

Working for Peanuts

Finding Grace in Tough Times

Mary Sharon Moore



Like a marathon runner, I began serious training for the economic downturn back in mid-2006 when the organization I worked for went through internal meltdown. However, instead of training for some future economic downturn, I ran headlong into my own personal economic abyss. Little was I prepared for the grace that awaited me.

When I returned home that day, I opened the trunk of my car and took a deep breath—partly because I couldn't believe what I'd just purchased and partly to concentrate my strength. I braced my knees against the bumper and heaved out a 25-pound bag of peanuts. Next came a 40-pound bag of black-oil

sunflower seed. Finally, with some ungraceful moves, I managed to lug out a 50-pound bag of cracked corn.

This purchase of peanuts, sunflower seed, and cracked corn has become a monthly ritual. I admit I have a passion for the eight red squirrels and countless birds in my backyard. But I might also have a problem. I can no longer justify the money I pour into feeding them. I pay for their food from

my personal food budget. And my food budget—shaped by the fits and starts of freelance income—is whatever remains after rent, health insurance, and any unforeseen expenses have been paid.

Yet in tough economic times—*especially* in tough economic times—I need to feed



my soul on beauty, on nature, on a living, tangible connection to the natural world. The price I pay is whatever the feed-and-seed store out west of town is asking for this necessary luxury—or luxurious necessity.

Each morning I scoop out one or two 32-ounce containers of sunflower seed and a generous container of cracked corn. I've learned to give out the peanuts by hand to the red squirrels. Still, the ever-vigilant scrub jays watch from their perch on the fence or in the neighbor's lilac bush. They wait until the industrious but unsuspecting squirrel has carefully buried a peanut under an azalea bush or amid the patch of tulips, and then they swoop down, feverishly blast through the soil with their killer beaks, and fly off with the prize. So

I became more cautious. I open the screen door and wait for a brave and hungry squirrel to approach me for a peanut.

One squirrel in particular caught on right away. *This human will be my feeding machine*, she decided. This animal has made a fool out of me. I named her the White-Tip-Tailed Mama Squirrel, and she named me The Source. We had an unspoken agreement from the start. Whenever she appeared in the yard, I would stop what I was doing, go to the door, place a peanut in her mouth, and then patiently wait, another peanut in hand, until she returned from wherever she decided to bury the previous one—whether in my yard, in the neighbor's yard, or in some yard down the street. Sometimes this ritual would go on for ten or fifteen minutes. I was her servant, her slave, the source.

If I went outside to eat my lunch at the picnic table, forget it. I'd be feeding her. If I went out to pull weeds or do some gardening, she'd be there, expecting to be fed. Dinner outdoors? Same thing. She never tired of approaching me, knowing I was her fool.

When the white-tip-tailed mama squirrel disappeared last spring, I grieved. I had not seen her in several days, so I went for a walk, going up one street and down the next, then walking the cross streets, looking for a white-tip-tailed squir-

rel carcass in the roadway. She was nowhere to be found.

Just like that, she's been taken from me, I thought. Without warning, with no last goodbye. Obviously in denial, I'd go to the window and look out to our chosen feeding pad beneath the leaning Ponderosa. I'd search for that white-tipped tail among the squirrels, her absence a dull ache.

Then one day, equally without warning, she returned. My heart skipped a beat. I raced to the screen door and flung it open, peanut in hand. "Where have you been?" I asked, trying to hide my hurt. She sat up on her hind legs in the middle of the yard, looked me square in the eye, then raced to the door and delicately took the peanut I offered her. She turned toward the yard, paused, looked back over her shoulder at me, then scrambled up to her perch on the fence post, bits of peanut shell

flying as she devoured each plump little nut.

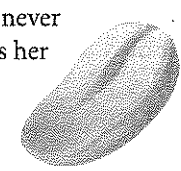
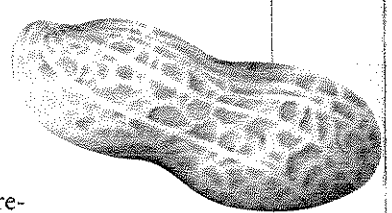
Something in me changed. I had enjoyed that white-tipped mama squirrel, fed her, put up with her insistence and her insatiable appetite. I had lost her, grieved her, searched for her, let her go. And now when she reappeared, my heart skipped a beat. I discovered I loved that squirrel. Without my knowing it, she had pushed the walls of my heart outward to create space for God in an unexpected way.

