

Bo Knows Heaven

Craig Harline

So there's my sort-of-neighbor big Bo, who despite owning two rock-solid Scandinavian names including, yes, Bo, doesn't exactly seem to have things rock-solidly together.

We could start maybe with his wife-of-Bath-quantity marriages, or maybe just his announcement in church after his last divorce went through that he was happy to inform everyone he was happily single again, a free brother in the Lord, like he couldn't think of a finer theological or actual state to be in but more likely (in suspicious minds) clarifying for any interested ladies the totally legal availability of his person, a suspicion that was pretty convincingly confirmed when right after his announcement he hobbled down substantially from the pulpit on his one good leg and one bad one (that bows way out) and took a substantial seat right next to a couple of single ladies in the congregation who were almost but not quite in the same universe age-wise, which for him is pushing seventy.

Or we could move on to his car, which is changing all the time but is basically always the same, namely old and busted-up and increasingly-dented-the-longer-he-drives-it (if he has a little money he gets a "new" one when he hits that financial sweetspot right where the cost of fixing dents in order to pass inspection ends up being more than buying a certain brand of whole other car would), and that also needs regular jumping, which I know because he's asked me at 6:30 early for one, or failing that maybe a ride to his most recent job, regaling along the way how lucky he was to get this particular honey of a jump-needing car for only

300, making the two thou or so that he's put into it since then a bargain when ya think what he woulda had to shell out for new or even somewhat so-called "reliable" used.

Or don't forget the job itself, the most recent being in a call center full of youngish people, but Bo is a chatty guy and doesn't mind, except the potential problem looming there is that when Bo starts chatting long and free he tends to chat blunt and offensive too (see e.g. above, but also his occasional unintentional digs at church about some former or irregularly present member, or the occasional unintentional racist comment, or maybe the occasional questions he posed to the teenage daughters of a family he home-taught that were meant to show interest in their lives but ended up coming across as close to predator-like), and so ends up offending without his even realizing or meaning to, and pretty soon just like old Ishmael Bo's hand might as well be "raised against all," and the hands of all raised against him too, all maybe helping to explain why Bo isn't always in work, or for that matter in car or phone, and for all I know barely in apartment too, let alone in any reliable pension plan that at his age he really ought to be drawing from.

But Bo is really good at one thing, in fact supernaturally good, and that's where this is going. Bo's in charge of sacrament meeting at the care center within the confines of our geographically tiny and very non-NIMBY hodgepodge of a neighborhood, and not necessarily non-NIMBY because of so much virtue or something on the part of the neighbors but maybe just because there's just not enough collective energy or clout or money or moral outrage or domestic stability to keep out things like the care center or nearby children's crisis center or nearby halfway house for the nearby mental hospital, things that really together upstanding neighborhoods know how to put a stop to!

So the weekly twenty-minute sacrament (and only) meeting is held in the center's combo TV room/rec room/dining room/filing space/church room, which consists of a couple of couches, a big-screen TV, some brown folding-chairs in "rows," a piano, some filing cabinets, a couple of sinks, and some bulletin boards with the month's big events in big letters.

Even before it starts, the anywhere from fifteen to twenty care-center residents who attend the meeting, ranging from maybe twenty-five to seventy years old in assorted but not-viable-in-the-outside-world states of mental and physical non-well-being, are scattered around the room, some on couches and folding-chairs but most in wheelchairs and walkers, all waiting for Bo, including bolo-tied Wally, one of the four or so residents who talks okay and so who conducts the meeting from the wheelchair that he rolls up right next to one end of the long kitchen/sacrament table up front, so he can set his 64-ounce Big Gulp on it, which he needs for when he gets thirsty conducting in his really loud voice.

Wally likes to think he's in charge and not Bo, but Bo doesn't mind because he doesn't act like he's in charge anyway, he just goes around and talks to everyone, even though only a few can talk back, but Bo doesn't care, he's shaking both of everyone's hands and touching their shoulders and talking to them like he knows everything about them and also rubbing Donnie's head, because Donnie likes that, and with Bo Donnie doesn't even have to grab Bo's hand and put it up on his head the way he does with everyone else's hand, which has got to be Donnie's highlight of the week, someone finally and voluntarily head-rubbing real long after a week of smiling entreaties.

