

REPRISE: WALKING EACH OTHER HOME
by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman

What is it that so touches us about a single caring act or a life surrendered into service? Perhaps we see our deepest yearnings reflected in others, and this encourages us to believe in our own purity and beauty. These are no longer just ideals to strive for. We can reach them, we can be that way. Images of compassion beckon and encourage us onward.

~

I went to Nicaragua as a Maryknoll missionary in 1971, before the big earthquake, and before the revolution. I had every expectation and notion about helping people you could imagine. It would bore you to tears to list them -- and you'd probably understand every one.

I walked into this barrio, with three hundred people, an old cotton farm, incredibly hot and barren, three trees near an old hacienda, then miles of nothing but small bushes. The idea was to help build it up from there, make room for others. I'd be part of that effort, and part of those people.

It wasn't too long before I realized I was signing up for the course: Life 101. First assignment: the horror of poverty, which until then was something I'd only known about from the eyebrows up. No running water, no electricity, malnutrition, disease. People lived in big one-room houses made from materials we'd throw away in the States. We had to haul water from miles away. Dirty water was kept in a hole in the ground where it could be saved to keep the dust down or wash the patio. It took me a while to tell the difference between a clean dirt floor and a dirty dirt floor.

But people rarely complained. Not that they were saints and martyrs, but the grumbling was always in a here-we-are-let's-make-the-best-of-it manner. There was just this moment-to-moment quality to their life. First lesson for me: you do what's in front of you, you start where you are.

Second lesson: Who do you think you are, anyway? Because you go in and you're going to help someone, and then all of a sudden you see they're a lot stronger than you are in certain very important ways. And how they're acting has to do with who they are, especially down there. Who they are is all they have -- no possessions, no property, very little to protect.

So I go into someone's hut for the first time, wondering how they could live under such conditions, and I'm embraced by this lovely woman who gives me her only chair and spends three hours talking, and when am I coming back? I cannot believe her liveliness and purity of heart, and she awakens me to my own. So I see that service is beauty.

Or a kid comes by and asks to dust our car. We see him later, peering in the window as we're preparing our main meal. So we invite him in, as payment, and pile his plate high, and he's eating like there's no tomorrow. And then he suddenly hears some other kids outside, and he catches himself and takes the food out to them. And I'm blown away. I see that service is remembering.

Or I'd feel uncomfortable about the comfort of our own house; nothing special, but we have beds, not the boards they slept

From **How Can I Help?** by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, pp. 217-243. Copyright © 1985 by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

on, and some semblance of privacy, like they'd never known. But they'd come in -- "Isn't this beautiful? Oh, it's so nice" -- without the slightest envy, without anything but appreciation on our behalf. And I see that service is gratitude.

Or that service is truth and honesty. Because part of me is romanticizing all this a little. I have to accept that and listen to who I am and be myself all along the way. Because we're all taking the course, right? But we have different assignments. And so finding common ground helps. Gossip and small talk are important. To sit on a patio in the evening and talk about nothing and say everything. Service is chitchat.

And service is death, too. You die in service, and you die into service.

They told us the insurrection was to begin a day or two beforehand. Someone came by: "The revolution is going to start tomorrow. What are you going to do?" And in our case, we were ready. At that point, if you weren't for Somoza, you were supporting the Sandinistas. We'd opted for them because from what we'd seen over the years, the signs of the kingdom were more likely to be realized: fraternity, justice, help for the overwhelming majority of the poor. And we'd prepared, and organized civil-defense support, and had the chance to learn how to handle a gun, although I didn't feel that was being asked of me.

That evening we had to notify the fathers and the sisters, and we buzzed off in our Jeep to see the Franciscans. At about six o'clock, we heard homemade bombs go off, and machine guns, and heavy fire. We hit the floor in this flimsy asbestos house. Here it was.

