

Fantasy Job (2010)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner on WLRH, Huntsville, AL USA

My fantasy job has always been to be a bartender. That might not sound strange unless you take into account the other job that I've been working at for over fifty years now, which is being a Presbyterian parson.

But being a barkeep: I must have been influenced by all those movies with the solitary patron leaning on the bar, late at night, and across from him a wall of gleaming bottles and a quiet guy with a polishing cloth wiping circle after circle... and listening, listening as the story of a life pours out. Sure, that was it Ñ all the best features of the counseling business, listening and not judging, encouraging a needy human being to talk.

Then... I got a chance to try it! It was 1968, and there was a World's Fair in San Antonio, Texas, called "Hemisfair." The Presbyterian Church had a really great idea, to run a kind of break-house for the employees of the fair, most of whom were young people; they could drop by for relaxation, schmoozing with others, game-playing, phoning their parents back home, or chatting with a minister. The place was staffed by volunteer ministers for a week at a time; the minister's family could come stay in an upstairs apartment and had passes to the fair in return for a little janitor work and staffing the place in the evenings. There were game-tables and corners to relax in and music and soft drinks and even (by a narrow decision) bottles of ice-cold beer.

What an opportunity! All that time of idle chatter about the fantasy job, and now a chance to do it.

The fair opened, the place opened, the off-duty staffers started coming, the plan was working. The family drove to San Antonio, moved in, prepared for our week in paradise.

What I had forgotten was the music. Young people and time off from work and a place to gather means music... loud, frenetic, stomping, boogieing music. The sound system, I might add, was state of the art and even in 1968 that meant foundation-shuddering rumbles.

I, the would-be friendly barkeep who would listen to their troubles, couldn't tell "Coke" from "Cup" when they asked for one. I was not the faster master pastor, I was the gopher.

The week was wonderful; days at the Fair, nights with the music. We returned home more mature in many ways, and exhausted. I still remember daughter Susan, who was five, telling her grandmother that her job was to go

around every morning and pour out the stale beer, then nest the cups so they could be discarded. I also remember the look on my mother's face. So much for my alternate career.

Houston Hodges has flunked retirement, preaches once a month at the Big Cove Presbyterian Church's two services in the Hampton Cove area.