

## Season of Sharing in September

by H. W. Moss

Turns out, the way Bob got involved was his attorney's secretary, Carla at Herring & Sutch L.P., called and asked if he wanted to volunteer for a worthy cause.

Caught off guard, he said, "Sure, why not?"

And could he bring a few workers with him? At which request he finally had the presence of mind to ask, "What's this for, exactly?"

"You can do a good deed by helping us help others," Carla said cheerfully. "The organization is called Season of Sharing in September."

"So it's three months from now?"

"Actually, no. It's next weekend."

"But you said September."

"I know, that's something of an anomaly, but it's in mid June. I think they did that on purpose. Anyway, we joined last year and we've worked on three houses so far. Our core group meets at a bar in the SOMA and we came up with this great idea to offer our labor for free. You know, volunteers. Sort of like one big happy family. We just need a leader and a means of finding the beneficiaries. That's where Season of Sharing comes in. They work with churches and senior centers to find and assign the needy with a contractor and a team. September supplies the materials from donations. We thought of you when they asked for a team leader."

For whatever reason, the proposal struck Bob the right way and he agreed to be the contractor slash team leader. Next morning at a job site, he asked his crew of six if any

would like to join him. It would be for two days, Saturday and Sunday, and they would not get paid.

Like a faithful yet dubious sidekick, only Leon said yes. Reluctantly.

The property was on Winding Way, a nice neighborhood perched on the southern edge of San Francisco with views of the East Bay. On a clear day you could see downtown and the Pyramid. Neighbors kept up their property. These people didn't.

"That's gotta be the place," Leon said as they rounded a bend and the most unsightly building on the block stabbed them with its gross vulgarity. The front yard was unkempt and had gone to seed. The lawn had not been mown in years, trees overhung the drive and were left to branch and die off which made it impossible for Bob's truck to get in the otherwise spacious driveway. It did appear the lowest hanging branches had been trimmed so that a private car might slide into the garage without scraping the paint.

Bob parked several doors away because the closest street spaces were already taken.

A handful of people milled out front trampling the lawn, some with to-go coffee containers steaming in their hands. One approached waving a cigarette, said hello, I'm Carla, you must be Bob. A brief introduction followed in which Carla shook hands with Bob and Leon who were the only ones wearing paint splattered work clothes. She explained it was she who talked to him on the phone and was coordinator for the day, Bob would be the leader of all the work crews.

"We have plenty of supplies donated by a big box store. Paint, ladders, drop cloths. That sort of thing." Carla inhaled long and hard. Exhaling, she pointed at a round pink

bandage on her left arm and said, “Nicotine patch. Trying to quit. I call it the trans-dermal railway.”

She suggested they go inside and led the way up three steps. As they approached the open front door, they heard “Arf, arf, arf.”

Ever vigilant of the unpredictable nature of an unknown canine, Bob asked, “Where’s the dog?”

“There isn’t one,” Carla chuckled and added, “Dog died 30 years ago. That’s a parrot, Pirate the Parrot.”

Pirate sat on a wood perch in the living room and barked again. His droppings more than covered the newspapers spread at the base of his stand.

“He eats mangos from the tree out back.” Carla retraced her steps to the front porch, crushed her cigarette underfoot, picked the butt up and carried it with her to find a suitable disposal site.

A woman sat on a lounge chair in front of a television in one corner of the living room. Carla waved, said “High Misses Spicer,” and walked on. The TV was silent and there was no picture. Sotto voice, Carla told Bob, “That’s Shelly Spicer. It’s her house. She won the church lottery, so she has the benefit of our services this weekend.”

The woman never turned her head, but said, “How long ya goin’ be? I cain’t watch muh tee vee judge shows.”

“Electric’s off while Ronnie replaces some wires in the basement,” Carla told Bob with an all encompassing arm gesture.

Shelly sat in the living room chair expectant. The television was turned at a 30 degree angle to give workers access to the rain ruined wall behind it.

