

# Self-Empowerment

Spring 2016

The newsletter dedicated to nurturing personal development

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## Love in Action – Practice Giving & Receiving

Hello, Dear Readers. I am excited and delighted to share with you in this way. I am grateful for all the inspiration and guidance I have received through the years, and for the opportunity to share some of that inspiration with you.

As an Interfaith Minister I appreciate aspects of many different faith traditions, parables, rituals, and scriptures. I do not promote one over any other to my readers. The mission of Agape Interfaith Ministries respects all religions and spiritual paths.

I have included in this issue a sermon by a Lutheran Pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber, a minister who I greatly admire and appreciate. Let me introduce her to you.



The 46-year old Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran minister who founded and is the pastor of the House for All Sinners and Saints, in Denver, Colorado. She is also a two-time *New York Times* bestselling author.

She grew up in a fundamentalist Christian family, but at age 17 she broke away. She started getting tattoos. She became an alcoholic and drug abuser. She says she felt like one of "society's outsiders". She began working as a stand-up comedian. After 10 years of an unhealthy lifestyle she became sober and has remained so for twenty years.

In 1996 she married Matthew Weber, a ministry student, and together had a daughter and son. It was eight years later that Bolz-Weber felt that she heard the call to ministry service for herself when she was asked to eulogize a friend who had committed suicide.

In 2008, Bolz-Weber was ordained. She started her own church, the House for All Sinners and Saints, which is often shortened to just "House". Her own background led her to focus on a ministry to the disenfranchised. Her church has always been especially welcoming to the LGBT community and people with drug addiction, depression, and even those who are not believers of her faith.

With her experience as an onstage performer she began speaking at religious conferences and as a guest speaker at other churches, leading to a surge of interest in her life and teaching. Her 2013 best selling book *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* brought much media attention to her. Her most recent book *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* was published in 2015.

I have read *Pastrix* and attended one of her speaking/book-signing events at a church in a suburb of Philadelphia. I am moved by her life story as well as by several of her sermons that were available online. I have not (yet) attended any of her church services in Denver. I may eventually have the opportunity to do just that, as my son who lives in Denver was the one to bring Nadia to my attention in the first place.

Nadia often spends 20 hours working on her ten-minute sermon on the biblical passage of the week. I appreciate her deep, vulnerable, and personal sermons. The following sermon is based on the lesson of the "Widow's Mite" found in the books of Mark and Luke in the Bible. In the story, a widow donates two small coins, while wealthy people donate much more. Jesus explains to his disciples that the small sacrifices of the poor mean more to God than the extravagant, but proportionately lesser, donations of the rich.

Following the sermon, I intend to share some of my own "Casseroles From God" experience.

See you in a few pages from now....

Rev Jill

## Sermon on Widows, Waldo, and Those Needed Casseroles From God

by Nadia Bolz-Weber



It's no big surprise to anyone that I was pretty wiped out a couple weeks ago when I finally came home from having been in 17 cities in 5 weeks – It's a weird feeling to do a thing like that and it would be an understatement to say that I felt depleted and like I'd somehow been consumed whole. All the so-called “self-care” tricks didn't seem to be helping. I slept and exercised and tried to spend time with friends and yet I was left wondering if it is worth it to put myself out there like that and I secretly vowed to never ever write anything ever again. Perhaps a bit dramatic but at the time it felt like the obvious conclusion.

Near the end of the tour I had preached at Seattle Pacific University's chapel service and afterward a young woman in her 20s came up to me crying saying that somehow something I wrote had helped her when her husband died a few weeks earlier. She was crying too hard for me to totally understand what she was saying so I hugged her instead and asked if I could give her a blessing which she accepted. I didn't think much of it until later that week when I came home totally spent and vowing to never do this again and the next morning I had a message on my public Facebook wall. Here's what it said:

*I was the recently widowed ball of emotions you blessed after your sermon in Seattle. As a lifelong Lutheran, (she wrote...) grace has been a part of my faith that I've never really noticed, until my husband died and I began reading Pastrix. I have 5 month old twins, so besides the obvious grief aspects of my husband's death, I was also having a difficult time having become the Tragic Charity Case. I've read the last paragraph of chapter 8 of Pastrix over and over. Now I see God with tears running down His face when I'm brought to my knees sobbing and I hear Him whisper in my ear, “Child, see what I've brought you,” when someone drops off a casserole, or a gift card, or*

*just scrubs my toilet. And maybe that is the meaning in this shit storm. God is here and I feel Him like I never had before.*

What this young widow didn't realize is that *her* note to *me* was the casserole from God I needed saying “child, see what I brought you”. And ever since, I keep seeing these widow's mites, these easily overlooked gifts, these casseroles from God in the form of simple things.

