

“Helping, Fixing and Serving”
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Rachel Naomi Remen is a writer on spirituality and meaning. You may recognize her name from her best-selling books, Kitchen Table Wisdom and My Grandfather’s Blessings, about the wisdom she received from her Jewish grandfather. Her life’s work has focused on the importance of relationship in healing. She relates the following in an essay called, “Helping, Fixing or Serving?”

Harry, an emergency physician, tells a story about discovering [the meaning of serving]. One evening on his shift in a busy emergency room, a woman was brought in about to give birth. When he examined her, Harry realized immediately that her obstetrician would not be able to get there in time and he was going to deliver this baby himself. Harry likes the technical challenge of delivering babies, and he was pleased.

The team swung into action, one nurse hastily opening the instrument packs and two others standing at the foot of the table on either side of Harry, supporting the woman’s legs on their shoulders and murmuring reassurance. The baby was born almost immediately. While the infant [girl] was still attached to her mother, Harry laid her along his left forearm. Holding the back of her head in his left hand, he took a suction bulb in his right and began to clear her mouth and nose of mucous.

Suddenly, the baby opened her eyes and looked directly at him. In that instant, Harry stepped past all of his training and realized a very simple thing: that he was the first human being this baby girl had ever seen. He felt his heart go out to her in welcome from all people everywhere, and tears came to his eyes.

Harry has delivered hundreds of babies, and has always enjoyed the excitement of making rapid decisions and testing his own competency. But he says that he had never let himself experience the meaning of what he was doing before, or recognize what he was serving with his expertise. In

that flash of recognition, he felt years of cynicism and fatigue fall away and remembered why he had chosen this work in the first place. All his hard work and personal sacrifice suddenly seemed to him to be worth it.

He feels now that, in a certain sense, this was the first baby he ever delivered. In the past he had been preoccupied with his expertise, assessing and responding to needs and dangers. He had been there many times as an expert, but never before as a human being. He wonders how many other such moments of connection to life he has missed. He suspects there have been many.

When we first think of helping, fixing and serving, these actions might seem to be similar. All three begin with the desire to make someone's life better. But as Remen explains, when we explore the effects of each of these on how we connect with others, we see that the differences are profound. She continues,

As Harry discovered, serving is different from fixing. In fixing, we see others as broken, and respond to this perception with expertise. Fixers trust their own experience but may not see the wholeness in another person or trust the integrity of the life in them. Fixing is a form of judgment that separates us from one another. (Remen, "Zen Hospice")

In the Compassionate Listening work I'm doing, and that some members of the congregation are also doing, we see the sacredness of another person's journey, and trust that they have within themselves the capacity, more than anyone else ever could, the capacity, to find their own way, to gain their own insights. Insights that are uniquely suited to them. We can think of that person as driving their own vehicle. When we have the desire to help or fix, offering suggestions and ideas in responding to their situation, we're in effect grabbing their steering wheel and turning it the way that WE think they should go.

Years ago, I tried very hard to help people who talked about their problems or frustrations, and I would think of great ideas for how they could deal with them. I was perplexed when, most of the time, they didn't seem to appreciate how perfect my solutions were for them! Now, of course, I understand why.

Even though we probably have the best of intentions, when we help or fix, we are not respecting that person's wholeness and their journey, and we are allowing our egos to convince us that we know better than they do. Remen continues,

When we serve, we see and trust that wholeness. We respond to it and collaborate with it. And when we see the wholeness in another, we strengthen it. They may then be able to see it for themselves for the first time.

This is exactly what we do in compassionate listening. After a person shares their story, we reflect back to them what we've heard. We ask questions to help them clarify their feelings and values. Often, that person gains insight into their situation. This happens as a result of our serving their needs, rather than our own need to feel competent or useful. Remen explains,

Helping, fixing and serving represent three different ways of seeing life. When you help, you see life as weak. When you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole. Fixing and helping may be the work of the ego, and service the work of the soul.