“You realize that means the roof leaks?” Bob said. “Anything we do will be destroyed next winter.”

“I’ve been assured the roof was replaced last month. Shelly won that too.”

Equally sotto voice, Bob said, “You don’t think these lotteries are rigged, do you?”

Bob recently went with his wife to price a new television. The 80 inch flat screen in front of which Mrs. Spicer sat was the latest, biggest and most expensive of any brand.

Carla said, “I don’t know. She won the television too, but from a different church.”

Bob turned to Carla. “You said the electricity is off while someone’s working on it. Anyone pull a permit?”

“Why? Do we need one? Too late now. It’s the weekend. Building permit office is closed.”

The kitchen was made over into a free food outlet. It seemed everyone brought something and mounds of chips, dips, salads, sandwich makings including sliced cheeses, salami, ham and condiments such as pickles, lettuce leaves, sliced tomato and onions covered the table, all available for the taking. Leon made a bee line for the ham and cheese and began putting a sandwich together.

“Teacher goes up to them and tells them who he is and said if they didn’t stop fighting right now, this instant, he was going to come in and grab the one who looks like he’s winning. And if he does that, whichever of them that is better not touch him because if they so much as brush his fucking face with a finger he’ll slap them with a DHP. Basically they’d be expelled.”

Carla interrupted the conversation just as the speaker explained that DHP meant Disciplinary Hearing Panel.

“Bob, I want you to meet one of our legal interns. This is Buddy, Buddy Melville. He’s a student at State. Asked to help out today. Very good of you Buddy. This is Bob, your team leader.”

Buddy extended a hand with a wide grin. “Big Bob. Hope to have a wonderful day working with you.”

And he was big. At six feet seven, in the neighborhood of 285 pounds, Bob towered over almost everyone in the room including Leon. Conscious of this but determined to be non-threatening, Bob often stood with shoulders slumped and head tucked in order, he thought, to be more acceptable to others. Door frames, like the ones in this house, often required he bow his head to pass through. Bob participated in the hand shake, looked around the room appraising the other volunteers. It was as if they were all standing around the office water cooler chatting.

“You mean my pseudo son-in-law?” someone said. They were all dressed casual, but upscale casual as if going for a walk, not work.

Bob took in the room’s peeling and faded paint, the burn marks and soot surrounding the stove flue where it entered the wall vent, the several places where cracked plaster was popping off the underlying lath; considered the floor where it was waterlogged and rotten probably because the occupants never emptied the catch basin of the automatic defrost refrigerator and he wanted to go home and climb back into bed.

“Did you hear how Mrs. Ortega described her marriage as a perpetual near death experience? Said that all the years they were married, she wished Mister Ortega was dead.”

From just this quick look and having passed through the living room, it was clear the entire interior of the house from top to bottom was, in real estate parlance, full of deferred maintenance. Direct and to the point without diluting it with a pleasant euphemism, Bob said, “This house is a wreck.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Buddy said cheerfully. “We like to think of ourselves as a bunch of drinkers with a do-good habit.” Then he added, “You’ll notice there are no senior partners here? And the only junior partner to show up is Martin Berner. He’s in there trying to paint the dining room.”

Buddy motioned Bob to follow and led the way through a swinging door. It closed behind them and Bob felt a sense of relief: at least that was working.

There was a final line from someone in the kitchen: “After menopause there’s no reason for men and women to be together.”

They stood at a distance and watched Martin at his self-assigned task. He was using a four inch wide brush. There was no shortage of paint tools and the floor was covered by a canvas drop cloth with a tray at the man’s feet and a bucket nearby from which the tray was filled. But it was evident Berner just did not know what he was doing. He kept running the brush over the same area. He never returned to the tray for paint and never widened his up and down pattern.

Bob and Buddy stood watching. Buddy whispered, “The body’s there, the brain isn’t.”

