



# Sunflower Seeds

Celebrating Everyday Spirituality



[HOME](#) [ABOUT](#) [BOOK STORE](#) [EVENTS](#) [CONTACT](#)



## The Shovel

by MELANNIE SVOBODA SND on OCTOBER 15, 2018

Usually I write my reflection first and then pick a song. Today, however, I picked the song and then wrote this reflection. The song is “A Shovel Is a Prayer” by Carrie Newcomer. Before we hear the song, let’s look at the fascinating tool called a shovel.

First, a definition. A shovel is a tool used for digging, lifting, or moving materials such as soil, coal, rocks, gravel, snow, sand, etc. The modern shovel traces its origin back to Neolithic times (10,000 – 3000 B.C.) when humans fashioned the first shovels from



the bones of large animals—usually the shoulder bone (scapula) or the pelvic bone. The oldest wooden shovel, found in ancient Egypt, dates back to 1750 B.C. Over time, with the discovery of metals, shovels were greatly improved since metals were stronger and longer lasting than bone or wood.

The shovel was the chief means of excavation and construction until the invention of the steam shovel (about 1839) and, later, hydraulic equipment such as excavators, backhoes, and loaders (post World War II.) This means, everything built or mined or farmed before the dawn of these inventions was chiefly done by shovels!

The oldest shovel manufacturing company in the U.S. is the Ames Company, founded in 1774 in West Bridgewater, MA by John Ames. It is still in business today in Parkersburg, WVA. I visited their website and learned many things. Their motto is, “Our Tools Built America.” Their claim is not an exaggeration. In 1775, for example, the

## About Sister Melannie Svoboda, SND

Sister of Notre Dame,  
teacher, student, author,  
speaker, listener, friend,  
poet, farm girl.



[Learn more](#)

## About Sunflower Seeds

Each Monday I’ll post a short reflection, a simple musing on some aspect of spirituality—the everyday kind of spirituality that



includes things like walking in the park, slicing an onion for the casserole, caring for a child, studying for an exam, reading a line from scripture, laughing at a joke, or mourning a significant loss.

Along the way I welcome your questions, comments and insights too. After all, we’re all in this life—this spiritual life—together!

[Learn more](#)

## Subscribe to Sunflower Seeds

Subscribe to Sunflower Seeds today to receive notification of new blog posts.

 [Subscribe to Sunflower Seeds via RSS](#)

Revolutionary Army troops used Ames shovels to dig in on the heights overlooking Boston Harbor. Without those shovels, the colonists might not have won the War of Independence.



When gold was discovered in California in 1848, Ames shovels were used to extract the gold from the earth. As mentioned earlier, shovels were used during wars to dig defensive trenches for battle. Abraham Lincoln personally asked Oakes Ames, son of the founder, to supply the Union Army with shovels. By 1874, the Ames company was making 60% of the world's shovels! The company supplied shovels for World War I, World War II (the company made 11 million shovels for Allied troops!), and the Korean War. During the Vietnam War, the company supplied troops with 275,000 folding, lightweight entrenching tools. Ames shovels also helped build the Transcontinental Railroad (1863-1869), the New York subway system (started in 1904), the Panama Canal (1903-12), Mt. Rushmore (1927-41), the Empire State Building (1929-31), the Hoover Dam (1931-1935), and the Golden Gate Bridge (1933-37).

Here are a few more facts about the shovel:

\* Manual shovels employed large numbers of workers. Today, a few skilled workers using powered excavators can replace hundreds of laborers.



\* When I was in India in 1999, I travelled all over the country with two SND's and several lay people. One of the men in the group said one day, "I've been in India for over a week and I haven't seen a single backhoe." He was amazed.

\* There are all kinds of shovels including these: coal shovel, snow shovel, grain shovel, gardening trowel, roofing

[Subscribe to Sunflower Seeds by Email](#)

### Recent Posts

[Jesus Saves](#)

[Making Commitments](#)

[Joy Harjo: The New U.S. Poet Laureate](#)

[Relax!](#)

[Murphy's Law and a Few Corollaries](#)

### About the Sisters of Notre Dame, Chardon, Ohio

The Sisters of Notre Dame of Chardon, Ohio, belong to an international congregation of more than two thousand apostolic women religious. We are one in mind and one in heart for the transformation of the world in Christ.