An hour later, someone from the Sandinistas rushed in: "Come quick, we have a wounded compañero!" It was Armando, shot in the arm -- not someone we knew from church, but we knew he was a

leader. He was lying there, bleeding in the road. I began to panic. I'd never seen blood before. But my friend, another sister, told me to squat down and hold his arm and she'd go get medicine.

All of a sudden -- "There's a car coming!" National Guard or Sandinista? Everyone else dived behind this pathetic asbestos wall. Armando and I were there in the road, looking at each other. One of those moments: "Okay, here we are. What am I going to do?"

I'm thinking, "How'd I get here?" and "Where's Julianne?" and "Who the hell is in that car?" and "MOM!" And finally, "Well, if I'm with them and they're willing to die, I guess it's all right, and I'll be willing too. Just don't tell my mother." The car drove up. It was friendly. And as he was being bandaged up, Armando and I looked at each other for a quiet second -- a kind of acknowledgment -- and that was that. He started giving orders again. Then the madness took over.

People came through all night. They brought in kids who died. I'd never seen death before. Their friends would stand around, not knowing what to do. One boy died in my arms. They brought him in all covered with blood. I knew his face but not his name. He was still breathing. But when I lifted him up on a table, he gasped three times and shuddered and gave up the ghost. On the last breath, he really let go. He was so young -- soft hands. Nobody knew his name. It was a very sad moment, a still moment. And that was very good for me -- very deep, but very, very sad.

Then the fighting started to get heavy again. Everyone went down on the floor. The kids were so frightened, saying prayers and crying. The body was on the floor. But nobody wanted it discovered on their property; it could get them in trouble with the Guard. So he was thrown into a hole,

with just a shroud over him. And I thought, "He died of such violence -- couldn't he even get buried?" And I felt all his innocence, and the meaning of his death, and the cost of freedom, and the horror of war. And I thought, "God is supposed to call everyone by his true name. So what's his name?" And you find yourself saying the Our Father and shaking your fist at the sky at the same moment. And then you're done with that. And you bandage wounds because there's nothing else to do. That's the dying into service.

So what was his name? Who was he? Who were they all? Well, they were people who were allowing me to be there with them. They were sharing life and death and hope with me. And they were sharing faith. And they were sharing that they didn't know what to do with it all any more than I did. And they were helping bring me an experience of God too, a God who works through people. Because I was seeing "No greater love hath a man than to lay down his life for a friend." I saw that. I saw that happen.

So you say you're going to be with people and you're going to help. But what does that really mean? It turns out to be an endless series of questions. What do I really hold to be the truth of my life? What do I have to give, and what am I called on to give? How am I a part of human history and great moments of change? Who am I? And where is God in all this?

That's who he was, that boy; that's who they all were. They were those questions. Part of me has become those questions. We — are questions for one another. And service is exploring them and awakening through — them.

How do I measure what it means to have been given all that?

~
So service is "an endless series of

questions," puzzling and insistent. It not only raises questions, it helps to answer them. Service is a curriculum.

In this curriculum, we encounter our own limitations -- a number of which we have met in the course of this book. We have seen, for example, how our ego can lock us into narrow self-images, leaving 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 an opponent as an enemy that we remain locked in a cycle of recrimination. Meanwhile, as the toxicity of these and other hindrances builds up, we begin to wear down. We burn out. Helping starts to hurt.

But the curriculum of service provides us with information about our strengths as well, and we discover how these contribute to genuinely help-full service. Each time we drop our masks and 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. Each time we quiet our mind, our listening becomes sharp and clear, deep and perceptive; we realize that we know more than we thought we knew, and can reach out and hear, as if from inside, the heart of someone's pain. Each time we are able to remain open to suffering, despite our fear and

defensiveness, we sense a love in us which becomes increasingly unconditional.

As we close our inquiry into service, then, we can see in this mosaic of limitations and strength a still deeper teaching. 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 us in 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 resistance -- 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.**

All the methods we have discussed throughout the book support us in this effort. They are, it turns out, more than helpful hints to improve the quality of service. They are appropriate technology for loosening the hold of separateness and for strengthening our vision of unity.

