Paying Out the Ying Yang

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA | JULY 2010

Loaves and Fishes is a volunteer-driven agency that feeds the hungry in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

The organization's name refers to the famous New Testament story where Jesus blessed five loaves of bread and two fishes, thus miraculously feeding 5,000 people, with a dozen baskets of food left over. How the needy are nourished in the Twin Cities is only slightly less amazing.

Since its founding in 1982, Loaves and Fishes has organized volunteers into serving teams who provide a hot meal for more than 300,000 people each year. Sometimes a circle of friends, a family, or a book club will gather to make dinner. There are also groups that come from schools, churches, and foundations, as well as corporations like Pillsbury, Microsoft, 3M, Target and General Mills. I was told about a gentleman who left money in his will, so surviving relatives could buy ingredients for the meals they make together several times a year in his honor. Currently, there are over 270 different volunteer teams who meet regularly to cook for others.

This all sounded a little too good to be true, and so I decided to travel to Minneapolis/St. Paul to see how it works. I arranged to work alongside a volunteer group one evening, and then cook my own meal the next. It was a sultry June afternoon, when I arrived at Hope Presbyterian Church in Richfield, a neighborhood south of downtown and near enough to the airport that jets roared overhead every few minutes.

I look at the church's marquee out front. *Hope* Presbyterian. This is a good omen. Hope is something everybody needs. It will be a pleasure to serve up a big, tasty plates of hope. But to who, I wonder? What sorts of people will come to a soup kitchen in this middle-class neighborhood of single-story ranch houses, all with neatly mowed lawns, and American flags flying by their front doors?

After I find my way to the office of Beth Ann Dodds, a coordinator for the Hope Church location of Loaves & Fishes, she explains. "Usually soup kitchens are very local, and poor people walk in, their belongings on their back. Not here. What we've got is primarily an elderly crowd, and they drive here, sometimes from great distances, even fifteen miles or so, which is a little bizarre."

I agree this is unusual.

This all sounded a little too good to be true, and so I decided to travel to Minneapolis/St. Paul to see how it works.

"Yeah, but it also makes a sad sort of sense," Dodds says. "Elderly people on fixed incomes might own their own homes, but they are paying out the ying-yang for prescription medicine. With a lot of our guests, they're either going to have their drugs, or they are going to eat."

She continues: "I've worked at other sites, that are more inner city, where there's transient folks, and you never know who you are going to see each day. Again, it's very different with us. Of the 100 or so guests we have each night, I'd guess three-quarters are here every single evening. We've got a lot of husbands and wives. They sit at their own places, and they come to think of those seats as 'theirs.' They get cranky when someone sits at their table that they don't know or, for whatever reason, they don't like. It's like teenagers in a high school cafeteria. Actually, from the teenagers I've seen, they behave a lot better than some of our elderly folks."

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The idea is vaguely comical. I'm trying to imagine a rowdy food fight, where after throwing spaghetti at each other, the oldsters tossing their dentures, or walking sticks. In reality, however, the misbehavior is more tame. Dodds tells me about one woman, Louella, who is a particular troublemaker.

"She's forever sneaking into the kitchen ahead of time to see what's cooking; she likes to cut in line to get second helpings before everyone else has even had their first. I say to her, 'it's about love, Louella. Be nice, Louella.' I just keep saying the words, and gradually, she calms down. We're born as babies, and I guess we die as babies, too."

The Band of Brothers is a group of former alcoholics and drug addicts.

As Dodds and I talk, Andrea Kish-Bailey arrives. She is the Program Manager for all eight dining sites that Loaves & Fishes operates across Minneapolis/St. Paul, and from which a combined total of 1,500 meals are served each weeknight. Although most of these meals are served in churches, Loaves & Fishes still has to pay rent to use these facilities. At Hope Church, for instance, the fee to use the kitchen and "Fellowship Hall" four nights a week is $2,000 a month. Volunteer groups all pay for their own food, Kish-Bailey notes, so they're free to serve whatever they like, and how they want to serve it. As such, the atmosphere of the dinner changes quite a bit from evening to evening, based on who is doing the cooking.

"Some groups see it as an expression of their faith in God, and that's fine. But a lot of times, corporations will want to make sure that nothing religious is going on. It's like I always say, 'charity is *not* a faith-based impulse,'" she says.

Kish-Bailey checks her schedule. "You're in for a treat tonight; The Band of Brothers is cooking."

"Oh, Lord," Dodds groans, rolling her eyes. "It's always something with them!"