[Learn More](#)

### SND Blogs

[Catholic Faith Corner](#)

[Catholic Web Solutions](#)

[Grace to Paint](#)

[In the Hands of the Potter](#)

[Living Justly](#)

[Prayer Poems](#)

[SND Express Blog](#)

[What's Happening](#)

### Search

To search, type and hit enter

shovel (to remove old shingles), spade, scoop (Yes, the ice-cream scoop is really a little shovel!), dustpan, fireplace shovel, trenching shovel, and toy shovel (frequently seen in the hands of children at the beach or in the sandbox!)

\* In 1929, when Herbert Hoover, Henry Ford, and Thomas Edison laid the cornerstone at Greenfield Village outside Detroit, they used Ames shovels!

*Have you had any experiences with shovels that you could share with us?*

*Does anything in this reflection stand out for you?*

**PS:** Once again I was inspired by the women who made the weekend retreat at Bergamo Retreat Center in Dayton. I thank them for their attentiveness, their prayerfulness, their goodness, and their sense of fun. Special thanks to Diane and her committee for making the retreat run so beautifully.

**Next presentations:** I will be at the Siena Retreat Center in Racine, Wisconsin giving an evening presentation entitled "What Does a Healthy Spirituality Look Like?" on Thursday Oct. 25 and a weekend retreat Oct. 26-28 entitled "Hanging onto Hope." I would love to see you at both or either of these events. Visit the website for details: [www.SienaRetreatCenter.org](http://www.SienaRetreatCenter.org).

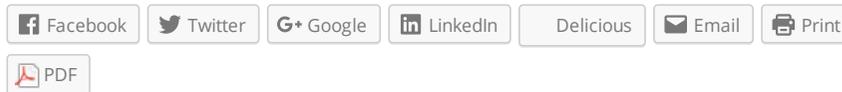
As I said earlier, the song today is "A Shovel Is a Prayer" by Carrie Newcomer. In addition to a shovel, the song suggests other images for prayer.



Newcomer says a shovel is a prayer... Or a friend bringing over some soup... What else has been a prayer for you?

I invite you to share your thoughts with us below:

Share this:



Tagged as: [a shovel is a prayer](#), [shovels](#), [the history of the shovel](#)

{ 27 comments... read them below or [add one](#) }

**Thomas D** October 15, 2018 at 4:14 am



My experience with shovels has largely been limited to shoveling snow. Once, I was helping a friend of my father's shovel snow and he was watching me as I was scooping up unmanageably heavy heaps of the white stuff! He gently

advised that I take just a little at a time, so as not to strain myself to the point of infarction or of muscle-pull! So a snow-shovel can teach the patience of slow and steady progress over wanting it done “all at once.”

This week, for me, my friend D. has been a prayer; she and I had a long and wonderfully rambling conversation as we sat outside a few afternoons ago beneath a gray blanket of sky. We’d have probably stayed in each other’s company for an hour or two more if it hadn’t begun to rain! Our conversation just may be my year’s chiefest gratitude.

Thank you for the care with which you assemble your weekly reflections, Sr Melannie. I am consistently edified and rewarded by reading them.

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 15, 2018 at 10:15 am



Dear Thomas, Like you, I often prefer “All at once” to “Slow and steady”... And I too have experienced a “wonderfully rambling conversation” that has been a true grace for me. Thanks again for your always insightful remarks! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

---

**Judy** October 15, 2018 at 5:19 am



Thanks, Melanie, for being like St.Teresa of Avila on her feast day, practical, prayerful.

A shovel is so practical yet contemplative as we are alone with what God is helping us to accomplish. Once while shoveling snow for long time, a cardinal accompanied me a beautiful song against a bright blue sky . It is a gift I still remember with gratitude, Let us continue to pray for migrants and their families throughout the world.