For example, we may start out to quiet the mind simply to hear the needs of others. To do so we learn to identify less with our own thoughts. Listening more, judging less, then, there is less divisiveness in our awareness. As we loosen our identification with personal motives and models of self, meanwhile, our awareness becomes more panoramic and inclusive; we're freer to take in more and more. Under these conditions, in turn, all our mental faculties can come into play as needed -- memory, training, logic and analysis, intuition, wisdom. Unexpected connections become apparent. We may recognize deeper patterns in the events which are unfolding. As we continue, we may even begin to gain insight into a larger order of lawfulness we cannot understand rationally but which nevertheless resonates within. We come to sense the Way of Things (Tao) of which our actions are but a part. The hold of separateness is thus being broken at its source, in our own mind.

These practices open us up to an awareness within ourselves **which is itself unitive**. Not only do we see and hear more, but our very openness and spaciousness

dissolve opposition and discord.

Through these practices, and our efforts to keep our hearts open in the presence of suffering, we find ourselves more available to whoever we are with. Compassion is increasingly an automatic response. We find a deep quality of love infusing our actions with others. The expression of this love, in turn, becomes increasingly our goal, whatever the circumstances. The more unconditionally we share it, the more helpful it is to all.

This is the essence of the spiritual path of devotional service. One enters into the helping act not only because there is a need to be met. Service gradually becomes an offering, first to those we are with, but eventually to that greater truth or source of being in which we are all joined in love. Helping becomes an act of reverence, worship, gratitude. It is grace merely to have the chance to serve.

Mother Teresa, for example, bending to hold a dying leper, sees there only "Christ in a distressing disguise." She's not "helping a dying leper," she's loving God, affirming in whomever she's with universal qualities of perfection and beauty. One can imagine how it might feel to be held in this spirit during one's final moments of life.

The Hindu deity Hanuman offers a similar example of devotional service. Every act he performs becomes an offering to Rama (God). His service brings him to the very edge of unitive love. How powerful his vision: "When I know who I am, I **am** you," he says, kneeling before Rama, "when I don't know who I am, I **serve** you."

For both of these inspirational figures, and for any of us, the smallest acts of caring -- making a sick friend's bed, filling a bowl on a soup line, welcoming a stranger, comforting a frightened child -- can be a means of affirming the greater unity of life in love. As real as this spirit is in us, we

have to communicate it to others, in addition to everything else we are doing on their behalf.

Placing service in a spiritual perspective in no way diminishes what we have to offer others through training, experience, individuality, special skills, or sense of humor. Quite the reverse. Our particular talents and unique qualities are likely to come forth more reliably when we have a richer and more spacious sense of who we are -- the very promise of all spiritual practice.

To the question, "How can I help?" we now see the possibility of a deeper answer than we might once have expected. We can, of course, help through all that we **do**. But at the deepest level we help through who we **are**. We help, that is, by appreciating the connection between service and our own progress on the journey of awakening into a fuller sense of unity.

We work on ourselves, then, in order to help others. And we help others as a vehicle for working on ourselves.

In this recognition, we find new freedom and opportunity. External obstacles and old habits -- our past experience of service -- can now be dealt with in the broader context of our own growth. And each step we take out of the illusion of separateness, we now can see, will inevitably be a blessing to ourselves and all we are with.

In our initial impulse to help out, had we really anticipated so rich a path?

As we take to this path, however, we find it neither straight nor smooth. At moments we may become profoundly aware of our oneness with all things. Our sense of possibility expands. Could it be like this more often...more often than not?

But then some incident or situation arises and we are thrown back into the pain of separateness once again. At first this must

shock us; we thought we were farther along. Yet, after a moment's pause at the side of the road, a break for a little self-pity and self-recrimination, we have nothing to do but take up the journey once again. Though the road is circuitous, the transformation proceeds inevitably. Gradually we come to sense profound changes in who we are. Our hearts can open and our awareness expand only so far and so often before we must conclude that we are somehow more than we once believed.