Wally's real competition for top-dog conducting rights actually comes from Marian, who likes to position her wheelchair up front too, at the other end of the long kitchen/sacrament table from Wally, and do a sort of parallel or maybe rival sort of conducting, calling on someone to say the prayer for instance before Wally can, or correcting Wally when he gets the order of things wrong, or announcing what they're doing next before Wally can announce it, or telling Wally to give it a few more seconds before ending the meeting so fast like he always does (he likes to hear one short talk or testimony max before shutting things down), and by the end Marian is pretty much conducting, making you think that maybe the revolution in female leadership in the Mormon Church has already happened, right here in the care center, and nobody except maybe Wally is even thinking about wheeling Marian from her spot, but just accepting that a parallel or rival or maybe

sometimes cooperating female conductor is just the natural order of things in Mormondom, especially when someone like Marian is doing such a good job at it. Wally gets back at her though by interrupting her testimony whenever she says it, slamming down his Big Gulp and telling her to cut it short.

Some time after the sacrament there's the weekly musical number too, which is the same number every week, and features Myra, Myra with the permanent smile on her face, Myra one of the oldest and tiniest and frailest ladies, Myra hunched way over in a wheelchair with her toothpick-shoulders poking up because the sides of the wheelchair are squishing in on her to keep her from falling out, Myra who when Wally says it's time for her solo metaphorically jumps right in, right from where she's sitting and sans accompaniment, singing the song she's remembered all these years, *Jesus Once Was a Little Child*, and she sings both verses, including the second one you'd forgotten about, about Jesus never getting vexed if the game went wrong, which is stunning not so much for the claim that Jesus played games but for using the word *vexed*, which isn't a word usually heard in a primary song, but she sings it right out, and also that Jesus always spoke the truth, and her voice quavers on the last try, try, try.

And there's some group-singing too, as in the opening, closing, and sacrament songs, taking almost half of the twenty minutes, but no one's really singing except the visitors who've come to do the sacrament or give talks or play piano or lead music, plus a couple of staff or visiting family members, but a lot of residents are really interested in leading the music, right from where they're sitting too.

But it's the sacrament part of the sacrament meeting that's the most memorable and that's really where Bo comes in again. His talking and head-rubbing and hand-shaking in advance are just a warm-up for this part, because see Bo is the one who actually passes the bread and the water around, which is no easy thing in a room full of walkers and wheel chairs, but making it even harder is that most of the people can't for the most part actually manage to get the bread or the cup to their mouths on their own.

But Bo knows. In fact Bo is possibly the only person in the world who knows exactly the sacrament-taking preferences of all

the assembled residents—whether they want to take the piece of bread or cup of water themselves from the respective trays and consume it on their own, whether they want Bo to put either one in their hand and let them take it from there, whether they want Bo to put his hand underneath theirs to guide it up to their mouth, or whether they even want Bo to actually put bread or water right in their mouth for them, old-Catholic-style so to speak.

And it's no easy thing remembering all that but it's even harder managing all that, starting with Bo having to squeeze himself into just the right position to do his thing, which might in some cases mean standing in front of but in others standing or sitting next to the person in question, and remember Bo isn't exactly the most graceful guy to begin with, what with his bum leg and bodily largesse, but there he is moving like Baryshnikov between the regularly shifting rows of wheelchairs and walkers, twisting and turning and possibly pirouetting and then standing or sitting according to their particular preference.

A few residents are wearing helmets so they don't hurt themselves, and when Bo approaches them they tend to rest their helmet on his upper arm so they can get a good angle to take the bread or water on their own. But that's easy compared to the more than a few who are making almost constant repetitive movements with heads and arms, which exponentially complicates sacrament-taking, not to mention increases average-individual-bread-or-water-taking-time from about three seconds per to more like thirty, but Bo is in sync with every single one, sometimes putting the bread with his own free hand right between their cheek and gum at just the right instant, or pouring the water right in, and especially with the water Bo is always ready with the forearm of his tray-holding hand and the handkerchief of his bread-or-water-giving hand to catch and wipe up whatever comes spilling or sometimes gushing out, then he wipes their mouth clean when they're done, Bo as unfazed by all this as St. Francis licking a leper's wound, Bo indifferent to saliva and other bodily fluids and also the possibly alarming hygienic state of assorted gums and teeth and mouths.