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 15, 2018 at 10:19 am



Yes, if you’re reading this on Oct. 15, today is the feast of the marvelous St. Teresa of Avila. Thanks for reminding us, Judy. And thanks too for sharing your experience of the “cardinal accompanist”... and for reminding us to pray for all migrants and refugees. Sr. Melannie

REPLY

**John Hopkins** October 15, 2018 at 5:40 am



Melannie, what a beautiful song! One of my favorites! For years, during summers, I would landscape to augment my teacher's salary. I was a laborer, the shovel was my tool, and I loved it! I still shovel my driveway when it snows! One more thing: I live a couple of towns over from West Bridgewater, and one of my nephews lives in an apartment that was once an Ames shovel factory! And the Ames name is still very big in that area. I believe there's an Ames State Park. Finally, I agree with Thomas D.: your bog is always edifying!

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 15, 2018 at 10:23 am



Dear John, I was so excited to hear of your connection to the Ames Shovel Company—through your nephew's dwelling. Fascinating! I also appreciated your personal experience with shovels. Thank you again for making a great contribution to my lowly little blog! Melannie

REPLY

**Kathleen** October 15, 2018 at 5:59 am



Good Morning Sr. Melannie!

I agree with Thomas D. and John Hopkins. Your reflections are always edifying.

I too have done some snow shoveling in my life. Now I leave it to the "plow guy." Thanks for the history of the shovel. Good to know that God has created such a long lasting tool.

Kathleen

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 15, 2018 at 10:25 am



Good morning, Kathleen! I guess the snowplow is another kind of shovel. Where I live, we'll be seeing snowplows a lot soon... Like you, I marvel at the long history of this simple yet vital tool. Thanks for writing! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

**Shirley** October 15, 2018 at 8:36 am



Shoveling snow is a treat for me, like to do it early in the morning as it is so peaceful. Don't get me wrong I would just as soon not have the snow but if we get it I enjoy the shoveling!

Thanks Sister Melannie, your blogs are great!

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 15, 2018 at 10:30 am



Dear Shirley, I wouldn't call shoveling a "treat"-but I do feel good after I've done a little shoveling. I usually shovel only our porch, the steps, and part of the sidewalk. I leave the greater portion for our plowing service that the parish uses. They're the experts, I say! Thank you for responding, Shirely. It's always good hearing from you! Melannie

REPLY

**Justin** October 15, 2018 at 9:44 am



Thanks, Sr. Melannie, for continuing to unpack Carrie Newcomer's grace-filled songs!

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 15, 2018 at 10:26 am



And thank YOU, Justin, for introducing me to Carrie Newcomer! I really, really like her "grace-filled songs"! S. Melannie

REPLY

**Eileen** October 15, 2018 at 10:46 am



Love these simple yet profound meditations on everyday items. As I was baking this morning I thought of you as I used the little shovels for flour and sugar. It made the task a little more spiritual. How about an ode to a dust rag or a broom? Such simple items yet can be a cause for everyday prayer. Thanks Mel, for your meditations. I look forward to them every week.

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 15, 2018 at 1:18 pm



Dear Eileen, I'm so glad this simple reflection on the shovel made your task of baking "more spiritual." And thanks for the suggestions—an ode to a dust rag... (hmmmm)... and to a broom... (hmmmm.) In a few weeks I'm posting a reflection on "the spirituality of shredding." I think shredding machines would fit into the category of dust rags and brooms, don't you?... Thanks for writing, Eileen! Melannie

REPLY

**Michelle** October 15, 2018 at 1:50 pm



A beautiful, poetic song. Thank you so much for sharing!

Prayer...a spontaneous hug from a child!

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 15, 2018 at 4:09 pm



Dear Michelle, I really liked your example of prayer! Thank you for including it! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

**Monique Couture, FCSCJ** October 15, 2018 at 10:38 pm



I used an Ames long-handled spade (shovel) today to transplant some small flowering bushes that will greatly be loved by my bees by next Spring. I always enjoy the exercise of digging or shoveling earth or mulch as I did today. There's a comforting feeling of preparing a new bed and then tucking in the new plant in its new home – mostly all done with the help of the simple tool that is the shovel. Thanks for the wonderful blog and contemplative offerings you so faithfully and creatively share!

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 16, 2018 at 10:36 am



Dear Monique, I can picture you with you Ames long-handled spade transplanting those bushes for next Spring's bees. What a beautiful thing to do!