How much more? This is for each of us to discover, walking the path at our own pace. The general direction, however, seems clear. Gradually, as our practice continues, **the fact of our unity becomes more real and powerful to us than the belief in our separateness.**

We may discover this in the course of ordinary daily work. In a demanding situation we may quietly affirm the fact of unity and suddenly see a breakthrough or insight follow as a result. Or we may come to recognize how our relationship with others has altered; how much more aware we are now of what we have in common than what once seemed to have set us apart.

Or we may experience moments of enlightenment or revelation which defy description. These may be more difficult for us to understand. They may happen instantaneously, and then become less vivid, and fade away. But their impact is such that they are never forgotten, and everything thereafter looks different. In referring to these transcendent moments, some speak of having lost a sense of the individual self altogether, or of having come to see, with undeniable certainty, that who we are is Spirit, beyond form. From such a vantage point, however it is described, **separateness is seen to be a creation of mind.** All really is One. Such is the testimony, in any case, of what has been "seen."

It is out of these transformative experiences that we find ourselves able to accept a number of seeming paradoxes. We are in the world but not of the world. We are a part of what is formless but we are in form. We exist beyond the polarities of positive and negative, dark and light, good and evil, pleasure and pain, yin and yang; but we function under their cloak as well. Even our perspective on separateness has changed. For while it may indeed be a "delusion of consciousness," even this delusion seems part of a greater order. It seems to be in the way of things that we develop our initial identification with a separate self and go on to get lost in it. It seems also to be in the way of things that we ultimately come to appreciate this predicament and go on to resolve it. We do so, however, not by returning to an innocence which existed before we felt ourselves to be separate. Rather we grow toward integration, a balance in which we can work within our separateness while resting in the greater unity which lies beyond it.

Separateness is there...to be awakened out of. Service is a perfect vehicle for this awakening.

We look at our present condition now with great compassion for ourselves and for the work we have taken on. We see the beauty of our humanity in the light of our divinity. From this vision comes a fullness of heart and a profound willingness and eagerness to come to one another's support.

~

*O, that my priest's robe were wide enough
to gather up all the suffering people
In this floating world.*

RYOKAN

~

Ultimately, on this journey, we simply become compassion, as a natural conse-

quence of what we have seen and understood.

~

Once his brother asked Ryokan to visit his house and speak to his delinquent son. Ryokan came but did not say a word of admonition to the boy. He stayed overnight and prepared to leave the next morning. As the wayward nephew was lacing up Ryo-kan's sandals, he felt a drop of warm water. Glancing up, he saw Ryokan looking down at him, his eyes full of tears. Ryokan then returned home, and the nephew changed for the better.

One Rose, One Bowl, JOHN STEVENS

~

What once seemed work now can be a kind of play...recreation...a joyous participation in the unfoldment of life and form.

~

I watch these little kindergarten kids, all eager and into their little world, and sometimes they dissolve into little molecules, bounding around, vital and energetic, and the classroom becomes a kind of organism. And it's so wonderful and comical and so great that, for a moment, I see the whole human condition that way. It's all like a joyous creation in which the gods and goddesses are taking delight. So why shouldn't we? And I'll just plunge into the dance. "Clara, you take the triangle, Margo you have the drum, Stevie has a whistle," and I pick up the tambourine.

Sometimes I'll carry this feeling home with me, and I have it around the house. I feel it at work inside. I'm cleaning up, and calling this friend and that, and dropping in on a person down the hall, and helping them out with whatever. And it's like the only reason to be here at all is to play. And the fact that this take on things makes me and everyone else feel so

good will make me stop for a moment and think, "My God. Maybe it's true."

~

This is the vision spiritual traditions offer: service as a journey of awakening. The value of such a perspective on our work is not so much that it leads to exalted states and indescribable experiences. It is enough that it can help keep us straight.

