-opportunity “pisser off-er” in this regard. The right wing would stare at Him and question where He chose to stand. They hated that He aligned Himself with the unclean, those outside—those folks you ought neither to touch nor be near. He hobnobbed with the leper, shared table fellowship with the sinner, and rendered Himself ritually impure in the process. They found it offensive that, to boot, Jesus had no regard for their wedge issues, their constitutional amendments or their culture wars.

The Left was equally annoyed. They wanted to see the ten-point plan, the revolution in high gear, the toppling of sinful social structures. They were impatient with His brand of solidarity. They wanted to see Him taking the right stand on issues, not just standing in the right place.

But Jesus just stood with the outcast. The Left screamed: “Don’t just stand there, do something.” And the Right maintained: “Don’t stand with those folks at all.” Both sides, seeing Jesus as the wrong size for this world, came to their own reasons for wanting Him dead. Both sides were equally impressed as He unrolled the scroll and spoke of “good news to the poor” . . . “sight to the blind” . . . “liberty to captives.” Yet only a handful of verses later, they want to throw Jesus over a cliff.

How do we get the world to change anyway? Dorothy Day asked critically: “Where were the saints to try and change the social order? Not just minister to the slaves, but to do away with slavery.” Dorothy Day is a hero of mine, but I disagree with her here. You actually abolish slavery by accompanying the slave. We don’t strategize our way out of slavery, we solidarize, if you will, our way toward its demise. We stand in solidarity with the slave, and by so doing, we diminish slavery’s ability to stand. By casting our lot with the gang member, we hasten the demise of demonizing. All Jesus asks is, “Where are you standing?” And after chilling defeat and soul-numbing failure, He asks again, “Are you still standing there?”

Can we stay faithful and persistent in our fidelity even when things seem not to succeed? I suppose Jesus could have chosen a strategy that worked better (evidenced-based outcomes)—that didn’t end in the Cross—but he couldn’t find a strategy more soaked with fidelity than the one he embraced.

* * *

Success

I am in a rush one late afternoon and driving out of the church parking lot, when La Shady stands right in front of my car. She’s a big girl of nineteen, large hipped and breasted, looking more like a woman of twice her age. Cradled in her right arm and resting on her sizable right hip is her one-year-old daughter, Jennifer.
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Shady's "man" and father of her daughter was Leonardo, whom I had buried three months before. In a fracas in the gas station at Fourth and Boyle, between Leonardo and five members of a rival gang, a nervous, tiny gang member, viewing the fight from inside the car, fumbled with a gun and shot wildly at those duking it out. His bullet found Leonardo.

Shady uses the hand not attached to her daughter to serve as a stop sign in front of my car, and she rushes over to my open window on the driver's side. She leans in and kisses me. She's draped in a huge black-and-white Raiders jersey with a number on the front.

"Where ya goin', G?"

I know enough not to tell her. I'm heading to a peace-treaty meeting I've set up between the female members of her gang and the one that killed her man. She would have been one I'd consider too much of a hothead, and even so, the rawness of Leonardo's death is still too dominant in the ring for her, knocking out reason, calm, and any hope for peace. She is not on my invitation list.

"I'm going on an errand."

Girls in gangs really represent just a tiny percentage of the overall gang population. The numbers vary from 5 to 10 percent. I would suggest favoring the lower number. Gangs are a guy thing, primarily. It is far more common to have gang molls—the girls who dated the guys in one gang as opposed to those in another. Those who are actually "jumped in" to neighborhoods perform reconnaissance, stir things up, and often shame the males into fighting—"Are you going to let that wto just walk over there, across the street and NOT do anything about it?"

The only times I've ever been remotely hurt in all these years always came in breaking up fights between girl gang members. Guys would stop the second I'd arrive. The parting of the Red Sea of brawling homies as I'd make my way through them. Girls, on the other hand, require back up. You can't get them to stop. ALWAYS bring someone with you to break things up.

Shady is a tough one. There is a certain gruffness to her, and when she's not of a hard-edged mind, she's impossibly shy. This seems to be that rare moment in which she is neither rough nor retiring. She is atypically glad to see me and has an urgency to talk I don't recognize.

