

**Invisible Hands**  
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The screen panel above the counter slides open and the frozen custard cone appears in front of you. You take it and balance it, pass back money and get your change and stroll off, licking the drips up the sides of your delicious treat.

You pull up to the window and it opens automatically; you hold out a credit card and it disappears inside; a cup of coffee and a glazed sour-cream donut floats into your hands and then the credit card comes back with a receipt, and a barely audible “thank you, enjoy your day” follows you as you pull away.

It’s raining and windy, a good day to stroll the stores down at the Tanger Outlets. You make a few stops, and come away with those new board shorts you had in mind, a couple of nice shirts, a new Corningware saucepan you’ve been needing and a clever kitchen gadget or two. At each stop you interact for a few seconds with someone who smiles, doesn’t say much, takes your money and hands you your packages.

You’re distracted by a message that pops up on your phone while you wait for your double-shot iced Mochaccino with the almond milk. As you stand in front of the counter your drink appears and a voice calls your name, and since you’ve already paid for it you just pick it up and head over to a table, sipping sweet coolness while you read.

As you drive along the bypass looking for that thrift shop you’re sure was between milepost 10 and 12 somewhere, it occurs to you that the grounds of all the stores and restaurants always seem to be trimmed and edged, grass watered just right, steps swept clean, trash cans always in the right place. You try to remember for a moment if you’ve ever seen somebody do those things.

It’s summer in the Outer Banks, and we are surrounded by people who make our lives better—a little nicer, a little simpler, a little quicker and smoother than they might otherwise be. The vast array of grocery stores, shops, restaurants, services, adventure centers, recreational retailers, rental houses and hotel rooms that makes this such a pleasant, always lively place to come for a vacation or to live during the season is in full swing. Of course, the beach and the Sounds are the most important things, the real center of attention—but the rest of our needs are served by an army of invisible hands. They cut grass, keep the vines down, and trim hedges; they clean rooms, maintain tennis courts and golf courses and swimming pools; they sell us things, prepare our food, serve our tables, mix our drinks, and clean up after us.

They’re everywhere, and yet it’s easy not to really notice them. In fact most of our interactions with the invisible hands that smooth our way in the world are structured so that we won’t notice. Cleaners and maintenance people are supposed to get in, do the job, and move on. In the retail world, the relationship is really supposed to be between the consumer and the goods they might buy; the live person is supposed to facilitate that relationship and if possible to gently

encourage it to be a little larger than the consumer originally had in mind—but mostly just to make it easy and quick.

Real restaurants are a little different; the experience of being there is part of their product, and so servers are generally more personable. Of course, if the majority of their compensation is tips, the stakes on friendliness go up. And most of the people who make a real, table-service restaurant go are not visible from the front of the house where the customers are.

It's not easy, being part of the unnoticed army of invisible hands who keep our vacation-based economy working smoothly. A series of articles last fall in the *Coastland Times* called "The Hidden Epidemic" looked at poverty in our area. Reporter Catherine Kozak wrote that "Dare County is populated largely by people who work in low-to-moderate paying jobs that serve a booming tourism industry. . . ."

Kozak cited one study's finding that the average weekly wage in the food and accommodation services sector here in the Outer Banks in 2014 was \$432. This would amount to about \$22,000 a year, which a recent MIT study determined is a living wage in our area—for a single person living alone. I would observe, though, that Kozak's weekly wage is an *average*; many service-sector jobs are at the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, which amounts to \$15,000 a year if you're full time. In reality, of course, in our extremely seasonal economy, most of these jobs are part-time, and do not last the whole year; many workers are people with families. That MIT study calculated that a "living wage" for two adults and two children in our area would be \$50,000 a year.

In Catherine Kozak's words, "Constant economic struggle is a fact of life for many who work here, often at multiple jobs, hoping to stash away enough in the busy season to survive the winter doldrums when the unemployment rate can be twice what it is in the summer." She goes on to say: "On the Outer Banks, even a college degree is not a guarantee against economic struggle. It's no surprise to see your kid's kindergarten teacher serving your dinner at a restaurant or cleaning hot tubs. Some teachers work three jobs . . . to patch together enough to take care of their family."