Nothing is "spiritual" just by calling it so. "Unity" will finally mean something to us only as the felt truth of direct experience. But this seems to be where it is so often revealed: in what is most familiar to us as human beings, in what we can most readily understand and appreciate because we find it so touching, comforting, and uplifting. We find it in the power and beauty of a single, simple caring act.

~

Take a look around. We're the only building left on the block. All the rest is rubble from urban renewal. We got some renewal going on here, though. We call it Project Return. I helped set it up, but now it has a life of its own.

What's going on at this moment, as you can see, is what you might call Bilingual Bingo, what with the different languages and accents some of these elderly people speak. Look at it. Sometimes it'll take five minutes for a single number to get around the room. Different languages; some folks are a little deaf or distracted or confused; two ladies are into an argument; this one is always cheating; three people yelling "Bingo!" when we haven't even pulled enough numbers for it. It's insane; it's just great. And don't tell me this isn't how the whole world is running, by the way. I see this as an average situation. Excuse me -- Richard, Mrs. Schwartz is looking for her coat.

So...these boys moving around like

waiters at a fancy restaurant, flirting up these old ladies, putting on their sweaters, reminding them of their numbers...these guys were heavy. I mean heavy. Years of crime, dope, doing time. They're in a program called Prodigal. Last shot for rehabilitation. Miss this one, you're done; no more programs. And I bring them over here to this Senior Citizens Center to give them a chance to make that last step home by looking out for someone beside themselves. Because maybe this center's a last shot for some of the old folks too. Last shot for companionship, last shot before dying, alone. Both groups on the edge -- why not bring them together?

Of course, people were a little skeptical at first. "Ex-junkies, ex-cons, helping old ladies? You gotta be crazy. They're out there mugging them, man," is what they said initially. Then I'd say, "I see that, but think about it a little more. How are we going to stop this madness? I see something in this idea for everybody. Chance to break out of the old patterns. We'll pull every-body just a little more out of their thing." Well, it was different enough for them to give it a chance...as simple as the idea really is.

So look around. There's so much life here I think it's going to explode sometimes. And strange moments too. Some guy comes up to me and says, "That lady over there, she looks like someone I done one time." I say, "Go ask her if there's anything she needs." And he does. And I'm amazed. I can't believe it myself, and I set up this scene, this crazy little world here. I mean, the idea came around anyway. The old people and the kids, they're actually doing it. Talk to them, listen to them.

I come to this center for company, I suppose, older women like myself. But I meet these boys here. Very interesting, very different than I expected. This young

man who walks me home, he's a very nice boy. His mother, she should be proud of how he acts with me. I know he's done wrong. Look, they did it to me. One kid once put a gun to my head and went for my diamond ring and wedding band. He bit my finger to try to get it off. But you know what? I wasn't angry. Maybe he never had any parents -- who knows what happened when he was very young, who knows?

I had some terrible experiences when I was young. Poverty and war. World War I. I was ten years old. The Germans dropped bombs. A woman jumped on me to protect me. Her body was ripped in half. She saved my life. I was very frightened after that. I'm frightened now. But I'm grateful for life, although it's a little lonely.

But this boy...he walks me home. He helps with my groceries. He says, "Wear lipstick, a nice dress. You're very pretty. You should get married again, a nice lady like you. That man in the center, he wants to get married again." "He's not good enough for me," I say. "You're right," he says, "Marry me." "You're good enough," I say. "But an old Jewish lady and a young black criminal? What would they think?"

I don't know what he sees in me, to be so nice. All I know, he walks me home. We talk and joke. I learn things about how things are in the world now, which I don't know much anymore. And I don't get the feeling that I'm just a little old Jewish lady. You think that's nothing? You know how many other people I don't feel like a little old lady with? None. Nobody. That's the truth. How's that?