"G, you got two minutes? I had a dream last night, and I need you to explain it to me.” (Homies always thought I possessed the lexicon to dream interpretation. I did nothing to encourage this. They just presumed it was part of my credentials.) She crouches closer to me and gives Jennifer a good hop to readjust her on her hip. She leans left to accommodate her there.

In the dream she enters Dolores Mission Church at night, and as she walks down the center aisle, she sees, in this dimly lit place, me standing up in front, vested for Mass. By my side is the coffin of a tiny baby, and the lid is up. Shady doesn't walk closer at first, but I summon and wave her forward. She trusts me enough to keep walking, but she admits she is absolutely terrified to peer into this coffin. I'm smiling and encouraging her to keep going. Shady finally reaches the casket and dares to peek. But before Shady can even fully get her head over the tiny box, a white dove flies out of it, startling her. It circles the inside of the church and flies above, back and forth, until it lands on her shoulder. Then she wakes up.

"What's it mean, G?"

"Well, it's obvious what it means," I say, clueless as to the
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dream's meaning. Since I was late for a summit and because my
sense of Shady's mood, generally, is that she is one to dig in the
heels of her Nike Cortez and not "give peace a chance," I self-
servingly give her my take.

"Well, everyone knows that the white dove stands for peace.
And so God is asking you to move toward forgiveness and heal-
ing and peace. And everything's gonna be fine."

She listens, but there are wheels turning that seem to be oper-
ating well out of my view. I abandon my own tight grasp on
punctuality, and for the first time I really see her standing in front
of me, juggling her daughter, her Raiders jersey flapping with
the wind. I place my hand on her forearm, resting on the door of
my car.

"But here's the only thing that matters, kiddo. How did the
dream make you feel?" Shady begins to cry, and her daughter,
curious at first, soon joins Shady in sympathy.

"That's the thing, G. At first I was scared, like . . . maybe that's
my daughter in the casket. But when I saw the bird, I only felt
peace and love in my heart."

I had not ever seen Shady cry like this.

"God only wants you to feel those things, mijita—love in your
heart . . . peace. You're okay."

She reached into the car with more verve than usual, nearly
whomping Jennifer in the head, as she threw her arms around
me, squeezing hard and thanking me harder.

At close to midnight that same day, Shady is crammed into
the middle seat in the back of a car filled with gang members.
They've driven well out of her barrio, and the guys in the car are
from a neighborhood not her own. They drive, and hand signs
get thrown out the window at rivals standing on some street cor-
ner. The corner guys yell and scream all manner of foulness at the
car, and Shady and the gang squeal rubber out of there, laughing.
Not a block away, a corner venta finds his gun. Shady slumps in the
backseat. Only one bullet entered the car that night, and it hap-
pened to find the back of Shady's head.

Now what does the dream mean, told to me just hours before
Shady's life was to end? I have no idea. Except that we are unfail-
ingly called to stand with Shady and all those who grieved her
passing. Beyond that, I don't really know. Allowing our hearts to
"be broken by the very thing that breaks the heart of God." In
the end, what needs to get disrupted will find its disruption in
our solidarity and in our intimate kinship with the outcast—who
too infrequently knows the peace of a white dove resting on a
shoulder. What is the failure of death, after all, when it is mea-
sured against what rises in you when you catch sight of this white
bird?

Nietzsche writes, "The weight of all things needs to be mea-
sured anew." Enough death and tragedy come your way, and
who would blame you for wanting a new way to measure.

If we choose to stand in the right place, God, through us, cre-
ates a community of resistance without our even realizing it.
To embrace the strategy of Jesus is to be engaged in what Dean
Brackley calls "downward mobility." Our locating ourselves with
those who have been endlessly excluded becomes an act of vis-
ible protest. For no amount of our screaming at the people in
charge to change things can change them. The margins don't get
erased by simply insisting that the powers-that-be erase them.
The trickle-down theory doesn't really work here. The pow-
ers bent on waging war against the poor and the young and the
"other" will only be moved to kinship when they observe it. Only
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when we can see a community where the outcast is valued and appreciated will we abandon the values that seek to exclude.

Jesus was always too busy being faithful to worry about success. I'm not opposed to success; I just think we should accept it only if it is a by-product of our fidelity. If our primary concern is results, we will choose to work only with those who give us good ones.