After a few seconds of this, Bob picked a pole and roller frame from an assortment of implements. He pulled a roller cover over the frame, attached the roller handle to the pole, dipped the roller in the paint tray, ran it back and forth a couple times to fill it to

almost dripping capacity, and swung it up toward the wall. After several strokes, all the way up to but not quite hitting the plate rail, then down, all the way down but not quite hitting the top of the baseboard, he covered a three foot wide section of wall.

Martin watched without comment. Bob never said a word as he took the brush from Martin, handed him the pole. He guided Martin's hands as they moved the roller in the tray once, twice, lifted it to the wall and let go.

Martin began to paint the same area Bob had just covered.

Bob retreated to stand next to Buddy who said quizzically, "Have you ever seen anyone spend so much time and effort and produce such little results?"

Bob made one more futile attempt to direct the work before he decided to leave Martin to his task. He cautioned, "Don't paint the door, OK? You're using latex based paint on the walls. The door gets enamel, an oil based paint. So don't paint the door. Right?"

Martin must have heard, but made no acknowledgement. He continued rolling the part where Bob had just rolled.

Buddy directed them into the hallway off which two bedrooms and a bath branched. It was obvious from the most cursory examination the rooms all needed attention, including the hall. At the end of the corridor was the backyard porch. The screen in the door was ripped as if someone who needed to get in simply sliced it above the handle. The back porch was a rickety affair and Bob grabbed Buddy's shoulder to steady himself as they descended into the back yard which was a repeat of the unkempt front except the rear was about three times as spacious. Another group of people holding cups of steaming coffee milled about.

“Have you seen ‘The Yawning’ yet? Scary movie, a really scary movie. ”

Buddy and Bob’s approach silenced a few, but one man continued talking.

“I went to my dentist to challenge the huge bill. I said I want the tooth, the whole tooth and nothing but the tooth.”

“That’s so old it was chiseled on Cleopatra’s tomb.”

Before silenced by their co-workers with Bob and Buddy’s approach, another respondent said, “Hah! That’s as good as the bumper sticker that says, ‘I owe, I owe, it’s off to work I go.’”

A hand shot out and a voice said, “Howdy Hoss. We’re the gardening crew. Who are you?”

Buddy introduced Bob as the contractor who would be supervising their work.

“Did anyone bring a lawn mower? Well, I got one in the truck, Leon, where’s Leon?”

“Right cheer boss,” jaws chomping his sandwich.

“We need the mower in the bed of my truck. I think it’s tied to the driver side wheel well. Can you take a couple guys and get it and some other things for me?”

“Sure thing.”

“Couple rakes, a shovel and the averruncator. We’ll need that too.”

A few of the crew stared at him quizzically.

“I love saying that word,” Bob smiled and enunciated: “Aver-run-cator. Sort of like Letterman loves to say ‘Joey Butta-fooco.’”

While they waited for the mower, Bob was introduced to everyone. Fortunately most brought their own gloves and there were plenty of hand tools. He made a point of

assigning tasks that did not appear too taxing for anyone. He doubled people up on such jobs as cutting back the rose bushes, trimming the walkway edges and, when Leon returned, raking leaves.

They fired up the mower.

“Bags? Who’s got plastic trash bags?” A box appeared and a black bag was plucked from it. “Good. Now. Your job, you are?” He pointed at one woman.

“Joy. My name’s Joy.”

“Joy. Howdy. I’m Bob. Your job is to walk in front of the mower and make sure no rocks or tree limbs are hidden in the grass. Who wants to run the mower?”

Several hands shot up.

“Great. Take turns. You first, you second, and then spell Joy walking out front, you and you. Got it? Who can handle a rake? Throw all the lawn cuttings, rocks and tree branches, everything in these bags, tie them up and take them out front by the sidewalk. When you finish here, go do the same thing in the front yard”

He left them with a promise to return in an hour.

“Only a fool would want to rise from the dead,” was the last thing Bob heard as the porch door slammed shut behind him.