Many of us have served in the army of invisible hands—temporarily, or as a first job starting out in the world of work. My first job was in retail, folding tie-dyed t-shirts and talking customers into bell-bottoms, granny dresses, and groovy polyester shirts at the Mod Shop, part of the retail store for military people and their families at Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina. I worked my way through my first two years of college as a pair of invisible hands behind an ice cream freezer—a soda jerk or an ice cream jock, depending on where you grew up. I always smile when I hear jobs like that referred to as "unskilled labor;" I remember how long it took to learn to make a scoop that wouldn't fall off a cone and how to shoot the soda into the glass and not spray ice cream and foam all over the backsplash and shelves behind the fountain. Forty years later I've still got a pretty critical eye when I go to Big Buck's.

Many of us have done that kind of work. Some of us are part of the army of invisible hands even now, as a way to earn a little extra money or to keep ourselves active and engaged in the

world. Most of us, though, have not experienced or even imagined this kind of work as the ongoing, long-term, defining reality of our working life.

The journalist and social critic Barbara Ehrenreich spent two years doing minimum-wage, service-sector work as research for her 2001 book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. She found that far from being “unskilled,” the work our country values least economically requires workers to be alert, focused, quick-thinking, and flexible, and demands considerable stamina in the face of long hours, often uncomfortable conditions, and repetitive but physically demanding tasks.

In addition to the stress of holding jobs that don’t pay enough to live on, Ehrenreich also found that the emotional environment of service-sector, hourly work is often stressful and degrading; the practices of supervision are frequently built around an assumption that workers are unintelligent, lazy, likely to steal, and in need of constant, close oversight. Lack of job security often adds to the stress.

A more recent book, *Behind the Kitchen Door* by Saru Jayaraman, focuses in on the restaurant industry, where often employees are paid as little as \$2.00 an hour on the sometimes true, but usually false assumption that tips will somehow make up a living wage. Jayaraman chronicles conditions which often include the absence of grievance procedures, raises, sexual harassment policies, paid sick days, job security, and anti-discrimination policies.

And yet, as our reading points out, we depend on workers taking and keeping these jobs. The work of invisible hands is the foundation of the economic system that we all participate in, although some of us benefit more than others from that participation. As Ehrenreich says, “To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.”

What do we owe our nameless benefactors, the people whose work sustains the economy of this place we love and appreciate so much, even as they themselves are most often too busy or too poor to take full advantage of its many delights?

In recent years, the realities of income inequality have become a much more frequent part of our public conversation, although political rhetoric focuses more often on the “one percent” at the top rather than the folks on the lower steps of the pyramid. The push for an increased federal minimum wage is an important and a hopeful part of that conversation. Saru Jayaraman’s book *Behind the Kitchen Door* has led to the creation of “Restaurant Opportunities Centers United,” an organization that advocates for what they call “The High Road to Profitability,” a set of sustainable, compassionate practices that balance worker justice with a recognition of the need of restaurant owners to make money for everyone’s long term benefit.

One of the explorations I’ll offer to lead this year will start with a shared reading of Jayaraman’s book using a “Common Read” study guide from the UUA. From there we can consider whether there are ways that we as individuals or as a community want to become engaged in working for a more equitable model. It’s about more than just being generous when we go out. As the

Restaurant Opportunities Center website says, “Tipping better is great, but it cannot be the only thing that we do to change this industry because we need this industry to change systematically.”

There’s another important starting place for me, one that grows out of the long story of who we are as a religious community. Our great heritage is the bedrock conviction that there are no divisions in humanity, no lives unworthy of attention or compassion, no people whose lives matter more—or less—than any others. We know, at the core of our shared understanding of humanity, that in every single person there are immense, extraordinary possibilities.

Perhaps our first responsibility to the people who make our lives easier and better is to *make the invisible visible*. As things are now, it’s an open secret that the way of life that makes the Outer Banks so attractive for so many people actively depends on some folks living marginal lives. Can we break the secret? Can we risk the discomfort of learning where our own actions, our own behaviors are supporting and sustaining that systemic inequality?

Most of us know someone—and some of us know many people—living as part of the army of anonymous donors who support the larger community’s prosperity. Can we risk honest conversations about what their lives are like, about what their dreams are, about what changes might make a real difference, about why those changes haven’t happened yet? Do we dare to talk about how it feels to acknowledge our different roles in a system that treats us differently, a system we didn’t make, but which we have all long since learned to live with? Once we begin to have those conversations, will there be *anything* that can keep us from seeking to make change?

Step by step the longest march can be won, the great Union anthem we sang for our meditation hymn says. The first step is always human connection. The next step will be there waiting for us.

Love will guide us.