Now that the relationship was well in place, the lesson would begin.

I used to make somewhat decent money.

Looking back now, I realize how relative that term can be. But what I made worked well enough for me. Over the years, between actual full-time jobs, I'd picked up freelance work—writing, editing, some workshop teaching and public speaking. As my calendar filled up with one gig after another, I began to feel that I was pretty special—keynote speaker, basking in the roar of audience applause when I came on stage. I spent nights in swank hotels and upscale resorts. I got myself an agent who set my fees at a jaw-dropping level. Well, the fees made *my* jaw drop. *I must be pretty good*, I thought. Unfortunately, not too many others shared that opinion.

Now that the relationship was well in place, the lesson would begin.



My last full-time paying job ended after two years and eight months, reminding me that all jobs are temporary. I'd stashed away absolutely every nickel I could, preparing for the inevitable day when I'd be out of work and on my own again. And sure enough, that day arrived. But like a sprinter, I convinced myself I'd be back on my feet, up and running within a year—eighteen months at the absolute most.

Three years after that hard landing, I scooped out the last of the sunflower seed, turned the bag upside down and shook it vigorously, just in case any last seeds were tucked inside the bottom seam. All that was left in the bag of cracked corn was the pale yellow dust that had settled to the bottom.

I still had some peanuts though, and when I looked out the window into the yard, the white-tip-tailed mama squirrel spotted me. She raced through the overgrown grass to the door, that unmistakable look in her eyes. *"The Source is here. She will feed me. I'll make sure she can't not feed me."* She leaped onto the screen door, up to eye level. I could see her sprawled underside through the door window.

I opened the door, then the screen door with the squirrel still attached. I held a peanut in front of her face, but she couldn't see it. She was clinging with all her might to the screen door, trying to get my attention. *"You have my attention, silly girl,"* I told her. *"Here's the peanut. Eat it!"* Finally she delicately disentangled her sharp and perfect little claws from the screen, plopped to the ground, and regained her composure.

Well, all right then, I imagined her saying. With an understated dignity, she took the peanut into her mouth, positioned it just so with her perfect little front paws, fixed her eyes on me with one last glance, and scampered away. I closed the door, stunned at what had just transpired. *That squirrel is me,* I suddenly realized. *She eats from my hand just as I eat from the hand of God.*

One last glance. Indeed, that was the last time the white-tip-tailed mama squirrel came to my door. Morning after morning, just after sunrise, I'd watch the parade of squirrels scamper down the trunk of the leaning Ponderosa. Some mornings I'd find three squirrels feeding be-

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neath the tree, sometimes five or six, but no white-tip-tailed mama squirrel. Weeks went by, weeks became months, with no sign of her.

At first I buoyed my spirits with hope, then waffled between hope and quiet grief. *It was just a squirrel,* I lied to myself. But she wasn't just a squirrel. To me, she was this particular squirrel,

and I had become her human, her source of an abundance of the really choice food.

Now, months later, life goes on. I've given up searching for a full-time job. Work trickles in. I somehow manage to stay financially afloat, knowing I'm living inside a miracle. More days than I can count, I've put my head down on my prayer table, tears of unflinching trust welling up in my eyes, knowing that God is all I have. I discover what Jesus knew all along: God alone is worthy of my trust and worthy of my tears. In my poverty, God is my wealth—a wealth that electrifies my soul and every cell of my being. Now, finally, my prayer begins to ring true, as I set the Holy Spirit free to reach through my experience and teach me to rely on what God provides.

I never put out the whole 25-pound bag of peanuts for mama squirrel. Rather, I fed her one peanut at a time. And I fed any other squirrels who were brave enough and hungry enough to approach in the same way. I gave them their portion of food in due time, as Jesus once said. God has promised us that if we open wide our mouths, he will fill them. (See Ps 81.) Truth be told, I've been praying daily since about the age of six to be fed—by our daily bread—in just the same way. Give me the sustenance I need for today.

I've been praying ardently, yet unknowingly, for the grace, the miracle, the wonder of eating from the hand of God. And now God has answered my prayer—personally, lovingly, perfectly, in teaching me to feed another from my own hand. I've been working for peanuts all along, and what I once regarded as not very much has become, by grace, perfectly enough. ■

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