Myriad are the examples at Homeboy Industries of homies coloring way outside the lines and being given their ninety-eighth chance. Maybe it's because we are often forced to start where others have stopped. Some on my senior staff wanted to change our motto, printed on our T-shirts, from "Nothing stops a bullet like a job" to "You just can't disappoint us enough." Others would mention that there seem to be no consequences for some actions, and, of course, in the real world, there are consequences. Someone told me once, "I mean, what's it take to get fired at Homeboy—release nerve gas?" When it seems the best thing for a person, I have, often enough, fired someone. I call the person in and say, "The day won't ever come when I will withdraw love and support from you. I am simply in your corner till the wheels fall off. Oh, by the way, I have to let you go." They always agree with me. Nearly always.

There is no question that everybody working at Homeboy would have been fired anywhere else (including me, I suppose—just ask my board). But as Mark Torres, S.J., beloved spiritual guide at Homeboy Industries, says, "We see in the homies what they don't see in themselves, until they do."

There was a homiegirl, straight out of prison, with award-winning and alarming tattoos all over her face. She began work at the silkscreen. First day, a fight. Second day, she came utterly illuminated on "chronic" (marijuana). Third day, she arrived at work, in a car filled with her homies (this is against our rules). Oh, and the car was stolen (this is against, well, everybody's rules). I suppose we could have fired her. And yet we decided, with all the "no matter wharness" we could muster, that she would give up on us long before we would ever give up on her. And give up she did. She just stopped showing up. We'll be ready for her when she comes back. You stand with the least likely to succeed until success is succeeded by something more valuable: kinship. You stand with the belligerent, the surly, and the badly behaved until bad behavior is recognized for the language it is: the vocabulary of the deeply wounded and of those whose burdens are more than they can bear.

Jesus jostled irreparably the purity code of the shot callers of His day. He recognized that it was precisely this code that kept folks from kinship. Maybe success has become the new purity code. And Jesus shows us that the desire for purity (nine times-out of ten) is, in fact, the enemy of the gospel.

Funders sometimes say, "We don't fund efforts; we fund outcomes." We all hear this and think how sensible, practical, realistic, hard-nosed, and clear-eyed it is. But maybe Jesus doesn't know why we're nodding so vigorously. Without wanting to, we sometimes allow our preference for the poor to morph into a preference for the well-behaved and the most likely to succeed, even if you get better outcomes when you work with those folks. If success is our engine, we sidestep the difficult and belligerent and eventually abandon "the slow work of God."

Failure and death become insurmountable.

* * *
Tattoos on the Heart

I see Manny in the neighborhood, and I am not one bit happy. Once homies move away from the projects, I tell them they have no more business here.

Once I saw a homie named Mugsy, now in his early thirties, three kids, lives away from the neighborhood, good construction job, and he's in the barrio.

"So what the hell are you doin' here?" I ask him.
"Oh, just going to buy some beer at Moon's store."
"Look, dog, you can buy beer anywhere."
"Yeah, but," he says, "not every place accepts food stamps."
The fact that I rarely win these battles does not keep me from the "broken record" of my insisting.

When I see Manny, I begin calmly, "Okay, Manny, what are you doing here?" Manny wants to defuse quickly, "Oh, I'm just visiting."

I turn my voice into a hospital's loudspeaker: "MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE. VISITING HOURS ARE NOW OVER."

Manny knows enough to change the subject. "Go ahead and congratulate me," he says.

"For what?" I concede, air hissing out of my balloon.
"On Monday, I begin college—at Rio Hondo."
"Son, I'm proud of you—now go home."

Manny had been one of twenty workers from a variety of gangs who built our child care center. It took them two years to build. It would have taken professional types four months, tops. We opted, instead, to begin the "Wrong Size for This World" construction crew. Nothing made Manny prouder than to have his name inscribed on the building's wall. "I built that," he'd say.

Not three hours later, as Manny pulls onto the ramp for the freeway home, a rival sees him and opens up fire. Within hours, the doctors are enlisting me to convince the family to donate Manny's organs.