Service rests on the premise that the nature of life is sacred, that life is a holy mystery which has an unknown purpose. When we serve, we know that we belong to life and to that purpose. From the perspective of service, we are all connected: All suffering is like my suffering and all joy is like my joy. The impulse to serve emerges naturally and inevitably from this way of seeing.

Serving is different from helping. Helping is not a relationship between equals. A helper may see others as weaker than they are, needier than they are, and people often feel this inequality. The danger in helping is that we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity or even wholeness.

Even if someone is grateful to us for our help or advice, we have not conveyed to them that they have the power to manage their own lives; but rather the opposite. That they are incapable. They have found an answer from outside

themselves, not within themselves. Our good intentions, then, are actually disempowering. As Remen points out,

When we help, we become aware of our own strength. But when we serve, we don't serve with our strength; we serve with ourselves... When I help, I have a feeling of satisfaction, but when I serve, I have a feeling of gratitude. (Remen, "Zen Hospice"). [In serving], we draw from all of our experiences. Our limitations serve; our wounds serve; even our darkness can serve. My pain is the source of my compassion; my woundedness is the key to my empathy.

If we respond to another's pain or needs by saying, "Hey, something similar happened to me! Let me tell you about it," we've shifted the focus back to ourselves. The idea of serving is not to assume that we've had the same experience, but to allow what has happened in our lives to open our compassion for other people.

Remen reflects on a brief, but meaningful encounter she had as a young woman. She says,

At 29, because of Crohn's disease, much of my intestine was removed surgically and I was left with an ileostomy. A loop of bowel opens on my abdomen and an ingeniously designed plastic appliance which I remove and replace every few days covers it. Not an easy thing for a young woman to live with, and I was not at all sure that I would be able to do this. While this surgery had given me back much of my vitality, the appliance and the profound change in my body made me feel hopelessly different, permanently shut out of the world of femininity and elegance.

At the beginning, before I could change my appliance myself, it was changed for me by nurse specialists called enterostomal therapists. These white-coated experts were women my own age. They would enter my hospital room, put on an apron, a mask and gloves, and then remove and replace my appliance. The task complete, they would strip off all their protective clothing. Then they would carefully wash their hands. This elaborate ritual made it harder for me. I felt shamed.

One day a woman I had never met before came to do this task. It was late in the day and she was dressed not in a white coat but in a silk dress, heels and stockings. She looked as if she was about to meet someone for dinner. In a friendly way she told me her first name and asked if I wished to have my ileostomy changed.

When I nodded, she pulled back my covers, produced a new appliance, and in the most simple and natural way imaginable removed my old one and replaced it, without putting on gloves. I remember watching her hands. She had washed them carefully *before* she touched me. They were soft and gentle and beautifully cared for. She was wearing a pale pink nail polish and her delicate rings were gold.

At first, I was stunned by this break in professional procedure. But as she laughed and spoke with me in the most ordinary and easy way, I suddenly felt a great wave of unsuspected strength come up from someplace deep in me, and I knew without the slightest doubt that I could do this. I could find a way. It was going to be all right.

I doubt that she ever knew what her willingness to touch me in such a natural way meant to me. In ten minutes she not only tended my body, but healed my wounds. What is most professional is not always what best serves and strengthens the wholeness in others.

Fixing and helping create a distance between people, an experience of difference. We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch. Fixing and helping are strategies to repair life. We serve life not because it is broken but because it is holy.

Serving requires us to know that our humanity is more powerful than our expertise...

Service is not an experience of strength or expertise; service is an experience of mystery, surrender and awe... Those who serve have traded a sense of mastery for an experience of mystery, and in doing so have transformed their work and their lives into practice.

The practice of service gives our lives meaning. It connects us to mystery and ultimately, to all that is.

I close with these words by Rabindranath Tagore: "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy." May it be so.