

an excerpt from

The Power of Serving Others
You Can Start Where You Are
by Gary Morsch and Dean Nelson

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Ask the Question

The ultimate aim of the quest must be neither release nor ecstasy for oneself, but the wisdom and the power to serve others.

Joseph Campbell¹

In Leo Tolstoy's short story "What Men Live By," an impoverished shoemaker encounters a naked man freezing to death on a Russian winter night. It turns out that the naked man is an angel who disobeyed God. He had been ordered by God to take the soul of a dying woman, but his action would have left two orphaned children; the angel did not want to carry out his instruction. The woman died anyway, and the angel was banished from heaven until he could find answers to three questions on earth: What is given to men? What is not given to men? What do men live by?

Through the compassion of the shoemaker and his wife, the angel learned the answer to the first question: What is given to men? *Love is given to all people, and dwells in their hearts.*

Through a boastful and demanding rich man, the angel learned the answer to the second question: What is not given to men? The man had ordered fancy boots, but died the same day and never wore them. *People are not given the knowledge of their own needs.*

The third question is the one most intriguing to me, because it is at the heart of everything we do. It is *the* question central to every human being: What do people live by?

What brings us meaning? What makes us live a life that matters, instead of one like the demanding rich man in Tolstoy's

story, who dies without knowing? The angel discovers the answer.

"I learned that man does not live by care for himself, but by love for others," the angel says, just before he is given his wings back. "When I came to earth as a man, I lived not by care for myself, but by the love that was in the heart of a passerby, and his wife, and because they were kind and merciful to me." Referring to the children left behind by the dying mother whose soul he refused to take, the angel said:

"The orphans lived not by any care they had for themselves; they lived through the love that was in the heart of a stranger. . . . And all men live, not by reason of any care they have for themselves, but by the love for them that is in other people. . . . It is by love for others that they really live."²

In Tolstoy's story, love for others is seen in how people serve others. Love for others is what we are to live by.

Growing up in a religious tradition, I was taught this principle and found it was true for me personally. As an adult who has been in every corner of the world, I have seen that love for others is universal to people of all faiths, as well as those who subscribe to no particular faith. We saw evidence in this in the aftermath of the tsunami that devastated Sri Lanka and Indonesia, as well as in the response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the United States.

As a relief worker and a physician, in some of the worst conditions imaginable, I see people helping others who are in need. Usually they are strangers to one another; often they are from different tribes, races, economic or social classes. What draws them together is that someone is in need and someone else is able to provide help.

With that experience in mind, I have come to the following conclusions:

1. Everyone has something to give.
2. Most people are willing to give when they see the need and have the opportunity.
3. Everyone can do something for someone right now.

University scientists who study the brain are discovering that serving others is as much a part of our genetic code as self-interest is. As a medical doctor, I have seen this firsthand. Kristen Monroe, a professor of political psychology at the University of California–Irvine, says that people act with altruism, a devotion to the welfare of others, when they see their common humanity. I have seen that to be true in the aftermath of hurricanes and wars and epidemics. When we see others as human beings, their needs become real to us, and we respond.

“The dominant mode in social science, evolutionary biology, psychology, and a lot of other fields is to assume that everybody is self-interested,” Professor Monroe said. “But that’s bad science. Altruism shows you that that isn’t true.”³

Researchers C. Daniel Batson and Nancy Eisenberg of Arizona State University have demonstrated that humans have a tendency toward altruistic behavior.⁴ Sociologist Linda Wilson suggests that altruism may be a basic survival instinct. Wilson studied more than a hundred natural disasters and found that victims helping other victims aided each other’s recovery. Victims who helped each other tended to avoid some of the psychological problems that would have otherwise been present, Wilson said.⁵

“The tendency to closely bond with others, acting for the welfare of others as well as oneself, may be deeply rooted in human nature, forged in the remote past as those who bonded together and became part of a group had an increased chance of survival,” said Howard Cutler in his book with the Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness*. Cutler, a medical doctor, said that studies find people most focused on themselves are more likely to have coronary heart disease, even when other behaviors are controlled.⁶ As a physician, I have seen this in my own practice.

After his family was killed in the Holocaust, Samuel Oliner, a sociologist at Humboldt State University, devoted his life to studying why people commit acts of violence and why people do good. His interest in why people do good was piqued as he studied rescuers of Jews from the Holocaust, Medal of Honor recipients, hospice volunteers, and rescuers from the 9/11 attacks.

“Without caring, compassion, and love, it is very tough to imagine that the world can come together,” he said. “Altruism may be the most potent antidote to a divided world.”⁷

Serving others has even been cited as a social necessity. Historian Daniel Boorstin said that colonial and frontier Americans formed groups to do for each other what they couldn’t do alone, out of a need for survival. Pilgrims pledged in the Mayflower Compact “to all care of each others good and of the whole by everyone and so mutually.”⁸ Serving others is written into our country’s history. More than two hundred years later, then–Vice President Al Gore said, at a conference on America’s future, “Volunteerism is good for the soul, and it’s good for the country.” Psychiatrist Alfred Adler said that melancholy could be cured in fourteen days if “you try to think every day how you can please someone.”⁹

While the scientific evidence shows we are wired toward altruism, there is still a choice involved. The beauty of the choice is that, when we choose to serve others, something wonderful happens.

