

“J.C. and the Boys (and Girls),” 15 March 2009

I recently read an article about the “behind the scenes” work of Google. Whenever I “google” anything, I always sort of wonder how in the world I get the information I’ve looking for so quickly. Well, this particular article gave us a little peek into one of Google’s closely guarded business secret. It seems that Google has built an amazing infrastructure that is a combination of the algorithms behind its search tools along with vast clusters of computer around the globe to answer queries. Outsiders have speculated that its information network may number as many as 450,000 computers. Process innovations, like Google’s vast computer network, are invisible to the public; most consumers are totally blind to the importance of this hidden, but extremely valuable, work and the people who do it.

It occurs to me that that is true when it comes to many of the people and enterprises that we admire. We hear about Mother Theresa, but what about the other Sisters of the Poor who toiled in Calcutta with her? We hear about Bono, but what about the scores of people who make up the One effort? Oprah gets all the glory, but it takes a huge staff to get her program on the air, to get her magazine published, to lead the work of her Angel Network, and all the other enterprises that are attributed to her. We see the figureheads and the big names, but often miss the fact that these headlines could not do so without their supporting cast.

Actually, the very same thing was true of Jesus. He didn’t try to do it all alone; he brought some others alongside him. But most of us are not familiar with the names of many of the disciples, nor does history tell us much about their fate. And yet, as one of our Bible passages informs us, Jesus chose twelve to help him in his work. According to our Bible passage, these were the twelve: **Simon (Jesus later named him Peter, meaning “Rock”), James, son of Zebedee, John, brother of James (Jesus nicknamed the Zebedee brothers Boanerges, meaning “Sons of Thunder”), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James, son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Canaanite, Judas Iscariot (who betrayed him).** According to the passage, **“The plan was that they would be with him, and he would send them out to proclaim the Word and given them authority to banish demons.”**

Then after the death of Jesus, as the disciples tried to re-group, they determined that there was a need to replace the one who betrayed Jesus, and Matthias was elected to fill that empty spot. As they gathered, the book of Acts tells us who all became the supporting cast. We read: **“They agreed that they were in this for good, completely together in prayer, the women included. Also Jesus’ mother, Mary, and his brothers.”** Those are the ones who would attempt to continue the work that had been begun, but we seldom hear about any of them in any detail.

Much the same thing happens in our world today. I was thinking about that US Airways flight that made an emergency landing in the Hudson River in New York. We’ve heard a lot about the pilots and their heroic work, but after coming to a stop, the Captain gave a one word command “evacuate.” The flight attendants were the ones who led the evacuation of the aircraft, and allowed the 150 passengers to get out of the plane to be rescued. They were the unsung heroes of Flight 1549, but they’re not receiving nearly the amount of praise and recognition that the pilots are.

However, we’re not just talking about the big events and the big names. Behind every endeavor is a cadre of unsung heroes—those doing the bulk of the work, but receiving very little credit or acclaim. That’s the case in every business and corporation I’m aware of; that’s the case in every segment of government and our society. Those out front are always backed up by a contingent of loyal workers and supporters.

Think about what happens whenever we have any kind of a weather occurrence, say, like the big snowfalls we had in late January and February. We had trouble getting down our street because it hadn’t been plowed, but about 3:00 in the morning, I woke up to hear the snow plows on our street, so by morning, the street was clear and we could make our way to work or wherever our destination was. The drivers of those snowplows don’t get much recognition, but they’re an essential part of the infrastructure that keeps us moving.

I found a similar thing during a trip to San Francisco a few years ago. We were riding the trolley to do a little sightseeing, and found ourselves staying on the trolley until it got to the end of its route. Before turning around and retracing its path, all of us who were aboard were asked to step off the trolley for a few minutes, and an older man standing there with broom and dustpan in hand, got aboard. We waiting when he swept out the trash left by previous passengers, wiped down the seats, and carried the trash bag off to dispose of it. Then we were welcomed back on board the trolley. No one made much of this brief interlude in our travel, but it was interesting to me how his work—never seen by many of the riders—made the trolley and much cleaner and more comfortable place to be. He qualifies as an unsung hero in my book.

Have you ever been to Disney World or Disney Land, and noticed how clean the grounds are? Sometimes we see workers picking up trash, but although they’re there, we may not really pay a lot of attention. One time a few years ago, I was attending a workshop at Disney Land, and took my usual morning walk long before the park was to open to the public. I was amazed to see the company of workers who were shining and polishing things until they sparkled, and doing work like scraping the chewing gum left by a careless chewer off the sidewalk. Many of us don’t see notice the cleanliness, let alone recognize the work of those unseen employees to make it that way.

Families are often filled with unsung heroes. I read a piece about the grandmother of the Obama children, and she was called an “unsung hero” in that

family Marian Robinson, the mother of Michelle Obama, was described as a combination of matriarch, mentor, caregiver, confidante, playmate, and role model." She certainly wasn't "out front" often in the course of the campaign and subsequent events, but someone had to keep the family on solid footing, and she has been given the credit for doing just that.

Across this country and across the world, there are thousands of volunteers who are the unsung heroes of many of the organizations that we know so well. Without these mostly-nameless volunteers giving their time and energy to a project, it most likely would not happen. As I was doing the research for this message, I googled "unsung heroes," and found a You Tube video from New Zealand. It was about something called the Pacific Prize that recognizes selfless helpers, and this year took those nominated for the prize on a cruise to thank them and recognize them. Let's look at a short segment of that video and see the kinds of things they were doing that allows us to call them "unsung heroes."

The reality is that there are many, many more "unsung heroes" than we could ever begin to imagine. They are the "they's" in comments like, "They painted the park bench," or "They re-stocked the grocery shelves," or "They fixed the elevator." But behind every "they" is an "I"—a human being, often anonymous, who expended effort to do something that has some effect, some impact on you and me.

Maybe it would behoove us to stop from time and time and consider all the unnamed and mostly-invisible people—men, women, children—who contributed to making our car, or our lunch, who grew the apple we're eating, or produced the magazine we're reading. They're there, you know? Those behind-the-scenes persons seldom receive any thanks for their work, but they work just the same.

Frankly, I think those unsung heroes are the real heroes, because they are the hands of God, working in this world, to make life just a little brighter, just a little more hopeful, just a little better for all of us. So, I think it is more than appropriate that we open our eyes in a new way, and breathe a prayer of gratitude for all those unnamed heroes who are, in ways not all that different from some of those in the circle that Jesus created, doing God's work.

Closing:

The Garden benefits from the work of tons of "unsung heroes." None of the Sunday work would happen without the hours of behind-the scene work that goes on Monday through Saturday, and that work is done by scores of volunteers, many of whom we don't see up front on Sunday, and we perhaps don't even know their names. You know who you are, and we want you to know that we're grateful to you for the myriad of ways in which you are The Garden and you make The Garden. THANK YOU!

As we prepare to leave here this morning, I hope and pray, that as we watch The Garden's credits for those behind-the-scenes" workers, that we'll be sure to

be more attentive to the other unsung heroes around us, and say "thanks."

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.