During all of this Beth is as usual holding the three children's books she likes while constantly waving and smiling too, alternating an open-handed wave with one that features only her middle finger but no one seems to mind. And of course Donnie is wanting his head rubbed again even during the sacrament, which Bo multi-taskingly does while letting Donnie take the bread and water for himself. But it's especially when you see Bo on his bum leg leaning bulkily but carefully over to gently wipe clean yet another only partially-successful intake of blessed water, and you see all the residents knowing that Bo knows just what they want sacrament-wise, that you realize that oft-married oft-divorced oft-offensive oft-struggling Bo is going straight to heaven.

Here's religion right here, you think, and not so much the sacrament part, but the wiping-up-of-their-messes-without-a-second-thought part, helping them do something they like doing, which is probably why most of them even show up early most of the time, unlike a lot of other churchgoers.

After a short testimony, Wally brings things to a screeching halt, the meeting ends, and one guy bursts out crying, for reasons not altogether clear—maybe he didn't like something, maybe he can't explain it, maybe he's sad at the thought of Bo leaving again, but Bo assures everyone that he'll be back next week and maybe during it too, and he stays longer than any other visitor even though he was the first to arrive, doing some more talking and double-hand-shaking and head-rubbing, and arranging for someone to stay and help him give Doris her weekly blessing right afterward, and he tells you afterward how much he loves all of them and you sense he's not just blowing pious smoke either.

And don't forget Bo's work with the fellows at the nearby mental halfway-house too, and that he chauffeurs them and still other people around more than you'd think a guy with a battery-jump-needing-seriously-dented car could, Bo always saying when you see him in the street that he's got to go give someone a ride (Where do they live? "Oh up in—" which is about 10 miles away), because see among his many acquaintances Bo has the "good" car, even just "the" car, plus not to mention Bo watching over one of the halfway-house fellows to the literal end, who had terminal cancer, and who

was black, which matters only because of Bo's aforementioned occasional racist comment, but Bo seemed to not even remember he'd ever had anything to do with any comment like that the way he took care of this guy, who had no family whatsoever on earth except for Bo, who might as well have been now.

And then there's me, who despite owning only one slightly-Anglicized Scandinavian name and despite assorted and undeniable lapses in life seems in comparison to Bo to have various things seriously together, maybe starting with a long marriage to a long-suffering wife, and three kids who seem to be doing all the right missioning and college-ing and marrying and grandchild-having things—and don't forget my Pee Aitch Dee, and my full totally non-partial professorship, and my highly reliable Consumer-Reports-approved and maintenance-scheduled car that has a few small dents only because anything big gets fixed thanks to rainy-day funds that easily cover the deductible, and my fifth-of-an-acre estate with tightly mowed lawn, and my pretty regular exercise regimen, and oh yeah my dynamite life-insurance/retirement-investment/and retirement-pension plans that have together just about secured a soothingly secure future. Yes sir, a lot seemingly together.

Except when I see Bo in action with the sacrament and around the 'hood there's something itching inside that needs scratching, something along the lines of I'd like somewhat inexplicably to be more like Bo, which itch I have to admit is one I never expected to find myself feeling.

And so I think maybe I could do that by bulking up my service portfolio, to go with my other portfolios, maybe doing things like going to the care center when Bo asks me to help out with the sacrament, and I say sure, but see way down inside I'm actually hoping that I'll just have to bless the sacrament and not actually pass it, because unlike Bo I don't really know how everyone likes to take it, but truth be told I can't get past the widely patented care-center smells, or the almost-certain encounters with stray saliva, and I can't get myself to manage skin-to-skin touching which is what the residents seem most to want, I can manage maybe only some quick hand-to-clothed-shoulder or something, or maybe I

can rub Donnie's head for a couple of seconds but what if he's got something(?), is what I'm really thinking. And then I'm not even very good at the sacrament here, because Wally has to pound his Big Gulp on the table to get my attention and remind me, who's sitting in a sort of shock, not to sing during the sacrament song but to stand up and start breaking the bread, which is something I've known I was supposed to do since I was sixteen but now here I sheepishly am having to be told.