In the kitchen Bob found the same scene as before. He stood politely quiet and did not interrupt a woman before she finished her sentence: “That’s the stupidest vegetable I’ve seen in all my life. Who eats an artichoke?”

He raised his arms and turned around with a quieting gesture, lowering his hands he said, “Everyone. I need your attention. Please.”

The hubbub reduced to a buzz and then went quiet.

“What I need is people who have experience. Who here has worked with dry wall?”

No one spoke, no hands rose in response.

“Mud and tape means nothing to anybody?” No response. “Anyone ever paint a room? Aw c’mon, someone here has used a paint brush before.”

Several people raised their hands. One volunteered: “I painted the nursery when we were expecting our first child.”

“Great, that’s great. Well here’s the deal. Preparation is key. And many hands make for little work. So we’re all going to wash walls with TSP, then fill cracks with mud and tape, sand and then we can begin adding color when that’s done. Here in the kitchen, though, I need someone who can pound a hammer.”

Two women raised their hands.

He pointed at one. “Yes?”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“Let me show you. First, I need the food covered up because there’s going to be lots of dust in the air.” Paper plates, cups and plastic utensils were taken off the drain board and placed on the kitchen table along with all the food. A six foot length was cut from a roll of three mill plastic sheeting and draped over it all.

While that was being taken care of, Bob sent Leon back to the truck for the tool barrels. These were five gallon containers that had been tricked out with utility belts holding different sizes and types of hand tools. Claw carpenter hammers and ball peens, Phillips and flat end screw drivers, cross cut and coarse cut saws, adjustable hack and jab saws with tapering ends as well as various dry wall cutting tools were contained inside

these tubs or hanging from the sides. There were several screw guns and a couple boxes of dry wall screws.

Bob went over to the stove pipe where it entered the wall and pulled the plate away. He removed a one foot length of double wall pipe and a hole appeared which was the vent pipe opening. Pieces of plaster fell to the floor.

“Leon, would you turn the gas off and disconnect the line so we can pull the stove away from the wall? Thanks.”

When that was done and with an audience of perhaps fifteen, Bob pulled his arm back and swung the twenty ounce carpenter hammer on the plaster surrounding the hole and a huge chunk crumbled away.

The crowd gasped.

“This whole wall surface needs to be removed and replaced with five eights fire resistant dry wall. But first, I want you,” and he pointed at one of the women who asked what “pound a hammer” meant and handed the hammer he was using to her. “You take the next shot.”

Before she stepped forward, he plucked a pair of safety goggles out of one tub and put them on her head adjusting them to protect her eyes. She braced herself, tentatively smacked the wall surface. Bob said, “No, no, no. Give it a good whack.”

This time when another hunk of plaster fell away from the lath, there was a satisfied smile on her face. Several in the group made appreciative noises. One applauded.

“Brooms. We need brooms and dust pans.”

A couple people left the room, returned with these.

“And now we need a trash barrel.”

This, too, appeared.

“Great. Now the rest of you: pick up a hammer and clear that wall of plaster.”

An enthusiastic attack on the wall began.

“Meanwhile, Leon and I will measure the plaster board. We’ll have this puppy ready for paint in no time.”

Enthusiasm gave way to humor -- of a sort.

“Why do they say ‘fig’ as in ‘I don’t give a fig’ or ‘I don’t care a fig?’ I mean, why not just say fuck?”

“They moved me to Richard Head’s office. You know what Dick Head did last week? He has a brother in San Luis Obispo. And the brother sent a birthday gift along with a card to the office. I opened it, a CD or DVD in birthday wrapping paper, and put it on Dick Head’s desk along with the other mail and you know what Dick Head did? He had me fish the envelope it came in out of the trash and seal it up and wrote ‘Opened In Error’ on the outside and sent it back with ‘Return to Sender’ scrawled on the outside. Turns out he has a beef with his brother. What an ass.”

