

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
13 February, 2022

***Seva* is Love**

This sermon started with the shoveling angels. During the huge snowstorm two weeks ago, Queen Cheryl shoveled her sidewalk, then kept at it and cleared the sidewalk in front of 78-year-old Crystal's house next door. Down the street, there's old Mama, who lost her son Jimmy. He used to shovel for her.... Cheryl cleared her sidewalk, too.

"It's better if you keep up with it," she says. When she got up early on Sunday morning to do it all again — joyful to think "how happy [they'd] be"¹ — she found that someone else had taken up the cause and shoveled them all out.

And the effects rippled out across the city — Everywhere, people were shoveling each other out, exhausted ... and elated.

In Hinduism and Sikhism, this is known as *seva*: selfless service; doing something not for acknowledgement, praise, or reward, but for the spiritual practice of promoting humility, demoting egoism, and for joy; service for the collective uplift of the community, in the name of love.

On this Valentine's Day Sunday, which will be followed this Thursday by Random Acts of Kindness Day, let's reflect together on service as love.

The word *seva* is comprised of two Sanskrit words: *saha*, meaning "with that," and "*eva*," meaning "also." "With that, also" is translated as "all together; no one excluded:" the action of seeing and responding to others' needs, expressing compassion and the deep desire to help. *Seva* is a path to waking up — a path to joy.

¹ Email from Cheryl Thieret, 2/9/22. Used with permission.

In 2013, Ibrahim Halil Dudu lost everything when his home and tailoring business in Aleppo were blown up in the Syrian Civil War. Three years later, Halil; his wife, Emine; and their three children arrived as refugees in Guelph, Ontario.

One Sunday, their host, David Hobson, was out in his driveway, playing basketball with the kids, when a bridesmaid approached him and asked whether he had a set of pliers. Next door, a bridal party was readying for a wedding; the zipper on the bride's dress had split open. The ceremony was one hour away.

David ran inside and grabbed Ibrahim to go next door; they'd only been communicating through Google translate, but a sense of urgency is apparently universal. When the master tailor saw the dress, there was no explanation necessary; he got to work with a needle and thread.

Afterwards, the wedding photographer, Lindsay Coulter, wrote, "Every weekend, I take photos of people on the happiest day of their lives.... Today, one man who has seen some of the worst things [the] world has to offer came to the rescue.... I'm in awe of the families who have welcomed these strangers into their homes ... and I'm inspired by the resilience of the Syrian people."

Her photos of Ibrahim at work on the dress went viral. He told *The Washington Post* he was happy and grateful his skills had come in handy, and that he dreams of opening a tailoring shop in Ontario. A GoFundMe campaign was started to help realize that dream, and a gentleman in Toronto got in touch to say he'd like to give Ibrahim his commercial sewing machine.²

So much *seva*: selflessness and service. So much joy!

If you ever find yourself wondering, "Can I really make a difference?," the answer is *always* "Yes." The Hindu teachings say, Start where you are. Give with an open mind, open heart, open hands. Expect nothing. And small causes can yield big effects: Mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz taught us that, over time, the flap of a butterfly's wings can cause a tornado.³

Did you see the news story about the singing Home Depot greeter in Fort Myers, Florida? From church hymns to popular songs, Ken Williams sings it all.

² Please see www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/09/30/a-refugee-from-war-torn-aleppo-helped-save-a-canadian-brides-wedding-day/

³ The Butterfly Effect

Originally a mixed martial arts fighter, he says his new path in life represents his growth from a fighter to a lover. “I [sing],” he says, “because you don’t know what a person’s going through in life, and I think we should all be ... happy.”⁴

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Perhaps like some of you of a certain age, my first teacher about Hinduism in general and *seva* in particular was American spiritual teacher Baba Ram Dass, of blessed memory. Ram Dass taught that *seva* was a “curriculum” in soul school. “In this curriculum,” he said, “we encounter our own limitations.... Our ego can ... [make] us tentative and hesitant to reach out. Our resistance to pain can lead us to insulate ourselves from suffering. When our hearts do open in empathy, all too often we close down quickly, frightened by the intensity of our feelings. We substitute denial, pity, or other defense mechanisms for the spontaneous response of the heart.

“Frequently, we find ourselves so identified with our own needs that we tend to treat others as objects to be manipulated toward our own ends. We see how the restlessness of our minds can hinder our ability to listen. We find ourselves at least one thought away from someone else. And when we try to help through social action, we often so identify [our] opponent as an enemy that we remain locked in a cycle of recrimination. Meanwhile, as the toxicity of these ... hindrances build up, we begin to wear down.... Common to all those habits which hinder us is a sense of separateness: We are divided within ourselves and cut off from others.... We burn out. Helping starts to hurt....

“Common to all those moments and actions [that] truly seem to help, however, is the experience of unity.... [In] the curriculum of service,” he said, “we ... meet heart to heart, reassuring one another simply by the quality of our presence.... [We experience a profound bond which we intuitively understand is nourishing everyone.... The mind and ... heart work in harmony, and barriers ... begin to dissolve....”⁵

“Awakening from our sense of separateness [to unity] is what we are called to do in all things, not merely in service.”