The young widow in Seattle reminded me of the thing I tend to forget all the time – which is that God shows up in my life over and over again. And yet so often this goes overlooked or under-appreciated by myself because all I can see is what I wish I had instead. My desires sometimes keep me from seeing the gifts of God in the present moment. Desires for an event to unfold in a certain way or my desire for a person to act a certain way, or my desire for things in my life to look a certain way. It's like I already have a picture painted of what everything should look like and I hold that up against reality and then judge reality according to how much it resembles the picture I painted. And every single time I do this I miss something important, or beautiful, or redemptive because even though it's right in front of me, it wasn't what I was looking for so I don't see it. Or all I can see is what is missing.

I wonder how often God shows up and I miss it because I was looking for something else at the time. I know the story of the widow's mite is one that is familiar to a lot of us. How often have we heard it used for sermons on the importance of giving – how even if we are poor we should still be giving to the church and how it's important to give sacrificially. Well, I guess that's one reading of this story. But what really struck me about this story this week had nothing to do with money – what struck me is that Jesus notices the stuff we tend to not even see. I mean, the main action that day revolved around the scribes in their fancy robes and their fat wads of cash. It is so easy for us to only see the big, flashy fast moving object and yet Jesus sees the smallish things, the tiny copper coin of a thing, the widow who is so easily ignored. Jesus sees what we hardly notice is there. Maybe we should pay attention to the fact that the stuff he uses in parables, how he tells us what the kingdom of heaven is like through simile, comparing it not to mountains and superheroes and massive SUVs, but to common, daily almost unnoticeable things that are hardly worth mentioning – coins, tiny little seeds, yeast. Jesus notices what we have a hard time seeing – that which doesn't even stand out. It's like turn the page and the guy can pretty much always find Waldo right away.

It feels like a reminder to us that God arrives in our lives, moves in our lives, provides what we need in our lives in more ways that we even notice because we happen to be too busy holding up our picture of how we want things to be. Perhaps we are too busy judging ourselves and our lives to notice where God keeps waving her arms trying to get our attention and saying child, here, I brought you something. I know speaking about how God shows up in our lives can sound perilously close to a kind of bad theology a lot of us try and steer clear of. Like a few months ago when I was behind a brand new, shiny Cadillac SUV who's vanity plate said "bcauselpray" Like the rest of us are complete idiots and could easily also have a Cadillac SUV if *we* just prayed. I too recoil from this idea of God as divine vending machine who dispenses cash and prizes to those who are the most righteous. But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about telling our stories about those easily unnoticed and sometimes sneaky ways God brings us what we need. For me, those moments happen the most when I'm smack in the middle of being particularly self-pitying.

Like when on Monday and Tuesday I was in NY, Wednesday in Philly, Thursday DC, Friday Atlanta, Saturday here at the Tattered Cover [Denver bookstore], Sunday here at church, Monday Chicago, Tuesday St Paul, Wednesday Minneapolis, Thursday the speakers for the conference me and my friend Rachel were putting on, then came into the Twin Cities and Friday and Saturday we ran the conference. Ok, so Saturday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the conference, between sessions we decided to have a book signing. So there's what felt like a gazillion people in line and I am just way too tired to do this. I don't have anything left and yet it was still another day until I got to be home. In front of me that afternoon was book book book book book and then suddenly – bag of dark chocolate. I look up and our own [House congregant] Brooke is standing there [with open arms] – she was attending the conference but since there were 1,000 people there, I hadn't seen her yet. I look up and she's like, "Could you use this about now, pastor?" I immediately stood up, walked around the table hugged her and literally started sobbing saying I'm so home-sick, I'm so homesick." Brooke just held me and rubbed my back saying, "You're almost done. You're almost done." There was a long line of people waiting for me to sign my book for them, watching me instead stand and cry while someone hugged me saying it's going to be ok. That tiny piece of home, that small moment of House for All Sinners and Saints, that casserole from God got me through the rest of the conference.

All I have needed thy hand hath provided.

The other aspect of having a God who notices the things we ignore, is that this same God works through the small things we so easily don't even take notice of. The casseroles, the notes of encouragement just when we need them. And kind of like Paul writes in Hebrews, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." I think it is also true that sometimes we are the ones doing God's bidding for someone else and we don't even know it. When you suddenly think "I should reach out to that person" or do that kind thing for someone else, or just ask this person how they're doing. Those nudges are meant to be paid attention to, for when you do these things you never know when unknowingly you are the casserole of God. You are the one being used to show God's love to God's child and this too is a gift.

I've had small kindnesses mean everything to me and the person who offered them has no idea. This is also to be swept up in this kingdom of heaven. For that kingdom is here, it is within you, it is for you, and it is at hand. Amen.

