

## A Morning When Everything Fell Into Place by Richard Whittaker

A couple of days ago I drove down to Los Angeles to interview a wellknown artist. I had dinner with friends in Culver City and then had to find a place for the evening. Searching on my friend's computer for something inexpensive, I finally found a Motel 6 about twenty-five miles east. When I got there around 11pm, from the cars and people I saw -- it was still warm outside, maybe 85 degrees -- I got the impression I was deep in gang territory. A young couple checking in at the office counter ahead of me added to this impression. I was nervous and felt out of place, but ended up getting a good night's sleep. In the morning, as I was carrying my bags to the car, there was a young man standing in the parking lot. I glanced at him and after a few more steps looked at him again. "Good morning," he said. "Good morning," I responded. And then, continuing to look at me with his smile, he said, "Have a blessed day."

His words were so unexpected and so genuine, they passed into an unguarded place inside that simply lit up in response. This was a blessing, and could not have been more unexpected.

Getting into my car, still feeling lighter, I remembered it was low on gas. Glancing around, I noticed right next to the motel there was a gas station. Great! I filled the tank. Okay. What about breakfast? Almost the moment the thought entered my mind, I spotted a restaurant across the street. Things were definitely lining up.

Walking in, I was led to a booth. It was a nice place—open, clean. A waitress came over, "Coffee?" Surprising how much one takes in just seconds. The way she wore her uniform, for instance. Impeccable. She was, I soon realized, an impeccable waitress. Her presence next to me at the booth left the space completely open. Nothing impinged on me at all. And yet, I was aware of her attention on me.

She handed me one of those over-sized, plastic-coated menus with all kinds of photos and visual distractions and left. I sat there holding it in both hands looking for something simple, something not in a photograph. Then, in a few lines of text at the bottom of the page, I spotted a "Senior's special"—one egg, two pancakes and bacon. \$5.99. Right. That should do it.

It's hard to know the sources of the state I found myself in as I sat there, at home inside myself, more awake, more open.

Now my waitress was back. I ordered the Senior Special.

"Don't you want the "Fast start"? she asked.

I hadn't paid any more attention to the menu once I'd found the S.S. She pointed to the menu—see this one? "Fast Start." I took a quick glance: \$4.99, two eggs, two pancakes and bacon.

"You get more, and save money," she pointed out.

I took a quick look at her to see if there was some hidden agenda. No. I didn't think so. The Fast Start was clearly a better deal. Same thing, plus an extra egg and one dollar less! Hmmm. Why not? I ordered the Fast Start.

As she walked away I watched her, a middle-aged Hispanic woman, and couldn't help

feeling that something unusual was going on. Absolutely everything was falling into place with no effort at all. I was even being guided to an extra dollar. It was almost as if I'd entered some zone of perfection.

That young man in the parking lot. At first, I was still in the grip of my fears from the night before. And then, when I did really look at him, I saw that he'd been waiting for that. How fortunate I'd done that. Looked at him.

As I sat at the booth waiting for my Fast Start to arrive, I was beginning to believe there was something mysterious going on. No, that's not quite accurate. Actually, that moment in the parking lot when I opened myself to looking at the stranger, when in that moment, smiling, he blessed me, in that moment, something inside was brought vividly to life like a small songbird. In that moment, I knew something mysterious had happened.

I don't mean to exaggerate. In the context of ordinary life, I could have passed over the whole thing and just called it a nice morning. But maybe we don't look closely enough at things.

My waitress brought the food. Walking away, she stopped at a booth across from me where a younger Hispanic man was talking about different kinds of cell phones with an older man. I watched her. She did her job cleanly and without ornamentation and yet, keeping this measure in no way shortchanged the customer. Not at all. One could say, this woman was a thorough professional. That's one way to put it, but my thoughts flew past that into a world I didn't know—but had sensed, a world where one lived, approached one's work, like a warrior, perhaps. The way of it, which I was watching from my plate of pancakes and eggs, was almost invisible. Nothing like I'd imagined.

As I ate my breakfast, at a certain point, I begin to think about the tip I would leave. Certainly, I'd give the waitress the saved dollar. I'd add it to my usual tip. But why not more? The thought filled me with a little charge of happiness. I'd leave a ten-dollar bill! That would be pretty generous. About \$4 on a \$6 meal. What would that be? 60% or so.

Then, as I was finishing off a bite of scrambled egg and feeling the pleasure of my planned generosity, something else entered my mind. Maybe the ten dollars was too easy. Didn't this morning call for something more? It called for something that crossed the boundary into the realm of my stinginess. I'd have to give something more.