~

Try to shake having been a junkie and done time, man. Everywhere you go, you get that. That's who you are. But this woman, it's like she doesn't care. She says she had a hard life too, maybe that's it. I told her how I robbed things. I told

her about jail. She says, "Your mother must have been very upset. Let's get groceries. You have time to do that?" Nobody ever treated me like I had anything to give. Just to take. So that's all I ever did. Take.

Never knew my folks, started in when I was nine, four juvenile institutions, two escapes, on the street at twelve, dealt heroin, burglary; by fourteen I had my own car and apartment. Got caught. Did a three-year bid in prison. Had to stay in the hole because people try to sodomize me. One guy stopped some other heavy guy trying to sodomize me and got cut bad doing it, cut real bad. Only time anybody risked anything for me.

This woman, she showed me something. I seen jive courage, but she's brave, living all alone, being old. She doesn't recognize just how much she understands about life. Ain't nobody ask her questions anymore now, so she forgets how much she knows. I ask her questions. I'm curious. She's interesting. We learn things together just looking around on the street. We have a good time. And I done a lot of time.

Old or young, no difference. I'm twenty-five and I feel old. My voice sound old on the phone, they say. So old people, I understand their situation a little. They're scared, I been scared. They live alone, like in a cell. I lived alone, in a cell. So this place, this attitude toward life they got going in this center, it's showing me some things. And this woman too. I'm not who I always thought I was being with her, just walking her home. Her too, probably. It's like you're free for that period. I said, "You're going to have me born again." She said, "That's not for Jews." I've done enough time. I've done enough taking. Time to be free.

~
Here we are, in the end, fellow beings on the journey. We come together or are

brought together in so many ways. Some seem extraordinary: a clown peers into the crib of a child burned beyond recognition: a literacy tutor and a prisoner in solitary keep a conversation going through a food hatch in the midst of a small riot: a North American nun and a Nicaraguan revolutionary lie together in the road, awaiting possible death.

Others seem as simple as these are dramatic and still are as powerful: a social worker and a bag lady sit together in the park in the rain; an old Japanese man comforts a drunk on a train; a therapist and a patient hear a bird.

And sometimes the circumstances are so ordinary we think nothing of them at all, or only in rare flashes appreciate the beauty of their everydayness: putting a child to sleep; talking to a neighbor waiting for the light to turn green; exchanging glances with a fellow overworked employee.

Here we are then in these forms, helping within our appointed roles, easing the pain of body, heart, and mind, working for peace and justice. And yet in the course of all this, we really **do** go beyond identification with all that would define us as "other." We really **do** meet behind our separateness. And for however long that lasts, such meeting is what helps...helps at the level of being...is help itself. We are sharing the experience of unity. We are walking each other home.

There is no reason why we cannot bring this quality to any human exchange. Any act that can be performed in the spirit of unity can turn out to be helpful.

There's no place special we have to be in order to help out. Right where we are, in whatever we're already doing, the opportunity to be of service is almost always present. We need only stay conscious and aware, and then give whatever we can to whoever is right there.

It only remains to add that we can be helping immeasurably when we are all alone. Each moment in which one of us grows in the awareness of our unity and divinity blesses us all. "We" are becoming that much more aware. While the action that comes from that awareness is critical, this moment of growth in true compassion is helpful **in itself**.

Meanwhile, it's useful to hear how much helping is taking place and just how much it can mean.

~

I tell you I would have died but for the friendships.

The doctors had just about given up. Forget it for having any will to live. I can't begin to describe the despair. Beyond the relentless physical pain, there was this utter emptiness of heart and soul. Each morning felt like waking up in hell -- can you understand that? -- every morning, feeling that way, like it was the first time?

And yet people came and called and cared and stayed. And each gesture came to feel almost miraculous to me. And there were moments when I would say, "You just don't know what this means to me."

And they didn't! They couldn't, or wouldn't. Isn't that wild? They really didn't see it. They really didn't recognize just how much their ordinary expressions of love would do for me.

