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. He seemed broken-hearted 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 worn out and needed a break:

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 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 my relationship in 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 myself. 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 it?” (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 other people 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: “Lord—serve with gladness (Ps 100:2)– with joy, Your love forever!” When needs are overwhelming, and we feel like telling Him, “Why don’t you go home, then, Lord?” that’s when we can use that verse of Isaiah 58:10–14 to help us. “Then you will call out and it will be as the noonday, your healing will quickly appear (vs. 8, 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 your family in service with God and for your family. Even then with the strength given to you to carry this burden, how can you be happy when you aren’t successful? Yet you must, as is shown by some people portrayed in Isaiah 58. 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.”

After 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 the body’s natural painkillers, the endorphins, are released when helping occurs. 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 exhortingly breaks into joy! “Then your light shall 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 shine like the noonday” (vs. 10, NIV).

Try it! You’ll like it!

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.” “Doing good is a work that benefits both giver and receiver.” When we serve with joy, we have double benefits!

In WIN! Wellness: Integrated Balanced Living,1 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.

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