Isn't gardening, by its very nature, a contemplative experience? Thank you for writing! Melannie

REPLY

---

**Tom** October 15, 2018 at 10:50 pm



Because we were a gardening family, shovels have always been a part of my life. The most fun I have had with shovels has been digging little trenches to let water drain out of low spots in a lawn or field. But my best memory of shovels in action was groundbreaking day for our new church. So much symbolism is packed into this time honored ceremony: the dreams, plans, fundraising that has already occurred, the task of building that is about to begin and finally the day of completion when the faithful gather in their new place of worship. All begun with the humble shovel.

REPLY

---

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 16, 2018 at 10:40 am



I knew you came from a gardening family, Tom! But thank you for recalling that ground-breaking ceremony for our new church. (Readers: Tom was pastor when we broke ground several years ago. here at St. Mary's in Chardon, OH) Yes, so much symbolism in that simple act of digging into the soil to "plant" a new church! Thanks for reminding us of the holy act of breaking ground! Melannie

REPLY

---

**Stephen** October 16, 2018 at 9:36 am



One winter, we had 3 feet of new fallen snow around the house. Our dachshund dog could not get out the basement door, so I brought him out the garage door. I saw the deep drifts in our circle driveway and dreaded all the shoveling I would need to do in order for us to go to work. I went in to change into my work clothes and find my snow scoop shovel. When I came back and opened the garage door again, all the snow had been removed from my driveway. It turned out a farmer friend of ours was shoveling the country road that we live on, and he spotted my driveway. So he drove down and scooped away my snow while I was changing. I like to think of it as God doing for me what I couldn't do for myself.

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 16, 2018 at 10:42 am



Dear Stephen, Thank you for sharing such a beautiful little story with us. When we get discouraged with the bad news around us, we must remember the millions of acts of kindness that are done each day in our world. Such acts seldom make the news—but occasionally they make a website such as this one! Thanks again for writing! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

**Mary** October 16, 2018 at 12:56 pm



My greatest memory of a shovel was when I was very young and we had a coal furnace.....I can still hear the sound of my dad shoveling up the coal to keep the fire going. That brings back “warm” memories and the realization that shovels can be instrumental in providing warm and comfort. So many things we take for granted never giving a thought beyond the obvious.....this was a good exercise in awareness which leads to appreciation. Thank you Sr. Melannie for presenting the most ordinary things for us to reflect upon.....I am new to your site, but look forward to Monday morning to see where the road led this week.

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 16, 2018 at 2:33 pm



Dear Mary, I too remember the sound of my mother getting the fire going every morning in the basement. We knew by the time we got up, the heat would be coming through the “registers.” Thanks for helping me to recall that sound, Mary—and a mother’s love. Welcome to our blog! Melannie

REPLY

**Mary Fran** October 16, 2018 at 8:35 pm



Melannie,

Wish I could eavesdrop on your “Hanging on to Hope” retreat...

Mary Fran

REPLY

**Melannie Svoboda SND** October 18, 2018 at 8:37 am

And I'd love to have you there, Mary Fran, but Bethesda, MD is a bit far from Racine, WI... Let us both pray for Hope in our world! Melannie



REPLY

**Carol Kapostasy** October 22, 2018 at 5:22 am



Dear Sr. Melanie,

What a unique way to look at everyday occurrences and opportunities as prayer. My thoughts went immediately to the beauty of nature I never want to take for granted, but I must confess my eyes and heart were opened to the prayer of people just passing through on my journey of life. I sometimes grow weary of the faults and shortcomings of people, including myself, but today's reflection gave me pause to instead see the gift of prayer in the variety of casual acquaintances as well as my friends and family who beckon me to abandon these pessimistic thoughts. What a simple precept: to listen and observe the prayer of human life. Particularly at work and through my music ministry I am reminded of how every individual has the power and influence of imparting prayer if we only look and listen...such a gift from above.

REPLY

Leave a Comment

Name \*

E-mail \*

Website

**Submit**

SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME WITNESS DAILY TO  
GOD'S GOODNESS AND PROVIDENT CARE.

Join us!

Contact our Vocation  
Director today.



Copyright © 2012 The Sisters of Notre Dame, Chardon, Ohio | Created by [Groupmind Media](#)