The Band of Brothers is a group of former alcoholics and drug addicts. They met five years ago at a 12-step sobriety group convening at Eden House, an organization in downtown Minneapolis that helps former users find more "pro-social" ways of using their time, rather than getting drunk or stoned. Eden House also has a "Sentence to Service" program, where low-risk offenders are offered the option of full-time community service jobs, rather than incarceration.

A group of at least a half-dozen men, sometimes more, The Brothers, as they prefer to call themselves, are not biologically related, but function as their own non-profit group, so they're able to accept donations to supplement the costs of food—most of which they buy themselves. They cook together at different Loaves & Fishes sites on an average of twice every month, or at least twenty times a year. Renowned for their ability to make a soul-satisfying meal (The Brothers' ribs are legendary) they exhibit the boisterous and rowdy energy of middle-aged guys playing a pick-up game of basketball. Meaning, they show the love by constantly ragging on each other, and hurling about affectionate insults. The Brothers are unofficially led by Tom Belting and Ezell Moore.

Belting, who appears to be in his early fifties, has the manner of a born salesman. When he smiles, which is nearly always, the sides of Belting's mouth stretch very, very wide, and the dimples on his cheek drill in deep. It is easy to imagine he'd have no trouble being heard over the din of a noisy bar. Belting has the unnerving habit of edging right up to sincerity, and then taking a 180-degree swerve away into the hoariest of jokes. The evening we meet, he is resplendent in a polo shirt that has a psychedelic pattern of purple and blue paisleys.

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"We can serve one hell of a meal because, in treatment, you'll always find a couple guys that like to cook. Maybe they were professional chefs, or worked on the line at some restaurant, and this is how they got into booze and pot in the first place, because they needed to calm down after a hard night of slinging hash," Belting says.

"I've had to pull guys off the serving line because they became too emotional."

Belting, who is president of Dean Johnson Exteriors, a Twin Cities construction firm (he donates a percentage from every job his company does to The Band of Brothers' budget), describes himself as "a middle class white kid who grew up in the suburbs, who never knew much about poverty, or the less fortunate, until I found himself with a drinking problem. I saw a lot and I learned a lot about who I was during treatment. I was in for a year and a half. Tell you what. As a Republican, I turned into an Independent real quick!"

"Most of us were such selfish pricks during the time we were using. It really is kind of an ongoing revelation not to only think of ourselves. There's just something about doing a random act of kindness, and when you see that smiling face…," Belting pauses. His voice has started to get a little thick. He takes a couple deep breaths. "I've had to pull guys off the serving line because they became too emotional."

Screech! Here comes the U-Turn. "But hell, we are not saints! Sure, we like to cook, but we also get together and play cards once a week, and we like that fine, too!" At this moment, Belting hopped up from the table where we were sitting together. He banged his hands on its top so resoundingly that coffee splashed up and out of my cup. Belting didn't notice.

"I want you to meet Ezell! We call ourselves salt and pepper. He's my gang-banger brother, and he's the real deal. He learned how to cook in jail! He's got two bullets left in him!" Belting rushed off to the kitchen, returning a few moments later with Moore.

A fearsome-looking African-American, Moore has a balloon of a belly that he brandishes with something like pride. There's also a full lower row of golden teeth, and a baseball cap worn perpetually sideways. Salt and pepper, to be sure. Moore is not only a different skin color than Belting, he is an altogether different personality. Whereas Belting was all bombast, Moore is halting and shy. As he talks, he looks down at his hands. I notice he wears rings on every one of his fingers, except his thumbs.

"First of all, I have to set one thing straight," Moore says. "Tom likes to call me his gang-banger brother. But I ain't never gang-bang no one, no how. I don't know where he gets this nonsense, but it ain't true."

Moore then begins to tell me his story. He speaks tentatively, taking the occasional peek upwards, to make sure that I'm not bored. Originally from Missouri, he came to Minneapolis in 1999, and soon "fell in with the wrong crowd," as he put it.

"When I was out there, I got in touch with God, though, and God told me hisself that I best be leaving the drugs alone."

On the day Moore graduated from his treatment program at Eden House, Belting was the guest speaker. Soon enough, Belting got Moore involved with The Brothers. "I did it once, and I just loved it. It's great for guys in treatment. In all these years, I've never had to raise my voice; I've never heard a cross word. And, we is dealing with hard-core drug addicts here. I mean some of these guys? They was *bad*."

I ask him about the elderly crowd he'll be serving tonight.

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"They is my grandmother," he says. "They's not happy to be here. It's a pride thing. I remember when I was on that side of the table." He points to where the dinner buffet will soon be set up. "I always said to myself that when I got straight, I would give back. When you get high, you get a rush, you know? Well, now I get that when I'm cooking. Speaking of which, I'd best be getting back to work."

