

“The best antidote I know for worry is work. The best cure for weariness is the challenge of helping someone who is even more tired. One of the great ironies of life is this: He or she who serves almost always benefits more than he or she who is served.”

—Gordon B. Hinckley, *Standing for Something: 10 Neglected Virtues That Will Heal Our Hearts and Homes*

The Secret of Joy

Many years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger, the famous 20th-century psychiatrist, once gave a lecture on mental health, and then answered questions from the audience. “What would you advise a person to do,” asked one man, “if that person felt a nervous breakdown coming on?”

Most people expected him to reply, “Consult a psychiatrist.” To their astonishment, he replied, “Lock up your house, go across the railway tracks, find someone in need and do something to help that person.”

Now, the term “nervous breakdown,” is not used much anymore, but when I looked it up, the definition read, “a period of mental illness resulting from severe depression, stress, and or anxiety.”

Severe depression is something we're all familiar with, whether we've experienced it ourselves, or know others who've endured it or are enduring it now. This past week brought its destructive power into sharp focus, as it claimed the life of one of our most gifted and beloved comedians. Rest in peace, Robin Williams.

I'm not here to suggest that anyone can escape depression by merely going out and giving a helping hand to someone else. Severe depression is a complex illness, and medication can often be a useful and lifesaving remedy that I would turn to in a heartbeat if my periods of depression came more often or lasted longer than they do.

But I *am* suggesting that perhaps the epidemic of depression that now pervades our country – 1 in 10 people, including millions of children, are now taking antidepressants – might be less severe if we glorified service to

others more than fame and fortune and the acquisition of the latest gadget. Psychologist Martin Seligman, originator of the field of positive psychology and author of *Authentic Happiness*, asserts that much modern unhappiness springs from the “society of maximal self,” which encourages an obsessive focus on the individual rather than on the group. And the 20th century Taoist philosopher Wei Wu Wei put it even more succinctly when he wrote:

Why are you unhappy?
Because 99.9 percent
Of everything you do
Is for yourself –
And there isn't one.

I think it's especially hard for us as Americans to wrap our heads around this idea, growing up in a culture that so glorifies independence, individual freedom and fulfillment, and, well, heck, the pursuit of happiness – as though it were something outside ourselves, some prey out there we could track down, wrestle to the ground, capture, and claim as our own (or at least put on our Mastercard.)

There are many factors contributing to our epidemic of depression – the processed food we eat, the sleep and exercise we don't get, the natural world we don't spend enough time in, the overload of information coming at us from print and electronic devices everywhere; but our modern glorification of independence and insistence on individual fulfillment serves, perhaps, to underscore a feeling of loneliness, which I think is the root of our deepest unhappiness as human beings – that sense of separateness from everyone else in the world. No amount of material wealth or pursuit of physical pleasure can alleviate it. Maybe the only way out of that illusion of separateness is connection, and maybe the most reliable way to experience connection is to serve others.

Mother Teresa in her lifetime became an icon of service to others. She and the nuns who served with her lived an austere lifestyle, living 3 or 4 to a room, their only possessions two dresses and a bucket for washing, eating the same food as the poor, working in suffocating heat. They rose before dawn and spent their days working in the slums of Calcutta – an existence most of

us would regard as difficult if not depressing. Yet when a television interviewer visited Mother Teresa, he exclaimed “The thing I notice about you and the hundreds of sisters who now form your team is that you all look so happy. Is it a put-on?”

“Oh no,” she replied, “not at all. Nothing makes you happier than when you really reach out to someone who is badly hurt.”

“I swear,” wrote the interviewer afterwards, that “I have never experienced so sharp a sense of joy.!”

Nobel prize winner, Albert Schweitzer, who devoted his life to treating the poor and sick of Africa stated “The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”

Of course, you can ladle out food at a soup kitchen for hours and maintain a sense of isolation if you are feeling blasé about it, or doing it out of a sense of obligation rather than generosity, or serving others at the expense of not taking care of yourself.

I think the latter is what keeps many of us from pursuing volunteer work: “Oh, I'm so over-committed and burned out already. I couldn't possibly take on one more thing.” I know that's been my excuse. But last week I went to a new hairdresser, and while we were talking, she revealed that she works 6 days a week, and on her one day off, she spends the morning serving breakfast in a local soup kitchen. Just talking about doing that made her face light up. I suspect that Gordon Hinkley, who was quoted at the beginning of the service in our call to worship, had it right when he said “The best cure for weariness is the challenge of helping someone who is even more tired.”

