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 Arlington Street Church
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Love, Serve, Remember

Love everyone. Serve everyone. Remember G*d.

American spiritual teacher Ram Dass, perhaps best known for coining the phrase *Be Here Now*, was a student of the late Hindu teacher, Neem Karoli Baba, affectionately known as Maharajji. Ram Dass says, “Maharajji said to me, ‘Love everyone, serve everyone, and remember G*d.’ And I have been trying to do what he told me.”

It’s an extraordinary mission statement.

My favorite of Ram Dass’s books is called *How Can I Help?*¹ If we want to be happy, this is the right question to be asking. A spiritual practice of love and service will make us happy ... and change the world.

An eight-decade study called The Longevity Project² hypothesized that if people had friends and relatives to count on through hard times, they would be healthier. Those who felt loved and cared for, they predicted, would live the longest.

They were wrong.

In fact, people who feel loved and cared for reported feeling better, but they didn’t live longer.

So The Longevity Project focused on social networks. Does having regular contact with a large number of close friends make a difference? Yes, they do live longer. In fact, increased social interactions through a spiritual

¹ Co-authored with Paul Gorman

² In 1921, Dr. Lewis Terman chose 1,528 bright San Francisco 11-year-olds for a long-term study of the social predictors of intellectual leadership.

community are cited as contributing to the single strongest predictor of long life: a strong social network.³

But – get ready for it – the clearest benefit of social relationships came from *servicing* others. Those who help die last.

Love, in its most important incarnation, is a verb. To love is to serve.⁴

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Robin Emmons, age 45, grew up in Boston and moved to North Carolina as an adult. For more than 10 years, she despaired of getting help for her older brother, who suffers with schizophrenia. When he was finally off the streets and in the safety of a group home, his mental health stabilized, but his physical health deteriorated. Robin discovered that he and the other residents were eating cheap packaged and canned food, and it was making them sick.

“I had a small garden, so I thought, ‘Well, I’ll just put in some extra rows,” Robin says. “I began making weekly deliveries of whatever was coming up.”

In fact, more than 72,000 low-income residents of Charlotte live in food deserts – areas without a supermarket or fresh food. “If you don’t live in an affluent part of the city, your ... options are the dollar menu or the convenience store attached to a gas station.”

³ Katherine Bouton, “Eighty Years Along, a Longevity Study Still Has Ground to Cover, *New York Times*, 4/18/11. Please see nytimes.com/2011/04/19/science/19longevity.html

⁴ A strong social network doesn’t count, by the way, if we’re only relating through a screen. While we think of cellphones as devices that connect us, researchers have concluded that even a short period of cellphone use reduces our desire to connect with others. Because chatting on the phone evokes feelings of connectivity, fulfilling our basic need to belong, we end up with less empathy, less interest in engaging, and less inclination to help others. Spending time on the phone makes us less inclined to volunteer for community service even when asked. Just in case we needed one more reason to commit to less screen time.... (University of Maryland, *Cellphone use linked to selfish behavior*, 2/14/12. Please see sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/02/120214122038.htm)

Robin was outraged. “Healthy food is a basic human right,” she says. “I decided to rip up my whole backyard and make it all a garden, and it just kind of snowballed from there.”

Today, Robin Emmons has 200 volunteers helping her tend 9 acres of crops on three sites. Since 2008, her nonprofit, Sow Much Good, has grown more than 26,000 pounds of fresh produce for underserved communities in Charlotte. “[We] feel like [we’re] giving them a gift,” she says, “– a healthier, longer, better, more delicious life.”⁵

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UVA professor Timothy Wilson, author of *Redirect: The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change*, affirms that doing good makes us good. Doing good “capitalizes on the tried-and-true psychological principle that our attitudes and beliefs often follow from our behaviors rather than precede them,” he says. When we help, we see ourselves as caring, helpful people. And it spreads. “The likelihood that a witness to good deeds will soon become a doer of good deeds” is high; the level of compassion, love, and harmony in entire communities can be improved when even one of us helps.⁶⁷

⁵ Kathleen Toner, “Creating an oasis in a Southern ‘food desert,’” CNN, 10/21/13.

Please see cnn.com/2013/09/12/living/cnnheroes-emmons-food-deserts/index.html

⁶ Please see bakadesuyo.com/2016/03/b-happier/

⁷ As I said, my favorite of Ram Dass’s books (co-authored with Paul Gorman) is called *How Can I Help?*. One of the questions running through it is not just how, but *how much* can I help – and how much is so much as to be not-helping? Wharton School professor Adam Grant set out to dig a little deeper and run some numbers on those questions. Some of his results were not surprising – we know, for example, that being a martyr has significant diminishing returns – but some were stunning. In his book, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, Adam Grant advised that, rather than spread out our helping over many days, we should focus our “formal” helping on one day. He calls this the difference between sprinkling and chunking: the sprinklers, who in his study performed one selfless act of giving each day of the work week, were less happy than the chunkers, who performed all five acts of giving in one day. “Selfless givers,” he writes, “are more inclined to sprinkle their giving throughout their days, helping whenever people need them. This can become highly distracting and exhausting, robbing selfless givers of their attention and energy necessary to complete their own work.” Adam Grant concludes that the happiest people – those who express joy and healthy self-esteem – give a minimum of two hours a week. But there’s an upper limit, too. The magic number is sixteen hours a week. After that, we’re back into diminishing returns. The so-called “100-hour rule of volunteering” – meaning one hundred hours a year, or 2 hours a week

Mr. Rogers, beloved host of the educational pre-school TV series “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood,” said, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”⁸

Georges Bwelle grew up in Cameroon. His father sustained a relatively minor injury in a car accident – a broken arm – but because he didn’t have access to good medical care, the break led to an infection and he never really recovered. Even today, there is only one doctor for every 5,000 people in Cameroon ... if you can afford it. Georges Bwelle was determined to become a doctor, and to serve everyone.