These things take time. For several days, I join in the vigil with his lady Irma, eight months pregnant with their second child. She does not leave his side. I stop asking her to take periodic respite. She lines the bed tray with photos, mutually meaningful, of Manny Jr. and the family altogether.

I watch as an endless procession of homies and family members and friends come through to say goodbye to Manny's comatose body. The homies tenderly drape rosarios around his neck and kiss him and hug him. Across Manny's chest is a tattoo of the song title "I'm Still Here," which he put on the last time he was shot.

Standing in the room, I return to some months before when Manny had called me, quite panicado about something—usually he called about his fear of violating probation again. I meet him at the iron stairwell outside of Irma's apartment in the projects. When I get there, he is already crying. It occurs to me to ask him, well into our conversation, "What do you want, Manny?" He knows what I'm talking about.

What do you most deeply, truly want?

Manny closes his eyes and folds his hands, and the obvious intensity may well burst something. He has the look of a man who, if he can articulate this correctly, might set himself on the right path. When Manny returns from his search, he says only, "I just want to be a good father. But I don't know how to be one."

Guideposts were not plentiful. I had buried his own father of a heroin overdose the year before, and his childhood was surrounded by good people intractably stuck in the chaos that only
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PCP can produce. When I met him years and years before, he was a little kid whose room and sanctuary was a closet.

I finally get Manny’s grandmother to sign the release to donate his organs. “Not his eyes, though,” she says, “Not his eyes.”

As the two nurses wheel Manny to surgery for the harvesting of his organs, one nurse turns to the other and shakes her head in disgust, no doubt eyeing Manny’s tattoos.

“I mean,” she says, rolling her eyes, “who would want this monster’s heart?” The other nurse stops the gurney midhallway and turns on her coworker with a clarity that may well have surprised herself. “How dare you call this kid a monster? Didn’t you see his family, his friends, his son? He was nineteen years old, for God’s sakes. He belonged to somebody. Shame on you.” I only know this happened because I gave an in-service to the nurses at White Memorial Hospital. The chastising nurse tearfully told her story, in front of everybody, during the Q and A.

“I cried all the way home that night,” she said.

Obviously, after having buried 168 young human beings, all killed violently because of gangs, I have had to come to terms with the “failure” of death.

“Death, where is your sting?”

La muerte, ya no tiene dominio are words I’ve spoken from the pulpit many times. Death has no power. Easy for me to say. There is much self-protection in saying it, however, otherwise you fear actually losing your mind. Annie Dillard writes, “So once in Israel, love came to us incarnate and stood in the doorway between two worlds, and we were all afraid.” Working with gang members means always trying to make sense of life in the doorway. Yes, the wheat dies, but check out the fruit. Sure there

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is pain in childbirth, but here’s this kid. Who’s still looking at the ashes, once the phoenix has risen? You’re always on the lookout for fates worse than death, and it turns out, there are a slew of them.

An Algerian monk, threatened with death, says to those who will inflict it: “What do we have to fear after all? To be thrown into the tenderness of God?” That’s certainly where I want to be, even if on most days the fear seems to triumph.

The owner of a vast, expansive heart and among the most heroic women I know is Soledad, the mother of four. I met her second oldest, Ronnie, when he was a sophomore at Roosevelt High School. I suspect he began working at our office, after school, shortly after his brother Angel started to work at our silk-screen factory. Angel was from a gang and two years older than Ronnie, who was never from any barrio.

Shortly after 9/11, Ronnie got his diploma (didn’t even graduate on stage) and joined the marines. Once, he and Soledad visited me so I could give a special blessing for Ronnie, who was headed to some secret location (which turned out to be Afghanistan). Sometime later, Ronnie was home on leave and walking back to the house after a midnight run to Jack in the Box.

Soledad can hear from the bedroom the most dreaded question in the barrio: someone is “hitting up” Ronnie. “Where you from?”

If you are not from a gang, you say, “I ain’t from nowhere.” Variations on this can be, “I don’t bang.” This could mean, “I am a gang member, but I don’t play that anymore,” or “I am not a gang member.”

She strains to hear what he says. He might have laughed or even said, “the marines.” She needs no straining to hear the shots
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that follow. Ronnie dies in her arms outside their kitchen door. He is shot four times in the back and twice in the head. They shot his hand off. Ronnie was given a full military burial. Soledad was handed a folded flag.

