

Open your doors to opportunity

By **TIMOTHY O'TOOLE**

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Every now and then, Hollywood comes to town, and the call goes out for local people to work as extras. "War of the Worlds" invaded Athens; Troy welcomed "The Age of Innocence" and "The Emperor's Club"; "Ironweed" was set and shot in Albany. "The Way We Were" enrolled at Schenectady's Union College. Americans are highly experienced at vicarious living, so directors find plenty of takers for these non-speaking roles

Yes, we have become a nation of spectators, watching the world from our comfy couches. We get up in the morning, go to work, come home, eat dinner, then watch TV. Even our weekends have predictable routines. And all too many of us have jobs that would suck the sour out of a lemon.

Small wonder that we "live lives of quiet desperation," waiting for the gold watch and the inevitable emigration to Florida and eternity.

For those of us with children, this process is postponed a bit by adult duties with youth sports, scouting and PTA. As parents, we resist America's inherent alienation for a time, connecting with other mothers and fathers, driving to and from play dates, birthday parties and school dances. Then our children grow up and move away, and it's back to our lonely vigil with HBO.

What we may not realize is that a golden opportunity awaits us, regardless of our faith tradition. Churches, synagogues, temples, mosques and shrines offer lots of opportunities for involvement, enlightenment, entertainment and fellowship.

Some suggestions: Singing in choirs, enrolling in adult education classes, cooking and sharing community meals, gabbing after the service over coffee and bagels, getting involved in

Sunday school with the next generation. Or organizing youth theater, going on field trips, building Habitat houses, chaperoning a contra dance (not a political act). Teaching English to new immigrants, showing a senior how to retrieve e-mail. Picketing the Capitol. Petitioning Congress. Joining a book group. Remember books?

Sure, a few of the folks we meet will be boring or strident. And we may have to shop around for a faith community that suits our needs because one size does not fit all. Faith communities can be united by shared interpretation of scripture, emphasizing study and meditation. Others stress social action in fighting poverty, bigotry or economic injustice. Creationists or evolutionists can share a world view, trying to live up to aspirations wherever the inspiration originates. We need to ask ourselves "what do we believe in?" and act accordingly.

We may be asked to contribute to a food pantry or join a weekend walk to fight a disease, or visit the sick or elderly shut-in. We may be talked into a bus trip to a museum, with a side trip to a mediocre restaurant. But along the way, we will be rubbing elbows with real people, in all kinds of weather. Exchanging views and sharing experiences.

Whether we are storing up merit in heaven, or making the world a better place, we will also run the risk of enjoying our involvement – which may start to interfere with pre-existing evening viewing habits. Thank God for video recorders and TiVo – we can schedule our favorite shows around our newfound involvements.

The Albany area has something for everyone, even with our tightening economy. While gas is still close to \$2 a gallon, this would be a good time to check out our options.

When gas goes back to \$4, we will then be able to carpool with new friends. And the money we save can be used to heat and light our new home away from home.

Timothy O'Toole is a member of First Presbyterian Church.