But I can't will myself to do what Bo does, and I think I'm starting to figure out why. It's not an act of will with Bo, or a matter of doing, it's just a matter of being. He's not taking the classic seemingly-together-person's approach of "I have so much that I need to give something back," or "I'm happy to help the less fortunate," but instead he's right there with every single one of them, giving everything he is and not just something, feeling just as fortunate or unfortunate as they are, thoroughly identifying with them, the way Jesus did, equal to the least of these instead of superior to these, and basically saying not "I am helping you" but like some medieval imitator of Jesus "I am you."

Most of us to identify with someone else have to have been through exactly the same thing that person has been through, maybe because we don't have Jesus-level imagination. Bo's got some though. He hasn't been through everything his friends here at the center have, but he can somehow take his general and vast experience of being beaten up by life and that's all he needs in order to identify with them, all he needs to see that he's basically like them. I've got some beaten-up stuff too, but haven't thought hard enough about it, or am still not convinced about just how fragile and ultimately unreliable any of my seeming-togetherness actually is.

I'm also starting to get the sense that my very hard work and investment at getting myself so seemingly together might be precisely the thing that's keeping me from identifying here, that the illusion of togetherness is what keeps you from understanding that you're one of the least too, because see if you have the illusion of togetherness it's just about impossible to imagine that you're also least.

And not only that, but the illusion of togetherness is a total (and non-tautological) illusion anyway, because like my neuroscientist friend tells me, we all have like 6 billion brain cells and 11 miles of connective tissue in that brain (I always mix up the 6 and 11 but it's a lot either way) and so the chances of every single one of us having something seriously wrong inside is like 100 percent. Which is just another way of saying what King Benjamin said about us all being beggars. We're all literally messed up. And beggars. Which is why we all need to identify with and help each other, and recognize that yes we need serious help too.

But it's easy to look around and think that because wow we seem in a purely visible way to really have more together than some or even a lot of people, then we must actually have things together period, which keeps us from identifying with comparatively-less-seemingly-together people who in actual truth are in total value our exact equals, not to mention might also keep us (me) from noticing our (my) own Bo-quality troubles too, maybe because ours (mine) are sometimes (but not always) of a less visible sort than Bo's, but visible or not they're of the same exact depth—like seriously vexing all sorts of people around me without always even meaning to but other times certainly meaning to, and though maybe sometimes (but not always) employing a more subtle and formally-educated brand of vexing than Bo prefers it's at least as offensive and regular as his is, and very possibly even more shattering to recipients, and very probably actually takes recipients even more days or weeks or years to recover from, as certain wife and kids and teachers and students and fellow-workers and -drivers and -Walmart-shoppers and -citizens and -believers can attest, and which vexing, given the right cascade of events and circumstances and persons, could easily have no-joke led to employment very much different from my seemingly-together sort. And by the way who, very much including me, with the same right set of other-cascading events and circumstances and person(s) couldn't have been divorced and married one or two or four times by now, and very probably be just as clumsy and unsettled as Bo in negotiating the anxiety- and mistake-ridden minefield of the singles scene that you'd thought you'd left oh so comfortably behind?

And so last of all I'm starting to think that losing the illusion of togetherness is maybe the big key to getting what Bo has and that I'm hankering for, which is nothing less than the quality of at one ment with other people, and not just among the sorts of people I already know and like, which as Jesus pointed out just about anyone can do, but among all sorts of people, and at one ment really is what that word means by the way, it's not just some lame sacrament-meeting-talk-trick of playing around with a word to try to find something original to say. "Atonement" has come to have the connotation of "pay for," as in if we do something wrong we need to pay for it or make up for it or that Jesus pays for it, but at one ment it seems to me (relying here heavily on Bo and a little on Alma too) isn't so much about doing as about feeling and being, or as much about paying for as about identifying with someone. It's maybe not as big of a mystery as we like to make atonement out to be, maybe especially when we turn atonement into theology instead of experience and feeling. But how to get it is the thing: by selling all you have? By losing your life to find it? Come to think of it, Bo's basically done both of those, so yeah, maybe that's it.

Outside the care center and halfway-house Bo is still vexing people left and right, like nobody's business and unlike the little child Jesus. He's not trying to, because at heart he's basically a good-hearted guy, which is how he can do what he does inside the care center, where his heart translates rightly instead of potentially disastrously. Inside those places, Bo knows just what to do, or better yet, how to be. And that's how he knows heaven.