Returning to the living room, Bob was surprised to see the television on. Shelly Spicer sat transfixed in front of it watching Saturday morning cartoons. Pirate stood quiet on his perch.

Electric must be back, he muttered to himself. At the front door he found people awaiting instructions on the porch. “Listen up. I have a job.”

Bob explained how the walls and ceiling in every room of the house had to be washed with TSP before they could be painted. There really was nothing worse than

painting a house full of furniture, but he instructed them to move everything to the center of each room and cover the furniture with thick plastic cut from rolls like the one they used to cover the food. He had them round up plastic buckets, sponges, drop cloths and ladders and set them to work.

“Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, sometimes you lose all night.”

Bob could not decide if that was a complaint or merely an observation. He returned to the kitchen where Leon was fitting the dry wall in place. As Bob and the crew watched, Leon screwed it against the studs and pulled a roll of mesh wallboard tape from one of the tubs. He applied it in one long strip from the ceiling to the floor. Using his utility knife, he sliced the strip neatly at the bottom, then took a one inch wide putty knife and wedged the mesh into the crack where the two walls met. Selecting a three inch blade, he smoothed the edges on each side flat, stood back to admire and more perfectly tune the work.

“I’ll take that,” a diminutive woman with quick hands said as she plucked the putty knife from him. A gallon of fast drying joint compound lay open at their feet. The woman approached the wall, scooped a substantial amount of compound onto the putty knife and applied the mud with long, assured strokes. Then she feathered it to be indistinguishable from the wallboard on both sides of the tape.

“I see this isn’t your first rodeo,” Bob said with admiration.

“We learned this in the last house we worked on.”

“Why didn’t you raise your hand when I asked about using mud and tape?”

“I didn’t know what you meant. We just called it crack sealer and goop.”

Still, Bob wondered, what on God's green earth ever possessed a room full of legal secretaries to think they might rebuild a house?

Morning turned into noon and a break was called. With mounded plates people seemed comfortable sitting on the floor talking as they ate.

“Did you hear about the dyslectic Satanist? Sold his soul to Santa.”

“Yah? Well what do you call Santa's helpers? Subordinate clauses!”

Bob blew on his coffee and steam rose. He felt satisfied the work was going well. The front and back yards looked good. The mud should be ready to sand in an hour and then paint could be applied.

In the living room, Shelly Spicer never moved from her chair as she found noon cartoons to watch. These turned into afternoon judge shows.

“Did you hear what happened to Harry?”

“You mean senior partner Harry?”

“The same. Seems last Thanksgiving he was disinvented to his aunt's house for dinner. They pretended they weren't having a family dinner that year because they invited his brother who refused to show if they invited Harry.”

“Not unlike Mr. Head and his sibling.”

Martin Berner agreed to stop working until the walls were prepared.

After lunch, Bob handed out sandpaper holders and demonstrated how to smooth the now dry compound on the walls. He inspected every room, directed clean up crews to sweep up debris and made sure the house was habitable once again.

At 5:30 he said, “Listen up, everyone. We're going to knock off in half an hour.” He held his wrist up to show he had no watch. A wave of relief washed over every face.

“But we have to clean the brushes and rollers and the floor and make this place livable until tomorrow. Help each other and we can be gone by six.”

Bob asked Leon if the gas had been turned back on at the stove. Leon nodded but said nothing.

Shelly Spicer was watching evening sitcoms. It would be a long night in front of the television.

The walls throughout the house looked spanking, ready for paint. Drop cloths were taken out on the porch and flung free of sanded dust particles, pieces of discarded tape cuttings and a couple of half eaten sandwiches.

“Who you live here with, Misses Spicer?” Bob asked amiably as he returned to the living room with a folded drop cloth.

“I live with my son. My son Atris lives here with me. All the other kids moved out.”

“And how old’s your son?”

“He turned forty-three last month. He’s on disability, y’see.”

“What kind of work does he do?”

“He don’t work, he’s disabled.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s disabled.”