When I first became a doctor, I knew that I wanted to spend part of each year with people who could not afford proper medical care. This desire came from observing my father. People who had been drinking too much would show up at our house, and my dad would make them something to eat. When he encountered a poor person he always gave them something, usually food or money.

I decided in medical school that I would devote time out of each year to practice medicine where people didn’t have adequate medical care. Each year I would pack duffel bags with medicine samples and head to a Third World country. I went for a few weeks to Chernobyl, China, India, and elsewhere by myself.

The seed of service was planted in me by watching my dad. He probably got it from watching his parents. Then it grew while I was in medical school, much like the small plant on the cover of this book.

The seed began to produce an oak tree when I made some

off-the-cuff comments at Rotary Club several years ago. The remarks resonated with the audience in a way I could not have anticipated, and the response resulted in my leaving full-time medical practice and starting a global humanitarian agency.

The comments to Rotarians came after I had spent a few weeks in a Cambodian refugee camp, treating as many people as time and supplies allowed. As I sat at a table with local business people, our leader announced that the day's speaker had cancelled at the last minute. "Perhaps Dr. Morsch could tell us about his work in Cambodia."

Walking to the microphone, I had no idea what I was going to say—but I never turn down an opportunity to speak in public about a topic that means so much to me. That day I told the group about the refugees and their horrible conditions. The people in the audience were able to think about the refugees as human beings, not statistics or news stories. I then tossed out a challenge. I didn't know I was going to do it. I wasn't preaching, I was just dreaming out loud.

"Why don't we, who are more prosperous than 98 percent of the rest of the world, find a group or a place or a project to commit to, and do something to help relieve someone's suffering?"

I went back to my table.

"Just tell me when to show up and what I need to bring" was the immediate and overwhelming response.

Within a few weeks we identified a YMCA building in Belize that had been damaged in a hurricane and remained uninhabitable. It had been used as a community center, an educational building, and a public health clinic. Our Rotary chapter took up a collection, and a group of us flew to Belize and repaired the building. It became a place of community service again.

The people there were delighted and grateful. Some of the business people on that trip—men and women who led or had built very successful companies—told me this was the most significant thing they had ever done in their lives. They felt their lives *meant something* while they were doing something for

someone else. They had helped someone in a concrete way, and it made them feel alive. They didn't say it made them feel good. Lots of things can do that. This brought them to *life*.

It reminded me of the scene in the movie *City of Joy*, where Patrick Swayze plays the part of a successful surgeon who walks away from money and prestige at a Houston medical center to be a doctor in Calcutta. "I have never felt as *alive* as I feel right now," he declared. This is the human quest.

Philosopher Joseph Campbell said "People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."¹⁰

A year after our Belize trip, a group of us flew to Russia to take supplies to a hospital that was running low on nearly everything: needles, gauze, antibiotics, gloves. We could have sent the supplies, but we knew that taking them in person would be better. The response we got from the doctors, nurses, and patients confirmed that. It was one thing to be able to restock the shelves with painkillers and bandages. It was even more significant to the Russians that we cared enough to visit. This face-to-face service made the difference *in them and in us*. We felt that we had made friends for life with these folks who at one time were considered to be the "enemy."

Trips like this motivated me in 1992 to start Heart to Heart International, an organization that seeks out people in need, using mostly volunteers to help meet that need. The global response is always the same. People *want* to help others. They don't always know how. But they know that, given the opportunity, this is what gives life meaning. It's what we live by.

Pharmaceutical companies now overproduce certain products so that they can donate them to us when we do medical airlifts to regions of natural and economic disaster. Transportation companies factor our airlifts into their routes. The U.S. State Department gives us access to their jumbo cargo

planes so we can reach large groups of needy people around the world. Television stations call to ask if they can get the word out. Volunteers line up at the drop of a hat, willing, *wanting* to serve others. Because Heart to Heart uses so many volunteers, we keep overhead costs at 2 percent or less.

I didn't intend to start a humanitarian agency. I was asking the same question as the character in the Tolstoy story: What do we live by? What are we here to do? I discovered what he discovered, that love for others is what we live by, and I wanted to give others the opportunity to do the same.

My dad did small things for people. He showed me that service isn't limited to big dramatic acts. I never saw him rescue someone from a burning building, but I saw him do little things—offer rides, food, money, and time to people—every day. Serving was his lifestyle. It became mine. Who knew that my dad's lifestyle of service would grow into an international agency that gives people the chance to live as he did, only on a global scale?

I still work as a physician, but to accommodate my time with Heart to Heart, I work just a few days a month in small-town emergency rooms. The rest of my time is spent bringing medical products and volunteers together to meet needs throughout the world. I have worked with people who have suffered unfathomable atrocities and been in horrifying places that most folks work hard to avoid. I have seen people serve others in these situations, and witnessed how the action transformed both the person serving and the person being served.