And then Ram Dass gets to the heart of it all. In the Bhagavad Gita, we are directed to do *seva* — to do everything we do — in the light of our awareness of the divine. “Your offerings [of service] include everything you do” he says, “— the

⁴ Please see news.yahoo.com/singing-home-depot-store-greeter-154200482.html

⁵ Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help?*

sneaky stuff, too. Like, how about when ... you're sitting around gossiping, and suddenly, you think, "This is my offering to G*d at this moment?".... I mean," says Ram Dass, "don't worry about it.... The Brahman⁶ can take it all in, no problem. *Just notice ... what you're offering to G*d....*

You are the breath of G*d."

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Ten years ago on a cold November night in Times Square, twenty-five year old Officer Lawrence DePrimo was working a counterterrorism post when he encountered an older, barefoot man on Seventh Avenue. Lawrence left, reappeared with a pair of new boots, and knelt to help the man put them on and lace them up.

This simple but profound act of *seva* would have remained anonymous but for a post to the NYPD's Facebook page: A tourist from Arizona had caught the interaction on her cellphone. Officer Lawrence DePrimo, who lived with his parents on Long Island, told the *New York Times*, "It was freezing.... I had [on] two pairs of socks and I was still cold." He keeps the receipt in his vest, he says, "to remind me that sometimes people have it worse."

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Sikh spiritual master Sant Rajinder Singh writes, "Selfless service is not only a ... task to be done; it is an act of healing, of ... radiating love [and] opening hearts [and souls].... One of the greatest things [we] can do is to serve others.

"We never lose when we give [in this way]," he continues. We never regret or feel "sorry for giving. There is no greater joy that can fill our [hearts].... [We] find more and more blessings raining down.... Selfless service strengthens our spiritual development.... We are all connected...."⁷

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This week, I enjoyed a wonderful visit with our own Harriett Bogage, who will be celebrating her 92nd birthday next Sunday. Harriett's oldest son, Dave, thought I might like to hear about her AIDS activism. He was right. Harriett has given me permission to share her story.

She raised five children. The middle child, Bobby, was beautiful, bright, artistic, and gay. He graduated from the Fashion Institute in New York and moved to Santa Fe. When he was diagnosed with AIDS, he came home to a small,

⁶ The Sanskrit word *Brahman* meaning "the ultimate reality underlying all phenomena."

⁷ Sant Rajinder Singh, "Power of Selfless Service, 7/19/20. Please see dailypioneer.com/2020/sunday-edition/power-of-selfless-service.html

conservative community in Pennsylvania to die a slow, agonizing death. He was 25 years old.

Dave came every weekend and Harriett cared for him day and night, sleeping in the same room. She “went crazy,” she says, trying to get him help, but there was no help to be had. What there was was ignorance and fear. Bobby was taken by ambulance to see an infectious disease doctor in Reading. Pointing to the sheet on which he lay, the nurse who greeted the ambulance said, “You’d better burn that.”

Harriett, married at 20 to a domineering man, had never worked outside her home. But after Bobby died, something in her broke open. She found her voice. Reaching out to other bereft mothers of sons with AIDS, she formed the first mothers’ support group. With no formal training, she instinctively knew they needed to share their stories to help one another to heal. At the time, she wrote, “I find it helps me tremendously to be there for people who are suffering so through this tragic and devastating illness and always death.” Teaming up with William Bender, a gay social worker, she co-founded the Berks AIDS Health Crisis, and began speaking in public, confronting the twin stigmas: Some parents, she said, were more upset that their sons were gay than that they had AIDS. She kept vigil at the bedside of people with AIDS, sat through countless memorial services, and attended every public showing of the quilt in Washington, D.C. Bobby’s quilt panel was number 734.

Today, Harriett’s organization is called Berks AIDS Network, which grew from its beginnings in a church basement to a permanent facility with a huge staff, a satellite office in Schuylkill⁸ County, and educational programs in India and Africa. Eventually, Harriet served on the Pennsylvania Governor’s Planning Committee for the AIDS Task Force. She felt, she says, valued and loved. The sticker on her notebook says, “Listen to your mother: AIDS is not over.”

This is *seva*: selfless service that grew from a broken, broken-open heart; service fueled by anger at injustice; service in the name of a great love. Can we, too, touch into that deep reserve of caring and commitment and kindle the fire of devotion?

The Persian poet Hafiz said,

“Now is the season to know that everything you do is sacred.”

⁸ Pronounced SKOO-kell

Beloved spiritual companions,

Our offerings of *seva*
include everything we do,
serving in the light
of our awareness of the divine.

Shoveling out the neighbors,
Sewing up a wedding dress,
Singing to the customers,
Buying new boots and kneeling to help lace them up,
Sharing stories to help the healing,
and confronting ignorance with education and a mother's love,
we are called to awaken
from our sense of separateness.

We are the breath of G*d.
Seva is love.