On the one hand, I thought it was wonderful that they wouldn't make a big deal out of something that seemed so simple for them, just showing up. But on the other hand, I wanted to shake them, and say, "Do you know how beautiful you are! Won't you see?" As if they were angels who had forgotten.

~

In the incredible power of what seems such a simple act, we are reminded of what a precious gift we have received and

can pass on. What we offer, and what can be welcomed with such gratitude and wonder, is a glimpse of our common divinity revealed in an ordinary act of kindness which any of us can perform.

Helping out is not some special skill. It is not the domain of rare individuals. It is not confined to a single part or time of our lives. We simply heed the call of that natural caring impulse within, and follow where it leads us.

~

I was a housewife and a mother, and when the kids got bigger, I was looking for something else to do. I wanted to give. But I had a good deal of self-doubt, not knowing really what I could do for anyone else, unsure of who I was, you might say.

But I was willing to try, and I see now that this was enough. Very often something just comes right in front of you. Like for me, it was an ad in the newspaper: "If you love animals, come volunteer at the Zoo." And it clicked, and I went, and I became a guide there.

We started an Outreach program, to bring animals to people who could never come to us. We'd bring them in twos -- two birds, two mammals, two reptiles. The snake we'd show next to last. We'd end with a dove.

We'd take them to nursing homes, hospitals for incurable diseases, children's wards, burn units, mental hospitals. Places where people are very sick, or lost, or dying. They'll never go anyplace else again. They've lost interest, given up on life itself. I was very shocked by that; it hurt me.

But I witnessed things I'd never dreamed of when I answered that ad.

In one mental hospital we went to a group known as "the boys." "The boys" can be aged eighteen to forty-eight, but with a mental capability from infant to two

or three years. They were constantly undressing, or urinating, naked as the day they were born. I had a ferret. One boy came running, yelling, "Touch! touch! touch!" I said, "You can touch him later." But when we got around to it, the feeling had left him. I just wanted to die. Tears streamed down my face. I'd missed it. Oh, did I miss it! But I've never missed it again.

In a cancer ward, a man refused to come out of his room. He was bitter and angry. Shame was in him. He heard there were animals so he was just a little curious. So this time, right away, I said, "Would you like to touch?" "Oh, sure, sure," he said sarcastically. "With these hands?" He thrust them in my face; there were no fingers left. Then he just looked down at the floor. I felt terrible, but I said, "Here, then -- with your palms." And he began to let us help. With each animal he became softer. For once, there was something beside his illness. He began to cry. "This is so beautiful," he said. "I will never forget this." He became so warm.

A woman in a nursing home had been talking only nonsense for many, many years, as long as people could remember. She gabbed and played patty-cake. I had an opossum. I said, "They're really nature's garbage collectors." She looked up and said, "If that's the case, lady, you better tell them to join the union." She laughed and went back to patty-cake.

Working with snakes can be very powerful. They represent original sin and evil and death for many. Once, in a mental ward, we asked if we could show a snake; anyone could leave if they wanted to. They all agreed to stay. But when one man saw the snake, he began to wail and shriek. "This is evil, this is evil," he cried. "Shall we leave?" I asked. "No, let me try," he answered. He tried very hard. He began to touch, then scream, then touch, then

scream. "Look," I finally said. "Say anything, but *quietly*. You're scaring the hell out of us." We spent five minutes of touch-and-scream. Then it was over. "Oh...." he said at the end, as he touched. "Oh, it feels so beautiful, the snake, it feels like gold." Horrible impressions all rolled up into serpents had gone out of him. Evil turned into gold. He had been healed of fear by the very animal that's supposed to have seduced us out of Eden.

It's just something to behold; it's as if you're in the presence of little miracles. To see another person feel the beauty of life. To see their pain transformed. To see an anguished face begin to soften. I never had been touched like this before.

All you're doing is coming in with help in your hands. It's not basically the animals even. It's something about life. The professionals notice that too. They get inspired. I've seen a few of them cry -- cry for the patients, maybe for themselves, maybe at what they see happening. Their work is very hard, you know. I once noticed a doctor, holding some instruments, look at a bird in my hand. Then he looked at his instruments for a long time, it seemed. Then we looked at each other.