Against all odds, he became a vascular surgeon. On weekends, he and a group of volunteers travel into rural areas to provide free medical care. Every Friday afternoon, 30 of them jam into vans, tie medical supplies to the roof, and set out. When they arrive, sometimes having had to push their vehicles through rivers and pull them out of the mud, they receive a heroes’ welcome – a feast, singing and dancing, and the best accommodations the community can offer. The next morning, they begin to meet patients – about 500 per weekend. People come on foot from as far as 37 miles away. Surgeries are performed under local anesthesia; after the procedures, patients get up and walk to the recovery area to make way for the next person.

The medical team works through the night, their generator providing light and sanitizing their equipment. The village musicians keep them going. Georges Bwelle says, “They are beating drums all the night to [keep us] awake and continue our work.” Volunteer medical and nursing students from the United States and Europe join in, and hail Dr. Bwelle as a hero. But he doesn’t view the astonishing workload as a hardship. Helping others live happier lives brings him great joy. “I am so happy when I am doing this work,” he says, “and I think about my father. I hope he sees what I am doing. To make people laugh, to reduce the pain, that’s why I’m doing this.”⁹

– “is the range where giving is maximally energizing and minimally draining.” (Thanks to Eric Barker, *To Help Others The Right Way, Do These Five Things*. Please see bakadesuyo.com/2013/04/helping-happier/)

⁸ from *The Mister Rogers Parenting Book*

⁹ Please see cnn.com/2013/08/01/world/Africa/cnnheroes-bwelle-cameroon-doctor/index.html

In his book *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived*, Jonathan Haidt writes, “The perception of compassionate or courageous behavior by others causes ... a desire to engage in virtuous action oneself.” It turns out that to be happier and to live longer, we want to spend time with others who help. Robin Emmons, Georges Bwelle, that friend who’s kind and generous: Hang out with them!¹⁰

Love, serve, remember.

And there’s one more thing: You have to love it. Agreeing to volunteer out of a sense of duty or obligation is a recipe for misery. You want to say yes when the opportunity to give feels potentially enjoyable and energizing.¹¹ And many of us know what happens then: suddenly, we’re not really sure who’s helping whom, who rescued whom, who’s the giver and who’s the receiver.

Seventy years ago, twenty-two members of a Nazi extermination squad were tried at Nuremburg for the deaths of more than a million Jews and many thousands of others. Benjamin Ferencz was 27 at the time. It was his first trial. From that time forward, he has worked to represent survivors of war crimes.

In an interview with *The Guardian* this week, Benjamin Ferencz was asked how he’s faring, given that the world hasn’t seemed this unstable since the Second World War. “I’m always doing fantastic,” he says. “You know why? Because I’m 97 years old and I’m aware of the alternatives.”

There is no one alive in the world today who has his perspective. He joined an anti-aircraft battalion of the United States Army and, as he tells it, “received five battle stars for having not been killed in every major battle in

¹⁰ Conversely, “bad habits can spread through [a workplace] like a contagious disease. Employees tend to mirror the bad behaviors of their coworkers, with factors as diverse as low morale [and] poor [work] habits ... all rising based on the negative behavior of peers.” (from Dr. David Niven, *The 100 Simple Secrets of Successful People*) Basically, “when you take a job, ... look at the people [with whom] you’re going to be working, because the odds are you’re going to become like them...” (from a conversation between Eric Barker and Bob Sutton, Stanford Graduate School of Business; please see bakadesuyo.com/2013/04/helping-happier/)

¹¹ from the work of psychologists Netta Weinstein and Richard Ryan

Europe.” He also participated in the liberation of four concentration camps, which haunts him to this day. “It was as if I had peered into hell,” he says. “That’s why I’m still fighting, to prevent that from happening again.”

“The world is a small planet. We must share the resources on this planet, so that everyone can live in peace and ... dignity, and it can be done.” He remains optimistic about society’s advancement. “Miracles can be performed,” he says. But, he adds, “My wife is a few years older than [I am].... We’ve been 70 years wed without a quarrel.... There are other things to do besides saving the world you know, my dear.”

Benjamin Ferencz continues to work for his vision of a world at peace. Currently, he’s busy giving away all his money. And he has three pieces of advice for young people. “One: Never give up. Two: Never give up. Three: Never give up.”

Beloved spiritual companions,

Here’s the equation:
Nourish your friendships
and care for others ->
Be happy and live long.

Look for the helpers.
Robin Emmons, Georges Bwelle, Benjamin Ferencz,
and each of us:
doing good makes us good
and suddenly, we’re not really sure who’s helping whom,
who rescued whom,
who’s the giver
and who’s the receiver.
Never give up!
Love, serve, remember.

Amen.