

## Service

“Life’s persistent and most urgent question is: What are you doing for others?”  
Martin Luther King Jr.

Service is the outer expression of a wish to benefit others – to increase their happiness. It begins with an intentional, internal aspiration. And if aspiration is the fuel of change, Service is its vehicle. Service is where the rubber meets the road. Or a more graceful way to put it, Service is love manifested.

At its best, Service is an expression of caring, sharing and delighting in each other. When it arises effortlessly and spontaneously, it is beautiful to watch. Yet service can also be experienced as a duty. Instead of being light and joyful, it feels heavy and burdensome. For most of us, learning to serve – and to be served – is a lifetime’s task.

In the developing world, it seems so clear, so obvious what is needed: clean water, sanitation, schools, enough food. Here, it is different. With an abundance of everything, what could anyone need? Yes, there are people who are homeless, poor enough to be hungry, or living in an atmosphere devoid of role models or tools to foster and develop positive character development. Yet amongst those who have an abundance of resources, options and opportunities – the people who are most of our contemporaries - there seems to be a lot of unhappiness. How to serve those who seem to have everything? Tricky. Not as simple as writing a check, digging a well - not to negate the benefit of those actions - but here is where we live, and for many of us, our canvass for service.

There are opportunities for listening and giving all around us, over cups of tea, at bedsides and on park benches. In every moment there is an opportunity to make someone else’s life a little bit easier or nicer. Every thought, word and action that flows from us in a loving way has the potential to create happiness.

It doesn’t mean we have to live in the slums, work on a hospital ward or teach at a challenging school. Or as Arlene occasionally mentions, we don’t have to “Start our own non-profit.”

The first step to serving where we are is to deepen our awareness of how much we have in common with other living beings. Just as we want to avoid loneliness, isolation, financial strain or unkindness, so does everyone else. When we begin to shift our attention away from our own anxieties and concerns, we strengthen and support the people and the society in which we live. The Dalai Lama calls this being ‘wisely selfish.’

In her handout on “Kindness,” Susan wrote a definition that I think can also apply to Service. Replacing Kindness with Service, Susan’s description goes like this:

“*Service* takes us out of the self-absorption that lies at the root of problems such as loneliness, discontent and depression. Because we focus on someone else, we are

automatically lifted out of ourselves. *Service* becomes an antidote to helplessness and low self worth. It gives us energy, power and a zest for life.”

There is satisfaction in carrying out an act of service with beauty and simplicity and with no expectation of reward. People who continually serve others act in this way because it brings them a sense of purpose and joy. They provide tangible evidence that working for the well-being of others can be a source of happiness. The more they give, the more energy they seem to have.

“Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles, and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?”

Lao Tzu

“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Howard Thurman

“How can I be useful, of what service can I be? There is something inside me – What can it be?”

Vincent Van Gogh

“To put the world right in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must first put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must first cultivate our personal life; we must first set our hearts right.”

Confucius

“To think is easy. To act is hard. But the hardest thing in the world is to act in accordance with your thinking.”

Goethe

“An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

“Everybody can serve....You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

Martin Luther King Jr.