Ezell waddles off with his stomach-first swagger. As I follow him into the kitchen, I notice the shorts he's wearing. More like coulottes, really, their hem graze his lower calf. On one of his back pockets is an embroidered image of the Virgin Mary. Instead of her face, there is a grinning skull. Mary's halo is made of barbed wire.

It is 4:20 p.m., and chicken is still being put on the trays, which Tom Belting finds unacceptable. "We're an hour behind schedule, and we've still got frozen chicken!" He screams. "Come on people! Get it together! We want all the legs turned to the left, and all the wings to the right. How often do I have to tell you this shit?"

None of The Brothers seem to be paying him much attention, so Belting finds a better target for his anxieties when Beth Ann Dodds comes into the kitchen, carrying an orange, three-ringed binder. She's shown this to me earlier, and explained that in order to qualify for donations from Minneapolis' city-run food bank, precise portion sizes and calorie counts for every meal served by Loaves & Fishes must be annotated in this binder. Belting knows this better than anyone, but at the moment, he finds it convenient to pretend otherwise.

"Don't even start with me," he says, swatting Dodds away like she is a mosquito. "We got 60 pounds of potato salad, 75 pounds of chicken, 14 pounds of rice, and 15 boxes of stuffing. *You* figure out how that all breaks down into portions and calories, O.K.?"

Ezell Moore chuckles to himself while he empties box after box of stuffing mix into stainless steel pans, then dumps in hot water and many sticks of margarine. The odor of sage fills the kitchen, and it suddenly smells like Thanksgiving morning.

Outside, in the Fellowship Hall, dinner guests start arriving at 4:30 p.m., on the dot. It is an overwhelmingly Caucasian crowd, and they are all quite old. It is easy to imagine them sitting in rooms with the shades pulled tight, watching television in the middle of the day. Many of the guests have canes, or rolling walkers, and hearing aids. Some tote along portable oxygen units, and have clear plastic tubing snaking up their nostrils. Most of the street-dwelling guests I've seen at other soup kitchens are disheveled in appearance, and when you get close to them, they exude a ripe odor of dirt and sweat. This crowd, though, is conspicuously well-scrubbed, with their hair brushed neatly into place.

They find their way to tables and, subtly, the room begins to Balkanize. Just as I'd been warned by Beth Ann Dodds, some tables fill up immediately, others are occupied by a lone person, almost as if there are assigned seats. A cart rolls around, offering scalding hot cups of "Swedish gasoline." Their hands shake as they try to get the brims of their coffee cups to their lips without burning themselves. Steam wafts up around their faces, and fogs over their eyeglasses.

Back in the kitchen, the din is indescribable. Pots are banging, gushes of water are rinsing off dirty pans in the enormous sinks, and The Brothers are screaming with laughter at a joke that's incomprehensible to anyone outside their fraternity.

"Fifteen minutes to kickoff," someone shouts.

"We're gonna' be late, but it's gonna' be good. That is our main consideration," Belting shouts.

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At 4:50 p.m., at the peak of pre-dinner insanity, a dozen teenagers arrive. They are sunburned and have wet hair, as they've just come from swimming in a local lake. Most are girls, and they wear spaghetti-strapped tops, and short shorts, and several sport lime-green toenail polish. They're compulsively checking their cellphones, as if the admissions committee from Harvard might soon be calling, or their investment brokers, needing to liquidate their stock portfolios. Later I will learn they are parishioners at a United Methodist church in Rockbrook, Nebraska, a suburb of Omaha, and they're visiting Minneapolis on a "missions" trip. I'm accustomed to hearing about teenagers like this heading off to Costa Rica, or Haiti, on such charitable adventures. But *Minnesota?*

"We're from Youth Works!" announces a cocky boy.

"So? Do you want a friggin' medal?" Belting screams. He's joking—sort of—but his humor is utterly lost on these kids.

Moore saves the moment. Since there are so many extra volunteers this evening, he decides guests will be given a special treat of table service, rather than their having to hobble up to the buffet table themselves. "Why don't you go get on aprons and plastic gloves, and join us back here in a few minutes for our group prayer?" Moore says to the teenagers, who scatter like frightened birds.

Frantic food preparation continues. I don't know how The Brothers did it, but they managed to cook frozen chicken, slathered with barbecue sauce in less than half an hour. It's not burned, either, but looks both juicy and crisp. As food miracles go, it's not quite Biblical in scale, but for a Minnesota Monday, it is startling nonetheless.