*Posted on November 16, 2015 on Patheos.com with a link to hear the sermon spoken by Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber.*

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2015/11/sermon-on-widows-waldo-and-those-needed-casseroles-from-god/>

*Nadia Bolz-Weber is the author of "Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint" and "Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People". She is the Pastor of House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, Colorado.*

### **My Casseroles**

I (Jill) have been aware, at times, of giving or receiving some kindness or a gift that was a "casserole from God." I have been blessed with many wonderful examples of being the giver or the recipient, but the most powerful experiences were when I was going through medical treatments for cancer in 2013-2014. I was in a weakened, vulnerable, and needy position from having had surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. It was through that most challenging circumstance that I had the humbling experience of mostly being on the receiving end of other people's caring and generosity. An internalized program of "It is more blessed to give than to receive" led me to acting as the helper/giver most of the time. Suddenly thrust into a weakened condition, I stretched out of my old comfort zone to receive both metaphorical and actual casseroles, cooked

meals for my caretaker husband and myself. One friend came to my house and did some much needed cleaning. Another gave me reading suggestions that were emotionally healing. Many others communicated love and care through calls, visits, cards, emails, prayers, and Reiki.

Now, more than two years later, I am once again on the receiving end of help and care. In January 2016, I was again laid low after having more reconstruction surgery due to the negative consequences of damage done to my body by the radiation treatments. This time I reached out and asked for help, something I did not consider easily only two years ago. I am blessed to have others I can call on when in need.

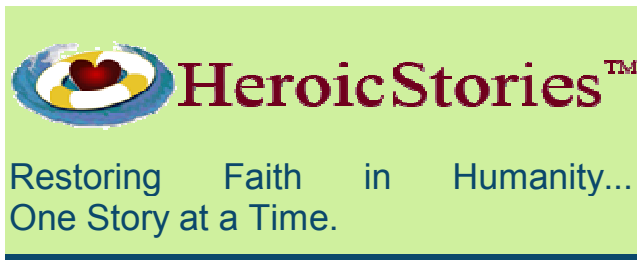
People – we are each other’s casserole delivery system! As you come to understand how the Divine can touch your heart and mind, let the givingness of life touch you from both directions. Give to others, but also give others the opportunity to give to you. Both are truly wonderful sides of the same coin.

May we each be present with the Givingness of Life in all of its myriad forms. May each and every one of us feel loved and nurtured.

Blessings to you!

Your fellow traveler,

*Rev. Jill*



## Mysterious Ransel Appearances

by Tony Keyes, Japan

When a child begins elementary school in Japan, it's customary for him or her to receive a "Ransel" — a standard sized backpack satchel that will be a status symbol for the six years of elementary school. Having just bought one for my son, I can understand its value, measured in the breadth of the smile on his face when he tried it on for the first time.

Usually this is a present from grandparents or parents, and receiving it is considered one of the first rites of passage of a child's young life. But for those children unfortunate enough to live in an orphanage or a foster center, there is no one to buy them a Ransel, so they can only hope for a donation or a hand-me-down.

That changed in December 2010, on Christmas morning, when an anonymous donor left half a dozen Ransel backpacks at a foster home in Maebashi, Japan. The donor used a pseudonym from a character in a "manga" or comic series, "Date Naoto". Supposedly this is the real name of a professional wrestler whose stage name is "Tiger Mask" — a well-known hero among children for the last four decades.

Now that of itself is a wonderful, heart-warming story, but the great thing about it is that it was only the beginning. In the days and weeks that followed, a series of copycat incidents occurred. Soon after the first gift, the mysterious "Naoto Date" and his imitators had appeared at six locations, donating various numbers of backpacks. In one case, the benefactor left toys and apologized for not being able to provide backpacks!

By the middle of January, the number of Ransels donated rose to almost three hundred Ransels nationwide, as others borrowed the "Naoto Date" alias and its spirit of charity, to make donations.

Other anonymous donors have given gifts of a more substantial nature but in this case I think the gift is more valuable, because it was small enough to inspire imitation. How far that wave of goodwill will continue to spread across this country remains to be seen, but in the days following this gift, I watched the evening news with a sense of anticipation: anticipation of something good, for a change.

In spring of 2011, I will watch my own son take those momentous first steps into his elementary school classroom. Some of the tears welling up in my eyes will probably be for the other children who join him on that great adventure, bursting with pride that they too have a brand new backpack that they did not expect to have, glad they do not stand out from the crowd with an old, ragged hand-me-down.

As I congratulate my son's grandparents on another wonderful milestone in their autumn years, I will probably think of the anonymous "volunteer" grandparents watching from afar, as a child they don't even know walks with a beaming smile into a classroom, ready to take on the world.