For the next six months, there was no consoling Soledad. She quit her job and rarely left the house. She dressed in black every day, bathed infrequently, didn’t bother with hair or makeup.

Among my proudest possessions is a photograph of Angel, her oldest son, in burgundy gown and gold sash and mortar board at his graduation from Roosevelt. Very few homies pull this off, and Angel was deservedly proud.

Angel sits his mother down on a Sunday morning, six months after Ronnie’s death.

“Look,” he says to Soledad, “you have to stop this. You have three kids left, and we need you. So I want you to go throw these black clothes away, take a bath, do your hair, and put some makeup on. It’s time.”

Soledad’s firstborn breaks through the solid mass of grief that had encased her soul and left her heart immobile for all this time. So she does it. Bathes, wears something with color in it, fixes her hair, and puts on makeup. She emerges from her room, and she is radiant. Angel cups her face in his hands, “You look gorgeous.” He doesn’t hesitate to add, “It’s about damn time.”

That afternoon, Angel is sitting on his front porch, eating a sandwich, and there is a commotion down the block. There is a kid running with all his might. He is from Angel’s barrio. He is being chased by two enemies. When they catch up to him, the kid is able to disappear from their sight. This leaves the two panting in front of Angel’s front porch. He knows enough to scramble wildly toward his front door. The shooting begins, and

Soledad runs to the source of the sound. She would say later that she wished the shooters hadn’t left until they had also killed her.

It being Sunday, I was celebrating Mass in the varied detention facilities, so I came late to the news of Angel’s death. By the time I reach Soledad’s living room later that day, she is huddled in a corner. Forget Kleenex. Forget handkerchief. Soledad is sobbing into a huge bath towel. And the few of us there found our arms too short to wrap around this kind of pain.

I see Soledad a lot, but this one day, two years after the death of Angel, I see her in front of the office and we hug.

“How ya doin’, kiddo?”

Soledad grabs my arm and thinks and considers her words.

“You know, I love the two kids that I have. I hurt for the two that are gone.” She begins to cry and shows the slightest embarrassment at the size of her honesty.

“The hurt wins . . . the hurt wins.”

Two months later, Soledad is taken to the hospital for an irregular heartbeat and chest pain. I visit her in her room, and she tells me what happened the night she came to the emergency room. They have her on a gurney in White Memorial’s ER. The doctors are tending to her with EKGS and the like, when there is a rush of activity at the entrance. With a flurry of bodies and medical staff moving into their proscribed roles, a teenage gang member is rushed to the vacant space right next to Soledad. The kid is covered in blood from multiple gunshot wounds, and they begin cutting off his clothes. The wounds are too serious to waste time pulling the curtain that separates Soledad from this kid fighting for his life. People are pounding on his chest and inserting IVs. Soledad turns and sees him. She recognizes him as a kid from the gang that most certainly robbed her of her sons.
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"As I saw this kid," she tells me, "I just kept thinking of what my friends might say if they were here with me. They'd say, 'Pray that he dies.'" But she just looked at this tiny kid, struggling to sidestep the fate of her sons, as the doctors work and scream, "WE'RE LOSING HIM. WE'RE LOSING HIM."

"And I began to cry as I have never cried before and started to pray the hardest I've ever prayed. 'Please... don't... let him die. I don't want his mom to go through what I have.'"

And the kid lived. Sometimes, it only seems that the hurt wins.

Mary Oliver writes, "There are things you can't reach. But you can reach out to them, and all day long."

In the end, effective outcomes and a piling of success stories aren't the things for which we reach. Though, who am I kidding, I prefer them to abject failure and decades of death. But it's not about preference. It's about the disruption of categories that leads us to abandon the difficult, the disagreeable, and the least likely to go very far. On most days, if I'm true to myself, I just want to share my life with the poor, regardless of result. I want to lean into the challenge of intractable problems with as tender a heart as I can locate, knowing that there is some divine ingenuity here, "the slow work of God," that gets done if we're faithful. Maybe the world could use a dose of a wrong-size approach; otherwise the hurt wins. Maybe there are things you can't reach. But you can stretch your arm across a gurney and forgive and heal.

Equal souls. All day long.