

How Can I Help?

Rev. Mark Hayes

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Reading: from *How Can I Help?* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman

Common to all those habits which hinder us is a sense of separateness; we are divided within ourselves and cut off from others. Common to all those moments and actions which truly seem to help, however, is the experience of unity; the mind and the heart work in harmony, and barriers between us dissolve.

Separateness and unity. How interesting that these root causes, revealed in the experience of helping, turn out to be what most spiritual traditions define as the fundamental issue of life itself. Awakening from our sense of separateness is what we are called to do in all things, not merely in service. Whether these traditions speak of us as being cut off from God, Nature, Original Mind, True Being, the Tao, the Dharma – they call on us, in one voice, to undertake the journey back to unity.

Service, from this perspective, is part of that journey. It is no longer an end in itself. It is a vehicle through which we reach a deeper understanding of life. Each step we take, each moment in which we grow toward a greater understanding of unity, steadily transforms us into instruments of that help which truly heals.

Service not only reveals a larger vision of life, but steadily moves us along and supports our efforts to realize this vision. Each time we seek to respond to appeals for help we are being shown where we must grow in our sense of unity and what inner resources we can call upon to do so. We are constantly given, for example, the chance to experience the inherent generosity of our heart. Each time this happens, our faith in that part of ourselves which is intimately related to the rest of the universe is strengthened. So, too, approaching each act of caring with a desire to grow, we also meet our fears and resistances – but with the opportunity to see them for what they are, and, in so doing, to loosen their hold and ultimately to relinquish them. *On the path of service, then, we are constantly given feedback which helps us along the greater journey of awakening.*

Sermon:

Four of the greatest words you can ever hear, especially during times of need, are “How Can I Help?” As we were reminded during our meditation this morning, we do need one another in times of trouble, despair and mourning. And when those needs are recognized and addressed by our friends and neighbors, it’s a wonderful feeling.

But as good as it feels to hear those words, it can be equally as rewarding to say them. As suggested in our reading this morning, being of service can be part of a journey of unity and understanding. Giving of ourselves to serve the needs of others can not only relieve suffering; it can also help us grow in wisdom and experience greater unity. Another frequent reward of service is the joy that comes from giving of yourself, from being helpful.

As an example, listen to these reflections of a senior citizen, recounted in Ram Dass and Paul Gorman’s book, *How Can I Help?*:

I’m ninety-two years old, all right. I get up every morning at seven a.m. Each day I remind myself, “Wake up. Get up.” I talk to my legs, “Legs, get moving. Legs, you’re an antelope.” It’s . . . mind over matter. You have to have the right spirit. And I’m out on the streets, seven-thirty a.m. sharp.

I'm wearing my Honorary Sanitation Commissioner badge they gave me from City Hall. I'm alert, I'm ready, I'm out there. And I got my whistle. My job is I help get parked cars off the street so they can bring in the sanitation trucks and the Wayne Broom, the big one – thirty grand for a broom! So when they show up, I go around blowing my whistle to get people to move their cars. I have a great time.

People are asleep. They're busy with businesses. They're busy taking time off from businesses. They're busy having a good time. . . Whatever. I don't care. I blow my whistle. I'm all over the place.

I don't discriminate, either. I go after the sanitation men too. The union got them a coffee break. Some coffee. They're having eggs, they're having bacon, they're having toast . . . they're having French toast. I kid them about it. And I go right into the restaurant and blow my whistle. They love it, they understand. Everybody loves it, everybody understands. It's the whistle that gets them. Sometimes I'm having such a laugh, I can't blow it. Then I get back to work. "Schleppers, get moving, let's go!"

This used to be a beautiful city. People cared. If you didn't pay your rent, the sheriff would come and put your furniture out on the street. But the poorest of the poor would come automatically and drop their pennies and nickels at your house and put you back into your apartment. That's neighborhood.

Now it's different. Things have gotten out of kilter – hard to say why. People seem to be lost in their own lives. I see them on the street, lost in their own thoughts. Not that I'm all that different. . . I have as many bad habits as anyone. You should see my apartment. It's a mess. Me, Mr. Clean! But I'm trying. . .

What can I tell you? I'm not a saint or a wise man. I'm not the Two-Thousand-Year-Old-Man. I'm only the ninety-two-year-old-man. Just a senior citizen. But what do I know that everybody doesn't know? I just go out there in the morning and blow my whistle. That's what I do. You do what you do. Me, I'm having a great time. Wonderful fun. And when people see how much fun I'm having, they have to laugh. What else can they do? Then I hit them with it: "Move your car!"

I like this guy's attitude. He's made helping a habit, and he has a great time doing it. It just would never occur to him to do anything else. And, isn't that how it should be when you find something that brings you joy?

