

# Tolstoy, Dr. Robby, and What We Owe Each Other

25 Mar, 2026

## Tolstoy's Calendar of Wisdom — March 25

During our lives we help each other: sometimes we help other people, sometimes we are helped by others. But the world is formed so that usually some people mostly help others, and some mostly receive their help.

*"As you acquire objects, and you use them, you should keep in mind that they are the products of people's work. When you damage or destroy these objects, you damage or destroy the toil, and this part of the life, of other people."*

—John Ruskin

Help should be mutual. Moreover, those who accept help and assistance from their brothers should pay them back, not only with money, but with love, respect, and gratitude.

If you've glanced at a screen lately, you know that the vibe out there is sustained clinical anxiety. While Wall Street is biting its nails over a 26-point VIX and stock futures are swinging wildly on rumors of an Iranian ceasefire, most of us are just trying to navigate the stationhouse detention of our daily lives.

Enter Leo Tolstoy, the man many consider the greatest writer who ever lived. In today's entry from the *Leo Tolstoy Calendar of Wisdom*, Tolstoy—via the Victorian social critic John Ruskin—lands on a perspective that feels less like a 19th-century sermon and more like something ripped straight from a high-octane episode of HBO's smash hit, *The Pitt*.

Tolstoy's meditation for today is a blunt assessment of human lopsidedness: "*The world is formed so that usually some people mostly help others, and some mostly receive their help.*"

If you've been watching Noah Wyle's Dr. Michael "Robby" Robinavitch navigate the retina-frying fluorescent purgatory of the Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Center (PTMC), you've seen this lopsidedness in high-res. In *The Pitt*, the help isn't some vague spiritual concept, it's a bloody, real-time, 15-hour shift where time melts away. Every episode is an hour of toil that Tolstoy and Ruskin are obsessed with.

Ruskin's kicker in today's reading is that objects and knowledge are "products of people's work." He argues that when you damage an object, you are literally destroying a piece of someone's life.

In the 2026 landscape, we are the ultimate receivers. We live in a world sustained by ghost-labor. We order a \$24 salad on an app and expect it to appear in 20 minutes, rarely stopping to consider the toil of the Lukes and Sarahs driving through Los Angeles traffic or Tennessee road construction to bring it to us. We may treat the world like a giant vending machine, but Tolstoy wants us to see the real ghost in the machine.

Take a look at the Carmy energy of Dr. Robby in *The Pitt* (yes, that Carmy from that *Bear*). In the latest episode, "5:00 P.M.," we see Dr. McKay making the choice to leave the ED to treat a patient in a park. It's framed as noble, but the show is smarter than that—it shows the cost. In a system stretched thin by institutional failure, budgetary restraints, and staffing shortages, one person's act of help is another person's potentially life-or-death absence.

That kind of tension runs through these shows, and it's part of why they land. We are currently obsessed with watching *competence porn*, shows about people who are incredibly good at high-stress, low-reward jobs. Why? Because we feel the lack of it in our own lives. We watch *The Pitt* or *The Bear* because we want to believe that somewhere, someone still views their knowledge as a gift to support other people rather than just a way to build a personal brand or scale a SaaS startup.

But Tolstoy isn't just talking to the doctors. He's talking to us, the people sitting on the couch, receiving the entertainment, the healthcare, the infrastructure, and the 82nd Airborne paratroopers currently being deployed to the Middle East.

He argues that help should be mutual. *Check*. If you are a recipient of the world's toil today, if you are using a bridge you didn't build, wearing a coat you didn't sew, or reading a book you didn't write—fine, but this is not a debt settled with your credit card. Money is the easy out. Tolstoy's talking about currencies that don't transact. Think love, respect, gratitude.

In a world increasingly insulated by glass screens and algorithmic distance, we've forgotten that simply being present is a form of equity. Whether it is Dr. Robby refusing to clock out or Carmy holding the station during a brutal dinner rush, we are seeing a visceral, global recognition that *showing up* is the ultimate gift. It is the only thing a subscription fee can't automate—the literal donation of your toil to the person standing right in front of you.

The lesson for March 25th is a call to end our consumerist nihilism. Don't just use your tools; respect the life-force that went into them. Don't just have knowledge; use it to support someone who is currently drowning in the unsatisfactoriness of the modern moment.

In the words of Dr. Robby: "We've got you." But Tolstoy's question for us today is who have *you* got?

#favorites #wisdom

