

The Kingdom of Cardboard and Spoils

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A few months ago, one of the blogs I read regularly pointed me to a YouTube video featuring the inspiring story of Dieter Zander. You can find it easily by typing in the title of this column into the search bar of YouTube.

I hadn't heard of Dieter Zander before. He used to be one of the rising stars at the Willow Creek Community Church, an evangelical, non-denominational, multi-site megachurch which was formed in 1975 under the direction of founding pastor Bill Hybels just outside of Chicago. WCCC is the granddaddy of the "seeker-sensitive" megachurch movement. It began a program based on the thinking that if we can get people into the church building with high-energy, multimedia worship presentations, then we can steer them into small groups to help them grow in their personal relationship with Jesus so that they become mature disciples. (To his credit, Hybels admitted in an interview some 25 or 30 years later that this approach never worked; people were content with the high-energy worship "shows," and never moved on in their discipleship.)

WCCC hired Dieter Zander in 1995 to direct the music ministry. He was a brilliant pianist and an inspirational preacher and pastor who drew hundreds with his preaching and music. In the video, Zander admits that he thrived on the adoration, the applause, the undivided attention he got wherever he went. People treated him like he was a rock star—and he bought into the image.

It all changed suddenly for him with a massive stroke. With his long-time friend and San Francisco poet LaDonna Witmer, he wrote about his experience in a small book called "A Stroke of Grace." He writes, "I slept right through the moment that changed my life. In the small hours of the morning on February 4, 2008, I suffered a massive stroke in the left hemisphere of my brain. When I woke from my coma in the hospital six days later, my right hand was crippled and I could barely speak."

It was a humbling experience for someone accustomed to being a rising star. In a moment, he lost his talent and his ability to speak. His whole life came crashing down.

Today, however, Zander says he wouldn't change much. He learned to live a simpler, slower life. In his first job after the stroke, he worked as a crossing guard to help neighbourhood children get to school safely. Then he began working at a grocery store called Trader Joe's, where he found a new perspective on life.

In the video, we hear his words, "If I am the king of all I survey, then I am king of cardboard and spoils. My kingdom is a small windowless room in the back of the Trader Joe's grocery store." The video shows Zander baling cardboard boxes for recycling, sweeping and mopping floors, and boxing up food which is called "spoiled" because it isn't perfect—apples that aren't perfectly round, food which is still perfectly fine, but which has reached its "best by" date.

He got the idea of the kingdom from Dallas Willard, who defines a kingdom as "a realm that is uniquely our own, where our choice determines what happens."

"My kingdom used to be a stage, a piano, a microphone. My kingdom used to be a performance. King Dieter! Then came the stroke ... and now my kingdom is found here at the back of Trader Joe's. There is no audience in this kingdom—but that's ok because I'm not performing. There is no 'stage Dieter' here, no superman seeking to wow the masses with feats of spiritual strength. It's just me. Just Dieter—the guy who mops the floors, who bales the empty boxes for recycling, who prepares the spoils for the Marin Food Bank.

“There’s something beautiful about this simple, menial work though. Take the food marked as spoils for example. It’s all still good. The fruit is good. The meat is good. The flowers are good. But they’re not ‘perfect,’ so the other employees wheel this perfectly good but not perfect food back to my kingdom. From here it goes to feed the hungry who don’t care at all that the apple they’re about to eat is lopsided ... they don’t care how it looks—they just want to eat.

“To me, this is what’s real. I understand the spoils. I can relate. Because I too am spoils. I used to be packaged as perfect. Back in the heyday of my church career, I was a shiny, unblemished apple. At least that was the image I polished up and displayed. But now, stripped of my talent, my stage and my six-figure salary, I relish imperfection. I revel in the spoils.”

“I come home after work, and I think, ‘It’s good today.’ It’s not a sermon; it’s not a performance; it’s not perfection. But the cardboard is recycled, the spoils are feeding the hungry, and today I’m thinking ‘Life is good. It’s very good.’”

You can watch the video for yourself on YouTube. It’s only 4½ minutes long and is one of the most spiritual things I have ever seen.

Zander’s story is a gift for us all.