At the end of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, after one of the brothers is convicted of killing his father, another brother burns with fever, and another brother commits suicide. Human corruption, betrayal, and violence become more severe with every page—Alyosha, the youngest brother, meets a group of children who are sad because one of their schoolmates died. Just as it appears that there will be no end to the boys' grief, and no end to the human suffering, and that they are all destined to a life of despair, Alyosha reminds the boys that they showed kindness to the boy who died, and that they should never forget

how that felt. He told them to remember: “Yes, there was a moment when I was good and kind and brave.”

“You needn’t be afraid of life,” he continues. “Life is so good when you do something that is good and just.”¹¹

The philosopher Huston Smith, one of the clearest thinkers I have ever read, said that the greatest power we can have in life is “the power to decide what we want to do with our lives, what we want to give them to.”¹²

In this book you will read about the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC; about an unspeakable act and a loving response in Kosovo; about the quiet revolution within a Black Panther revolutionary; and about a number of other encounters that reveal the good and just nature that is within each of us. They are stories that come from my experience and observations and that bear witness to the angel’s experience in Tolstoy’s story: We live by loving and serving others.

The stories in this book point to larger lessons and show people of all ages, income levels, and expertise how to find meaning and significance in their lives, wherever they are. The stories show that serving others is easier and more accessible than you might think. You’ll see examples of the way small seedlings sometimes become giant trees.

Through these stories I hope people will be able to see that the world—no matter how small, large, mundane, or terrifying it may appear—needs each of us to participate in it by serving others *with whatever we have at this moment*. Our service doesn’t have to change the world. But everyone’s world will change as we discover what Tolstoy’s angel discovered. We live by loving others. We love others by serving them.

I hope everyone can see the possibility of living this way. Writer Mitch Albom saw it when he began visiting his dying professor, Morrie, and recorded his experiences in the beautiful *Tuesdays with Morrie*. A sports writer, Albom was covering the Wimbledon tennis tournament, surrounded by other self-absorbed media people and athletes, when he remembered something Morrie told him.

“So many people walk around with a meaningless life,” Morrie had said. “They seem half-asleep, even when they’re busy doing things they think are important. This is because they’re chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.”

Albom considered this amid the crush of the obsessed player at Wimbledon and said, “I knew he was right. Not that I did anything about it.”¹³

Why is this such a difficult concept to grasp? Why do some people, like Mitch Albom at that time, recognize that the concept is right, and yet do nothing? Why don’t most of us *naturally* live this way of serving others? What are the obstacles to living at a level that is so easily attainable?

Perhaps the primary obstacle is fear of the unknown. We don’t know what we might get ourselves into. Things tend to be messier and more complicated than they first appear. We fear that serving others might take us where we lack the emotional energy to go.

Maybe the hesitation comes from an introverted personality. Some people are simply shy, and reaching out to others is extremely uncomfortable and seemingly intrusive. Mother Teresa did it, but she was an extrovert!

Perhaps people don’t serve others because they think they lack the time and money. Who has time to look to others’ needs when we’re running on empty ourselves? And, in a tightening economy, it seems there is little money left over once our obligations are met.

Maybe some don’t live in service because they simply don’t know what the needs of others are or what they could do—a lack of information.

Perhaps it is a lack of opportunity.

Maybe there is a perceived risk. With Mitch Albom, the risk of getting involved in Morrie’s life was that he knew he would be confronted with how self-absorbed and empty his life was.

Perhaps people don’t serve others because they may have

impure motives—suspecting they are hoping to get something out of it instead of coming from a pure desire to help others.

I think our motives are always going to be mixed.

Robert Coles, a Harvard professor, told Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement that he had misgivings about his motives for serving others. She said “If we were going to forbid hypocrites to work here with us, there’d be no one to do the work, and no one to do the forbidding!”¹⁴

But there’s at least one other reason why people don’t serve others, in my opinion, and I hope this book can change this perception:

People simply don’t know how easy this is!

In my years as a physician I have visited thousands of hospital and nursing home rooms. Not once have I seen a patient’s room decorated with a trophy, a plaque, a contract, or a bank statement that belonged to the patient. I have never seen a picture of a patient’s home or office in one of these rooms. But in almost every room I have seen cards sent by loved ones, pictures drawn by children and grandchildren, expressions of love and hope from the people who matter to them.

We don’t have to wait until we are in a hospital room to find out what’s really important to us. We can start paying attention now, caring for those around us, and providing hope.

This book does not contain seven steps or seven habits. It isn’t a soup for your soul. But it does have lessons—some counterintuitive—to make us seriously consider what we live by. The answers will vary for each of us, but the question is the same.

What do we live by? I trust you will discover some answers for yourself in the following pages. I believe you will see that you can start with something small, something that is in your hands right now. I hope this book will instruct, inspire, and encourage everyone to serve others. That will lead us to something we have been searching for all along.

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