If there's one thing I want you to take away this morning, it's a recognition of the relationship between service and joy. In the words of Rabindranath Tagore, a bearer of much wisdom: "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy."

Whether it is sharing of our financial resources, of our time, our talents, or our sweat, being helpful has the potential of bringing great joy. Those of us who traveled to Puerto Rico last spring experienced it. Working hard, to the point of exhaustion, was so worth it when we could see the tangible results of our labor, and the smiles of gratitude on the faces of the home owners we were working with.

If you want to experience that kind of joy, I encourage you to consider joining this coming spring's trip to New Orleans.

If you prefer to be of service closer to home, I see in the announcements in the Order of Service today that all this month, during Coffee Hour, our Caring Committee will have a table where you can sign up to volunteer your time to help out with meals, transportation, and miscellaneous household chores. We need one another, and this is a good way to match up our desire to serve with needs right here in our own community.

Getting back to the connection between service and joy, Anne Naylor has written an article called “How to Increase Your Joy Through Service,” in which she lays out several ways of doing that:

1. Cultivate attitudes of joy in yourself. Appreciate the blessings that you are and that you have, and *feel* grateful for them. Choose to smile when you go to sleep, and when you wake up in the morning.
2. Do more that brings you joy; simple things like walking in the fresh air, doing daily meditation, or watching a movie that inspires you or makes you laugh. You know what works for you.
3. Cultivate an attitude of serving others. When you assume a serving frame of mind, it is less likely you will feel needy, despairing, or dependent upon outer, material circumstances for your well-being and happiness. Giving gives you freedom. And, finally,
4. Find out what others need – and commit some time to giving it. Opportunities to serve others will not necessarily fall at your feet. Being pro-active is where you can make a real difference.

Two weeks ago I talked about “Standing on the Side of Love,” about acting out of the motivating force of love. Then last week I talked, among other things, about creativity of thought and language. Well, love and creativity come together in the enterprise of figuring out how to be of service. Of figuring out how to leverage our energy and generosity to be of service most effectively. After all, the greater the results, the greater the joy.

I want to share with you this morning one recent example, close to home, of bringing joy and service together in a very creative way. The joyful occasion was a wedding; a wedding of two former members of this Fellowship: Marc Maxson and Heather Katcher.

Marc and Heather did not want any gifts for themselves, and so they used the occasion of their wedding to encourage gifts that would bless those in greater need than themselves. They requested that their guests contribute to a charitable cause and let them know about it. Many of us contributed through GlobalGiving, an agency that Marc works with. GlobalGiving connects donors with community-based projects all over the world that need support. Its stated mission is to “Build an efficient, open, thriving marketplace that connects people who have community and world-changing ideas with people who can support them.”

I’d like to share with you part of a message Heather and Marc sent out to their wedding guests some time after the event:

Through your generosity,

- 44 Afghan girls will learn computer skills;
- 50 Afghan women will learn to read;
- 20 rescued pigs and sheep will have a winter retirement home;
- one Vietnamese family will have safe drinking water for life;
- two school girls will raise lambs and sell their milk to put themselves through 13 years of school in Burkina Faso;

- two villages will learn how to make and use greener stoves and cut down fewer trees;
- two at-risk girls in San Francisco will get job training;
- a PlayPump will provide ten Africans with clean water for a decade;
- one child will get free cleft palate surgery;
- one blind man with trichiasis in Mongolia will regain sight;
- five Nigerian midwives will be trained to save lives during childbirth;
- six families in Mali got life-saving mosquito nets;
- an Ethiopian refugee child got fed for an entire year;

And this is only a small part of the list. Heather and Marc go on to say:

We wanted our wedding to be a celebration of life, joy, and giving back to the community that brought us together. The world is our home, and you gave to places all across the globe, in at least **21 countries**.

We wanted this celebration to serve a larger purpose for this community – of sharing just a small fraction of our wealth with those who can do more with it. Look at all the lives that you have changed in one day: You made the blind see, the hungry eat, and the sick grow healthy . . .

[We] try to live out our values and wanted our wedding to reflect the things that matter most to us. Thank you so very much for helping us to have such a joyful and rewarding day with you.

Wow. That is a wonderful example of what you can do with a little generosity, a little imagination, and a little help from your friends. There is really no limit to the joy that we can create and experience if we put our minds – and our hearts – to it.

Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro quotes Ben Hei Hei as follows in *Wisdom of the Jewish Sages*:

We are here to do,
 And through doing to learn;
 And through learning to know;
 And through knowing to experience wonder;
 And through wonder to attain wisdom;
 And through wisdom to find simplicity;
 And through simplicity to give attention;
 And through attention
 To see what needs to be done. . .

May we seek out what needs to be done, and set about doing it, with gratitude and with joy.

May it be so.