You couldn't pay me for what I get out of it. To think...just by answering an ad. You see, my childhood was very ugly. I was born in the wrong country at the wrong time with the wrong religion -- a Jew in Germany during Hitler times. There was death all around. I was treated lower than the lowest animals. They could kill me anytime. We had no rights. Dogs had rights, but not Jews. We were exterminated, the way you exterminate insects. I was so very bitter for so very long. But I have learned compassion and forgiveness from what I have seen.

I was once in a criminal forensic unit in a mental institution. There you have what I

considered animals, that did murders in the most gruesome way. I recognized some of them from the papers. Each of them I had condemned to death. They should be put in an electric chair. They should be eliminated.

But when I was in that unit, I learned a deep lesson. Here I was, face to face, enjoying life's creatures with human beings I had condemned to death. I looked around and said to myself, "Who are you to have condemned?" And suddenly I felt such forgiveness and understanding -- for them, for myself, for everyone. For everyone.

So it has been a journey from fear and hate to love of all creation. Without question. And a journey of wonder, too -- wonder in that I'm amazed, and wonder like I don't really understand it all, and how it's happened. I'm just grateful, to whoever or whatever is responsible for it all. Just very grateful.

~

Perhaps, finally, we can trust a little more -- both ourselves and the process. We have much more to offer than we may realize. All we have to do is ask "How can I help?" with an open heart, and then really listen.

~

You ask yourself what helping is, or who helps, or what helps, and how much, and when are you, and when aren't you...and the whole conversation can get a little dizzy. What you're talking about is something you really understand instinctively, but the words can start to have a life of their own. Not that it isn't a wonderful topic. But there's always the potential for it all turning into the tea party in Alice in Wonderland.

I get evidence of this in a phone call one day. I am talking to a woman who is working for the Gallup poll. She's actually doing a poll on how much time

people spend helping. She's trying to explain the criteria. I finally start to crack up, seeing something of the absurdity of it all.

"You all are crazy! 'How much time are people helping?' What kind of question is that? Tell Gallup he's nuts!"

She started to laugh as well. "I know. That's what I said too. What can I tell you? It's a job." She was sort of whispering, which made me laugh more. We got into this conspiratorial, infectious laughter at it all.

When we stopped laughing, I asked, "Was that helping?"

She said, "I guess so, sort of. Why was it?"

*I said, "That's **your** job. You tell **me** why." And then I threw in, "We were trying to make the best of a nutty situation. In fact, that's what I'm trying to do all the time. That's it -- I want you to put me down in the Gallup poll as someone who helps all the time."*

More laughter. She said, "We don't have a category for 'All the Time.'"

"Oh ye of little faith."

"But we do have a line here that says, 'All of the Above.'"

(At this point I didn't know if she was kidding, but I went for it.) "Perfect. Put me down under 'All of the Above.' I am very All-of-the-Above. In fact, you have to put everybody down under 'All of the Above.' Everybody's trying to make the best of a nutty situation. Gallup can release a poll saying 'Everybody in America Is Helping.'"

"God," she said, "I wish I had the nerve. Maybe I'll do it with alternate answers. 'One Out of Every Two People in America Is Helping.' The other half is being helped."

By this point we were just in love with the idea of throwing the topic back into blessed confusion, which is where it really is

anyhow. Finally, we said goodbye.

"It's been great, "I said.

"Very helpful," she agreed.

Months later, there's a story in the newspaper: Gallup Poll Reveals Half of All Americans Help Out as Volunteers. Right there in the paper. She did it! She pulled it off!

I rush into the kitchen reading the headline to my wife. "That's me!" I exclaim.

"Which half?" says my very formidable and wonderful wife.

"All of the Above!" I answer triumphantly.

"Just wash the dishes," she replies.

~