[heroicstories.org/mysterious-ransel-appearances/](http://heroicstories.org/mysterious-ransel-appearances/) was originally published as HeroicStories #824 on April 25, 2011. Reprinted with permission from Leo A. Notenboom, Publisher. Visit [heroicstories.org](http://heroicstories.org) to subscribe. “Our mission is to publish examples of people being good to each other, to inspire similar heroic actions in others.”

# The Empowerment Plan - Detroit

When Veronika Scott was a student at the College for Creative Studies in her native city of Detroit, Michigan, she received an assignment to “design to fill a need.” She dreamed up an idea for insulated overcoats that would double as sleeping bags, made 25 of them, and handed them out to people living in makeshift shelters on a run-down city playground. While her efforts were greeted mostly with enthusiasm from those braving Detroit’s brutal winters, one woman voiced dissent. “We don’t need coats; we need jobs,” she told Veronika. Then she had her second inspiration.

Veronika, now 26, found an expert to teach two homeless women to sew and hired them to assemble the coats. She paid them with donations she received through her blog. At first, the coats were constructed in a homeless shelter’s utility closet.

After graduating from college in 2012, she moved the shop into an old downtown warehouse for socially conscious businesses and founded the Empowerment Plan, a nonprofit organization.

Clothing manufacturer Carhartt donated several old industrial sewing machines and reams of fabric and zippers. GM and other companies chipped in operating funds and insulating material. To date, the Empowerment Plan has produced more than 10,000 coats and distributed them in 30 states, Canada, and elsewhere abroad.

The group employs about 20 people – mostly single mothers, some of whom have served time or worked as prostitutes – and pays them more than Michigan’s minimum wage. “We don’t require a GED or even previous employment,” Veronika says. “We’re looking for people who are motivated.” The Empowerment Plan provides free GED and financial literacy classes and offers micro-loans to those who qualify. Nearly all the employees eventually move into permanent housing, and some go on to jobs in the auto industry and construction.

Veronika has refined the coat’s design...but she is less focused on the coats than on the workers who make them. “At the end of the day, the coat is a vehicle for us to employ people.”

Their website <http://www.empowermentplan.org/> tells their story:

**The Empowerment Plan is a Detroit-based nonprofit organization dedicated to serving the homeless community. Our goal is to help build a better life for those that have become trapped in the**

**cycle of homelessness. We mostly hire homeless parents from local shelters to become full time seamstresses so that they can earn a stable income, find secure housing, and gain back their independence for themselves and for their families.**

**The individuals we hire are trained to manufacture a coat that transforms into a sleeping bag at night, and a bag when not in use. The coats are distributed to homeless people living on the streets at no cost to them through partnerships we have established with outreach organizations in communities around the nation.**

**We believe in giving second chances to those who want it, and providing warmth to those who need it.**

Want to help?

**Every dollar has an impact!** Anything you can contribute helps us hire more homeless individuals and get more coats out on the streets. When you donate \$100, you're providing a warm, durable, and weather resistant coat to someone in need.

You can donate online now, or by sending your donation to our address:

**The Empowerment Plan  
1401 Vermont Street  
Detroit, MI 48216**

The Empowerment Plan is a 501(c)3 accredited non-profit.  
All donations are 100% tax deductible.  
Tax ID: 45-3265365



## Daily Word

*I open my heart and lift up all  
who are in need of prayer.*

When someone is going through a difficult time, he or she may find it hard to still the mind and commune with God. At such times I offer my prayer support. I envision that person encircled in love, comfort, and perfect health. I affirm the truth, that God is present in this moment and place. In prayer, we are united in a heart-to-heart connection.

I apply this practice for others beyond my circle of family and friends. I envision my community enveloped in love and health. Then I broaden my vision to see each continent infused with peace and understanding, their leaders using divine wisdom to guide each decision. I affirm the truth that God is present in each moment and place, and all is well.

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## Love in Action – Practice Giving & Receiving

What can you do today to share the love that wants to be experienced by you, through you, and as you?

There are many opportunities to give and share your gifts with friends, family, community, and with many others who are in need today.

There are also opportunities for us to ask for help, for assistance, for support, for prayers. Take the risk and reach out – make a request (not a demand). It might feel uncomfortable.

The responses may not be exactly what you would prefer.

Practice, practice, practice.

I hope you continue to enjoy this publication. The Self-Empowerment newsletter is a labor of love.

Each issue comes to you with a free e-hug! Feel free to send me your feedback via email to

[Jilleroni@juno.com](mailto:Jilleroni@juno.com)

Blessings!

**The mission of Agape Interfaith Ministries is to encourage, support and inspire a deepening conscious relationship with Divinity for the greater experience of wholeness, abundance, love and peace. We serve to elevate consciousness through individual and group educational activities, and community service.**