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# The Disabled and Their Lives of Purpose

by

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Not long ago, I was asked by an elderly woman, "What good am I? I have always tried to spend my life helping others, but I am so crippled and old that I cannot always help myself anymore! I can't care for others, they have to care for me now. What use am I to myself or anyone else?"

This situation is not unusual for many physicians. We want to improve or maintain our patients' health, but we inevitably fail at some point, and may wonder, along with them, what good remains in their restricted lives? This question may be even more cogent when physical limitations exist even without ongoing physical suffering. I have a patient, a young boy, damaged at birth; now incapable of talking, walking, or feeding himself, yet he was adopted by a woman who wanted him just as he was. The staff in the hospital thinks she is wonderful, but also wonder what she is thinking.

In general, we all seek some definition of purpose in our lives. When we are younger, we want to find a grand plan, vision, or mission – a life's vocation. As we mature, we continue to seek a "purpose driven life" (as the large sales of the same-titled book confirm). Our purpose is often seen in our accomplishments, and we define ourselves accordingly – we are what we do. Yet it is troubling that, along the way, we so frequently encounter those who cannot count accomplishments in the same way. We see those whose deficiencies lend themselves to no particular ends. Even worse off are those whose disability (mental or physical, innate or acquired) keeps them from doing anything, for others or even for themselves. In a world focused on achievement and a particularly American sense of self-sufficiency, what are we to make of such people, such lives? It is understandable that we may look at those unable to do anything, not even

to feed themselves or interact with others, and question if such lives have any purpose. We may question why, if there is a loving God, He would bring such beings into existence and force them to live such meaningless lives – and sometimes we may also question why such lives are forced upon us. A meditation by the Beguine, Methchild of Magdeburg, may lead to a hint of an explanation. She quotes a purported beggar woman as saying:

Lord, I thank you that since in your love, you have taken from me all earthly riches, you now clothe and feed me through the goodness of others.... That since you have taken my sight from me, you serve me through the eyes of others. Lord, I thank you that since you have taken from me the strength of my hands and the strength of my heart, you now serve me with the hands and hearts of others.

She, who has lost most of her abilities, is given a gift by God – the assistance of others as a sign of His love and value for her. But the deeper insight follows from the beggar woman's subsequent prayer:

Lord, I pray for them. Reward them here on earth with your divine love so they may faithfully serve and please you with all virtues until they come to a happy end.

The beggar, the recipient of the good deeds of others, prays for their reward, their virtue, their faithful service. Yet what service could they do without her? What service should they do; how is it to be determined and measured out?

If we accept that God is Love, that He has only one single stance toward His creatures, that of unconditional love, can we also accept the implications? If God's attitude toward us is only a constant overwhelming love, are we not at a particular disadvantage? On the one hand, we must acknowledge that everything we have, not just our possessions and our fortunate circumstances, but even our abilities and talents that permit us to acquire the aforementioned – all these are a free gift from God. What then is a just and proper return? We can't truly make God happy any more than we can make Him sad or angry – He is beyond our control, and His attitude toward us is fixed – He gives us love alone, ours to accept or reject, but it is there, ever present. And knowing that through that love, and because of it, we have received everything else good about our lives, then what can we choose as a proper return?

At some time in our life, all of us have been the recipient of a gift whose largesse or unexpectedness catches us unprepared. If a friend or colleague were to be so overly generous on an occasion such as Christmas, we would feel the need to scramble to make some recompense. In such

situations, we usually do not have anything at hand that will do. This leaves us feeling awkward, and if the truth were known, even a little angry for being made to feel at such a disadvantage. But when it comes to God's love, we are all arch beggars – love is to be not only given but received, but we always receive more from God than we can repay. Moreover, how can we repay anything to the source of everything? Especially, how can we repay love to perfect Love? It is the ultimate “coals to Newcastle” frustration, or it could be. Instead, we have been instructed how repayment can be made – not directly to the source, but to each other, in the name of God. And not just to each other equally, but to those most in need, “the least of my brethren”.