It's time for the group prayer—something that's not obligatory for all groups, but a cherished part of The Brother's routine. As he hollers out the "blessing," it appears even God is not safe from Tom Belting's incessant joking. "Dear Lord, Brother Ezell told me that you were the one who forgot to defrost the chicken, but I am pretty sure it was his fault, not yours. I'll forgive him if you will, Lord."

As I look about, I see the Nebraska kids are confused to hear God talked to with such impertinence. The expressions on their faces grow even more quizzical, when The Brothers launch into the Serenity Prayer.

As food miracles go, it's not quite Biblical in scale, but for a Minnesota Monday, it is startling nonetheless.

The kids line up, and march out to the seated diners. I get a plate for myself, and sit alone, in the room's far corner. Soon enough, I'm joined by Dan Weigel, the executive director of Loaves and Fishes. He talks about the older clientele.

"Yes, they are on fixed incomes, and their pinched budgets need the help they get by receiving free meals." But, Weigel also believes that just as important, is the social aspect of coming together this way. "These people mostly live alone, or with their long-time husband or wife. They may not see anyone else all day, or maybe speak, until they come to Loaves & Fishes."

Afterwards, I see Belting. He grabs me into a hug so violent, he nearly squeezes the breath out of me, as he simultaneously claps me on the back.

"Make sure you say goodbye to Ezell, my gang-banger brother," he says.

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Before we'd parted company the evening previous, Dan Weigel told me he'd booked three of his very best kitchen volunteers—Sally, Bonnie and Jan—to help me prepare my meal.

Gulp!

I'm still new to this enterprise of mass cookery and feel like something of a fraud in claiming any skills at it. The idea of three, highly-capable Minnesota women "assisting" me, when I imagine they could bone and filet me in no time flat, makes me nervous. You'd think the shambolic way The Brothers pulled their meal together might allow me to relax. (I, at least, know to defrost frozen meat.) But, it didn't. I grew up in church kitchens, you see, and was always somewhat envious of an unquestioned authority the deaconesses commanded as they churned out lunches at Vacation Bible School, or Sunday suppers. I feared Jan, Bonnie and Sally would see through me right away.

Without a word of complaint, Sally diced nearly fifty pounds of boneless chicken breasts into bite-sized pieces, even though I later learned she was a strict vegetarian.

This anxiety led me to remember Margaret Woodiwiss. She was a deaconess at McCoy Memorial Baptist in Elkhart, Indiana, a parish that my preacher Dad accepted a "call" to when I was a sophomore in high school. Rural Indiana was very far from suburban New York City, and it was a rude shock for me, and for my Mom. Sensing that she might need help in learning the local ways, Margaret Woodiwiss took Mom under her wing. As I recall, one of Margaret's earliest lessons was in the making of candy.

One Saturday morning, Margaret showed up at the parsonage with a solid block of chocolate, nearly the size of a businessman's attache case. Mom and I were astonished; Margaret was surprised by our surprise.

"Well, what did you use back East?" she asked.

"I've never made candy before," my mother answered.

Margaret's face fell. It was as if Mom had said she'd never scrambled an egg.

"Well, nothing could be easier, and I'm here to show you how."

Margaret, Mom and I spent the day together, chopping, melting and mixing the molten chocolate with all sorts of things: candied ginger, strawberries, coconut, mini-marshmallows, even Chinese wonton noodles and Cheerios. We ended up with many dozens of chocolate blobs which, Margaret assured us, when "properly stored" could last for several months. Indeed, some of the chocolate-covered potato chips lived on in our freezer for years afterwards. The first known example, perhaps, of cryogenic candy.

What Margaret Woodiwiss would have made of the menu I'd chosen for this dinner in Minneapolis—couscous with chicken and roasted vegetables; a Greek salad with tomatoes, cucumbers, Feta cheese, red onion, and black olives; Asian cole slaw; and fruit salad for dessert—I can't say. To my immense relief, though, Sally, Bonnie and Jan all jumped right in. We were a band of sisters, if you will.

Without a word of complaint, Sally diced nearly fifty pounds of boneless chicken breasts into bite-sized pieces, even though I later learned she was a strict vegetarian.

"Why didn't you say something? You could have worked on something else," I said.

"Oh, it wasn't a problem," she replied. "I cook meat for my dogs."

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I was improvising some of these recipes. I've eaten Greek salad many times, of course, but never thought to make one, much less enough to feed 100 people. The cucumbers looked so fresh at the grocery store, however, so I got inspired. Showing Bonnie how I "seed" a cucumber—peeling off the skin, cutting the cuke lengthwise, and then scooping out its innards with a teaspoon—she protested, "but you loose half the cucumber that way!"

"I know, but the seeds make people burp, and they're ugly, don't you think?"

