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*Let us not become  
 weary in doing good,  
 for at the proper time  
 we will reap a harvest  
 if we do not give up.*

Gal. 6:9, NIV



## DO YOU HAVE COMPASSION FATIGUE OR JOY IN SERVICE?

### COMPASSION FATIGUE

One day, after attending a meeting of Adventist Community Services leaders and church administrators, a leader who was there with me commented that he wished there had been more joy expressed as they gave their presentations, their reports, and shared about their service. There appeared to be a heaviness, an attitude that it sometimes seemed overwhelming to serve God on behalf of others. That comment really hit me and is the catalyst for this article.

In my sometimes hectic life of service, I have occasionally felt this heaviness, this lack of joy. In fact I recently caught myself praying the following prayer when I was especially tired at the end of a busy work day:

“Lord, sometimes I get so tired serving You and Your people on this planet. This can’t go on. It is too much for me. I’ve got my regular employment at the General Conference, traveling, and additional responsibility to care for my in-laws when I’m not working at the GC. And there is the rest of my family, my children’s issues, and nurturing my relationship with my husband, as well as community service in conjunction with my church. And I must spend 30 hours/week studying to be a Certified Senior Advisor, and I must finish writing my latest book, and I must. . . . There is no end to it all, Lord—always more than I can handle. It’s too much! Lord, help me—please! Amen.”

This is a strange prayer from someone who is supposed to inspire others to serve God and people. I am reminded constantly that I can’t do it on my own, and sometimes I find myself bending under the load of service. Jesus’ followers have been given the task to do Jesus’ work—which is presented in Luke 4:18—“He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted. . . .”

“BUT Lord, I need healing. I feel broken. My life is out of balance and out of harmony with itself. I have compassion fatigue. There is so much need all around

me that I become overwhelmed and desensitized. I am tired, Lord!”

Sometimes compassion fatigue can be an attitude issue, as is shown by some people portrayed in Isaiah 58. God is not happy with His people because they are asking, “Why have we fasted, . . . and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” (vs. 3, NIV).

Whining—that’s what that is. In today’s lingo, their whining might sound like this: “Lord, can’t you see what I’m going through?! I’m tired of this! I have been serving you for 40 years. There is no joy in doing this! The only joy I get is when others notice and give me credit. That includes You, Lord. Sometimes it seems like I’m so alone in serving you. Why don’t others help too? And, sometimes it seems that people don’t appreciate what I do for them.”

One morning for our couple worship, my husband and I read a statement that I knew was especially for me: “We need to beware of self-pity. Never indulge the feeling that you are not esteemed as you should be, that your efforts are not appreciated, that your work is too difficult. Let the memory of what Christ has endured for us silence every murmuring thought. We are treated better than was our Lord.”<sup>a</sup>

Then there is Psalm 100:2 (KJV), which exclaims, “Serve the Lord with gladness!” Joy and service belong together—like a horse and carriage!

Many times we have viewed service as an obligation rather than an opportunity. When our lives are overtaxed and out of balance and harmony, the obligation part might overshadow the opportunity part. Joy is hard to come by when you are worn and tired.

### JOY IN SERVICE – HOW CAN IT HAPPEN?

To experience joy when serving God and others, our

priorities need to be in the following order:

1. God (my inner self must be in order and in tune with God)
2. Family
3. Work /service

Not only must priorities be in a certain order—these general priorities need to be in harmony with each other—as the individual parts of pleasant music. Dissonance and imbalance between them will diminish the joy of living and of service.

*Priority #1—God*—is the melody line in life’s song. When He takes the lead in our lives and we have regular time with Him in Bible study, prayer, and Sabbath observance, our family and our work/service will be infused with joy. “In thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.” (Psalm 16:11, KJV).

“Nothing is more needed in our work than the practical results of communion with God.”<sup>b</sup> After we have absorbed the joy in His presence during our intentional devotional time, we can continue the practice of His joyful presence all day as we work side-by-side with Him. Don’t work *for* Jesus—work *with* Him! Now, that’s joy!

*Priority #2—Family* deserves our quality time. One prominent church leader told me that he took no vacations with his family, and he is reaping the results because his children felt that God and the church took Daddy from them. Jesus said to His “family:” “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31, NIV). Everything won’t fall apart if you do so. If you don’t come apart—you will fall apart! There is no joy in that!

*Priority #3—Work/service.* Put reasonable boundaries on your service and factor in your relationship with God and your family. Then with the strength given to you from Christ (Phil 4:13) – serve Him with gladness (Ps 100:2) – with JOY! When needs are overwhelming, and we feel we are not successful in making a difference, and are not making an impact in our work and service, remember the words of Mother Theresa: “God has not called me to be successful. He has called me to be faithful. And I do what I can each day in faithful accountability to God.”<sup>c</sup> Not worrying and leaving the results with God surely makes me more light-hearted and joyful as I serve Him.

Another way to have joy in service is to love and respect the people whom we serve. Several years ago, I heard an unhappy missionary complaining about how stupid the people were in the country where he was serving. I felt like telling him, “Why don’t you go home, then, so you can be happier!” When we look at the people we serve through love and respect “glasses,” we will discover a joy in serving them that we might not have without these “glasses.” Otherwise we might get mad at them and end up serving the Lord with MADNESS!

### EXCITING INFORMATION ABOUT JOY AND SERVICE

With priorities in place—and with joy, serve God with the whole of your joyful heart! Both joy and service bring many blessings in their train. Joy gives us health (Prov 17:22) and strength (Neh 8:10), as does service: “The pleasure of doing good to others imparts a glow to the feelings which flashes to the nerves, quickens the circulation of the blood, and induces mental and physical health.”<sup>d</sup> “Doing good is a work that benefits both giver and receiver.”<sup>e</sup> When we serve with joy, we have double benefits!

In *WIN! Wellness: Integrated Balanced Living*,<sup>f</sup> John, Millie, and Wes Youngberg share several examples of the health benefits of joy and service. For example, a study of 3,296 volunteers performing acts of kindness established a clear cause-and-effect relationship between helping and good health. A happy feeling accompanies kind acts. Helping contributes to maintaining good health, and it can diminish the effect of both serious and minor diseases and disorders, psychological and physical.

After performing a kind act, the volunteers sensed a rush of euphoria, followed by a longer period of calm. Dr. Allan Luks calls this feeling “helper’s high.” We call it joy. The body’s natural painkillers, the endorphins, are released when helping occurs.<sup>g</sup>

The best way to counteract depression is to find the joy of service. After the depression recorded in the first part of Isaiah 58, Isaiah recommends to these depressed ones a life of unselfish service (Isa 58:6-7). Then he exuberantly breaks into joy: “Then your light will break forth like the dawn, your healing will quickly appear (vs. 8, NIV) . . . , and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like the noonday” (vs. 10, NIV).

Try it! You’ll like it!

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<sup>a</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1909), p. 476.

<sup>b</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 512.

<sup>c</sup> Quoted by Lilya Wagner, *Caring Is Not a Spectator Sport* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1986), p. 57.

<sup>d</sup> Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1952), p. 303.

<sup>e</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2 (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1948), p. 534.

<sup>f</sup> John B. Youngberg, Millie Youngberg, Wesley Youngberg, *WIN! Wellness: Integrated Balanced Living* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: WIN! Wellness, 2007).

<sup>g</sup> Allan Lukes and Peggy Payne, *The Healing Power of Doing Good*, 1991. (Quoted in WIN! Wellness, p. 177).

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