It is at this point a certain Divine wisdom can be discerned and appreciated. Imagine a world where there were no inequities, no one disadvantaged when compared to others. How could we feel that doing for others as for ourselves was deeply meaningful? Giving could still be an expression of love, but we would have to admit that perfectly equal giving and receiving does not have the same impact as O. Henry's “Gift of the Magi.” Little is accomplished, for instance, in the exchange of luxury automobiles between two wealthy spouses. How much better, you might say, to give that money to charity. Yet charity needs a deserving object; to be most meaningful, it needs some sacrifice on the part of the giver, satisfying some real need on the part of the recipient. Without inequities, without real need, the equation remains unbalanced. We must seek out those in need, for our sakes as much as their own. Without them, our ability to grow in charitable virtue, and to find a way to partially repay all that we have been given, would be terribly frustrating. Seen this way, the lame, halt and blind, those disabled physically, mentally, or spiritually, are a profound need for us to have in our lives, truly more blessing than burden. And, those that find themselves so disabled, so in need of the goodness of others, should know that they are as much an integral part of God's plan as those who would serve them – perhaps more so. In this light, Christ's pronouncement that “the poor you will always have with you” is not a sign of discouragement, but a promise that God will always supply us with sufficient circumstance to work out our mutual salvation, that indeed there will always be someone we can help. In no other way can we help ourselves, in no other way can we even make a down payment on what we know we owe.

We must remember that the work is truly mutual, with a reciprocity of need and giving, present between us over time and in every relationship. Thus, givers become receivers, but are still giving even in their neediness. One can be life-giving though lacking in physical energy, inspiring in the dignified acceptance of one's limitations, and make others feel better just by being there. And as for the disadvantaged, the beggar woman of our

society; their faith can assure them that God would not allow them to be no more than a means to an end for others. Their lives and their sufferings have transcendent meaning. As the product and object of the Creator's love, their intrinsic worth is immeasurable. Their condition is an extreme example of the helplessness and innocence of all children, and those who love and care for them. Yet in their suffering, there may be some solace that even their helplessness may work powerfully for good in this world. For those perplexed by the problem of pain, and discouraged by their apparent uselessness as their abilities wane and their helplessness increases, this small added insight into their continued contribution may comfort them a bit.

### Conclusion

As a final note, it appears reasonable to ask how much return giving is enough? Can we fairly delineate our contribution toward our debt? I can only offer insight drawn from my professional experience. As a physician, I have seen families "burdened" by children who cannot see, cannot hear, cannot talk or even sit up and families who have accepted and embraced the care of such children. What happens then can be truly miraculous. I don't refer to the improvement in the status of the child, although this sometimes can occur. The real miracle is found in the transformation of the family, the caregivers. They often say that they have received more than they ever gave, and this after having given so profoundly. If we question how this can be so, perhaps the answer lies in the nature of the Giver, as much as in the gift. To acknowledge that everything we have ever received is in truth a divine gift, how can we then justify withholding anything? Anything we give back is just a return of what we received – there can be no logical or moral basis for a limit on our return, because we would not have it to return unless it had been given to us; and we are seeking to return it to the original giver, by the way of those here who are in need. This could be totally overwhelming and discouraging, and in fact is exactly that for many of us. We may then respond by refusing to acknowledge the depth of what we owe, or by finding a more comfortable limit, such as a tithe. But when we see those rare individuals who have no set limits on their giving, who feed and care even for individuals such as those in a Persistent Vegetative State, from these we learn something about giving: no matter how good at it we may get, we will never lose our amateur status. God is never outdone; we always get back more than we give, just as those selfless families have tried to tell us. It is this fact that ultimately confirms what we were starting to suspect – that each person, the elderly woman asking, "What good am I?" as well as the young boy damaged at birth –

has a divine purpose in life. Moreover, the purpose of those most needy, most disadvantaged, may be a crucial contribution to all of us working out our mutual plan of salvation. Amazingly, it is those who are frequently classified as only a burden who are essential to each of us, so that we finally may see that the last are indeed first.

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### **Bibliography**

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