However, I don't think you need to go to Calcutta or take on a new weekly volunteering commitment to experience the joy that comes from service. It may be available now, in your daily toil, depending on how you hold it. You've probably heard the story of the Three Stonemasons. It goes like this:

A medieval traveler, wandering across the country, comes across a huge construction project. Near his path, he sees three stonemasons, hard at work with their hammers and chisels.

“What are you doing?” asks the traveler
“Breaking stones” grunts the first.
“Making a living” says the second.
“Building a cathedral!” proclaims the third.

Ever since I've been working on today's service, thinking about “service,” I have, with some frequency, been able to shift my attitude towards some lowly task I'm doing for my family, be it ironing a shirt or chopping onions, to realize I'm building a cathedral. It's sort of amazing to me how simply shifting my focus can transform drudgery to joy.

Mother Teresa said “Don't look for spectacular actions. What is important is the gift of yourselves. It is the degree of love you insert in your deeds.”

There's a Jewish proverb that goes like this: A young woman once said to an old woman, “What is life's heaviest burden?” And the old woman said, “To have nothing to carry.”

My first thought when I read this proverb was “Wow. I have totally failed my son.”

“The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real.”
(Marge Piercy) We all want to feel useful, like our presence here matters, like we're not merely using up the oxygen until we die. Of course, I just want my son to be happy, but in this one area in particular, I have not given him the tools. “What can I do to help?” are not the words I have taught him to ask. For 12 years it's so often been easier just to do a task myself, than to get him to do it, that that's usually what I've done. And I am losing sleep at night thinking I might have blown it, like my window of opportunity may have already closed.

But maybe not. More and more studies keep showing how plastic and malleable the brain is, so maybe it's never too late to learn this. So I want to find ways of giving Isaiah opportunities to serve, and I want to lead by example, so I've developed a plan to help make sure I follow through on my

good intentions. I want to conspire with you all. Peter and I are leading a service again in October, and between now and then, I want to conduct a group experiment: have everyone who's willing, to find ways to serve every day, be it as deliberate as volunteering in a soup kitchen or something smaller and more random, like paying the toll for the person behind you at the toll booth. Can you imagine how it might affect your day if you took a meal to a friend who's sick or feeling overwhelmed, complimented your cashier on her hairstyle, picked up litter on the beach, took care of someone's children for a couple of hours to give their parent some down time, baked cookies for your co-workers, wrote a letter of thanks to someone in your life, gave your partner a massage or flowers or a love note, gave a dollar to someone who's asking for change? Or five dollars, and really blow their mind? The experiment I'm proposing is simply to find ways to serve, if possible every day, and see how it affects your sense of joy and well-being. And don't worry or think "it doesn't count" if you're being kind in order to be happier yourself. The Dali Lama uses the term *selfish altruism* without any pejorative sense at all. If my selfish desire to feel more happiness and joy makes me behave with more kindness and compassion, who loses?

So, two months to experiment. I'll compile a report on our collective findings to be presented at the service on October 19th.

And don't worry. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands or anything to put you on the spot right now. Think about whether you want to be part of this experiment. I will send out an announcement about it on the listserve tomorrow. If you're interested, email me back, and then I will create an email group just for those of us doing the research, so we can keep each other posted on our progress, and feed each other ideas and inspiration.

And here's the flip side of this request: if you need help with something, don't be afraid to call on this community. You can serve others by giving them the opportunity of serving you. Live Oak has a caring committee (Sally Kennedy, Jay Roller, and Nancy Ballasi) volunteers whose job it is to match people in need with folks who can give them a hand. So please, if you could use some help, don't hesitate to ask one of them to find it for you. I would love for this community to get a reputation for how well we serve each other

and the world, and how well we support each other in making service a regular part of our collective spiritual practice.

The choir is about to sing a song whose first words are “Will you let me be your servant?” and whose last words are “Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.”

“From you I receive, to you I give, together we share, and from this, we live.”

And I mean really live, with joy and purpose. May it be so.