Bob persisted. “Really? I’m sorry to hear that. What kind of disability?”

“He’s a alcoholic.”

At that moment a late model Cadillac drove down the driveway and into the garage.

That’s him now,” Misses Spicer said. “That’s Atris.”

The driver could be heard slamming his car door. He crossed the few feet to the porch from the open garage door passing several workers who were putting supplies and tools in empty trash barrels.

Atris walked into the living room, nodded at his mother, said nothing in greeting to either she or Bob and apparently believed the adage “sobriety sucks.”

Bob could smell him as he went down the hall into a bedroom where he slammed that door. Atris reeked of alcohol.

After making a final inspection of the premises, indoors and out, Bob stood in the living room in front of the woman who owned the place but who had never risen from her television lounge the entire day except to go to the bathroom and retrieve beer from the refrigerator.

“We’re finished, Mrs. Spicer.” He waited an instant for a response, received none, turned and started to walk away.

“Just a minute, young man.”

Bob mimed mock shock as she rose to her feet and reached in back of the lounge to fish out a worn wood cane.

Shelly wobbled her way down the hall into the bathroom where she stood just inside the doorway and sniffed. Bob was right behind her and he used that description, she sniffed, every time he told the story.

“She didn’t need to go all the way in, y’see, she could tell from the doorway. Then she turned to me and said with indignation, I could hear it in her voice, she said, ‘You didn’t clean the tub. Last time they cleaned the tub.’”

“‘Last time?’ I said.”

“Yah, when the church sent the last work crew, maybe a couple years ago. They cleaned the tub and fixed the plumbing. You just fixed the plumbing. The drip. You just fixed the drip.”

“We are contractors, not cleaners. We don’t scrub. You want the tub cleaned, get in there and do it yourself.”

The next morning the house looked completely different with it’s hedges trimmed, lawn mowed and light arriving on the stone walkway that had been hidden by overgrown grass. This time there was plenty of parking.

“We’re here at eight. Where’s everybody else?”

Leon said, “We’ll be lucky if anyone shows.”

But Carla was already there, sitting on the front porch smoking. She waved, said, “Hi guys. No work today. Wait’ll you see this.”

At the base of the steps Bob and Leon together saw the piece of paper tacked to the front door.

“What’s that?” Bob said taking the steps in two long strides. “Did a building inspector . . . Fire? What fire?”

The paper was printed on fire department stationery, not the building department. It read: Do Not Cross. This property condemned.

Bob seemed stunned. Leon not so much.

Carla eased herself up from the porch swing, wincing as she got to her feet.

“Sorry. I’m a bit stiff from yesterday. So the deal is, it appears the building blew up in the middle of the night. Speculation is the gas line wasn’t shut tight or leaked and

when it seeped downstairs and hit the pilot light on the water heater in the basement, ka-boom!”

Bob had the presence of mind to ask if anyone was hurt?

“Nope. The old lady was asleep in front of the television so the Barcalounger basically protected her. It got tipped over. You can see it through the front window.”

Bob and Leon both approached the busted out glass and peered into the living room.

“The son was saved because he was so drunk and had his door shut, it just blew the mattress off his bed. He landed upside down on the floor. But he was still passed out. Firemen got to him before he could suffocate.”

This information was digested and then Bob asked, “What about the parrot?”

Carla laughed. “That’s probably the best story of all. I showed up about 7:30 and talked with a fireman who was here inspecting the damage when I arrived. Pirate the Parrot was outside in that tree,” she said pointing at the newly trimmed spruce. “We both heard ‘Help me, help me,’ in an annoying insistent but very tiny, tiny, childlike voice and there was Pirate. Completely naked. All his feathers got blown off. I had the fireman retrieve his perch in the living room and we held it up to him and Pirate leaped out of the tree. He’s with animal care and they say he’ll probably survive.”

That, Bob likes to explain when he tells the story, was the last time he agreed to donate his work to a church.

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