She didn't roll her eyes at me, or give me any attitude. Instead, she smiled. "If you think they're ugly, Stephen, let's get rid of 'em."

I roasted the vegetables (zucchini, acorn squash, red peppers), first putting the empty pans that I'd smeared with olive oil into the oven to heat. Why did I do that, Jan asked? If the oil wasn't already hot by the time it hit the vegetables, I explained, they would stick to the pan, and burn.

"Would you marry me?" she said. "If you did the cooking, I'd do all the dishes, I promise." Meanwhile, Jan peeled ginger root for a vinaigrette, and cut up strawberries and pineapple into the fruit salad.

In other words, the kitchen's mood was altogether different from the night before. We worked quietly, doing our jobs, and trading tips. Our cheery collegiality, however, was slightly dampened by a few factors beyond our control. First, it had been a terribly hot day and though thunderstorms were predicted all afternoon, they never arrived. Now, seemingly because this precipitation was pent up without release, a simple downpour would no longer do, and the weather service was sending out urgent tornado warnings.

"No one will come out in this," Dan Weigel said, as he stopped by the kitchen shortly after four o'clock. "I hope all this food will last overnight in the refrigerator."

Secondly, as if a tornado weren't distressing enough, an elevator was malfunctioning that usually brought guests from the church's main entrance to the basement Fellowship Hall. "Our folks can't handle the stairs. I don't know what we'll do, even if they do show up," Wiegel said, thereby creating further gloom.

I am fifty-three years old. Anyone who calls me "young man" is going to get a friendly response.

Finally, as the cherry on the sundae, a fire alarm kept going off, with a rapid series of eardrum-piercing bleats. Each time this happened, Weigel would order Sally, Bonnie, Jan and me to evacuate the kitchen. After the third time. I told Dan I wasn't leaving. "If the building is truly on fire, call me on my cell phone, O.K.?"

Just before 5 p.m., the YouthWorks kids from Nebraska show up again. They arrived with news that the tornado had blown over, and the elevator was working again. If I'd felt a little condescending towards them yesterday, now these kids were my joy and delight! I get them busy scooping out portions of fruit salad. Then, they served as waitresses and waiters again. While the meal was served, I mostly stayed back in the kitchen. When things thing were nearly finished out in the Fellowship Hall, though, I popped my head out.

"Young man, young man!" an old lady calls out, her voice high and sharp. "Did I hear that you cooked all this food?"

I am fifty-three years old. Anyone who calls me "young man" is going to get a friendly response.

"Yes, I did," I said, and arranged my face into what I imagined was a suitably modest expression for her gratitude.

Instead, she pointed at her plate with a grimace. "What was *that?*"

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"You mean the couscous?"

"Kookoo?"

"Couscous," I repeat, hitting the consonants harder.

She frowns. "What is it? Some sort of pasta?

"Similar, but different. It's made from durum wheat, and it's popular all across the Middle East, but especially in places around the Mediterranean. They love couscous in Morocco."

The woman stared at me. I suspected I'd overwhelmed her with information.

"Did you like it?" I ask.

"Well, I can't rightly say. It needed salt, I can tell you that much." She turned to the man next to her, who I guessed to be her husband. "Did we ever go to Morocco?" she asked him.

He turned to her and smiled, but didn't answer.

"He's deaf as a donut. Can't hear a goddamn thing, can you, sweetheart?" She stroked the hair above his ear. "I think we went to Morocco. Then again, I think we went to a lot of places my daughter says we never did."

The woman turned back to me, and once more pointed at her plate. "What's it called again?"

"Couscous."

"Is there any left?"

"Sure, shall I bring you some more?"

"If you wouldn't mind, sweetie. But put some salt on it, won't you? And can you bring me a few more of those raspberries?"

As I returned to the buffet table, I see Jan, Bonnie and Sally are elated. "It's almost all gone!" Jan says. "People are loving the food you made."

"The food *we* made," I say, correctly her. "Well, I'm glad some people are happy. I've got a customer who isn't sure she likes the couscous, but wants more anyway." I tilt an ear back over my shoulder to where the old woman is sitting.

"Oh, that's Louella," says Bonnie. "She's a handful, that one. She's already been scolded twice for picking all the raspberries out of the fruit salad.

I laugh, remembering what Beth Ann Dodds told me the day before. We're born as babies, and we die as babies.

As I walk back towards Louella, with a fresh plate of couscous, and a shaker of salt, I rehearse in my mind what I'm going to say. A gentle word of admonishment, like to a child. Then, I think better of it, and decide to keep my mouth shut. Be nice, Stephen. It's about the love, Stephen.