

The Power of One: Selfless Service

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Mavis sat in her comfortable rocking chair as she listened to the evening news. Toward the end of the news she heard the reporter mention that in South America many newborns were being sent home wrapped in newspaper.

"Wrapped in newspaper?" said Mavis out loud. "That's terrible!"

So Mavis went to her sewing room and went to work. Over the next few weeks she made more than 200 quilts and receiving blankets. As she finished each blanket, she gave it an affectionate hug before placing it in one of the boxes to be taken to the Church's Humanitarian Services Center.

There's something you should know about Mavis: she was 91 years old and legally blind. But Mavis was an amazing individual. She said, "There is something I can do," and she wanted to exert herself to make a difference to the newborns around the world.

Elder H. Burke Peterson stated:

In the day-to-day process of living, with all of its trials, challenges, and discouragements, we often underestimate our own God-given attributes and abilities which make it possible for each of us to pattern his or her life after that of the Savior and,

*in fact, do some of the things he did as he lived here among men. We may never personally experience the miracle of raising the dead, or be one to turn water into wine. We may not be one of thousands who may be fed from a few loaves and fishes, or be a part of the miraculous experience of walking on a stormy sea. But, for each one of us, there are a number of Christlike patterns of living we can be a part of in our mortal sojourn. [H. Burke Peterson, "Selflessness: A Pattern for Happiness," *Ensign*, May 1985, 66]*

So what is it to be a selfless person? As Elder Peterson described:

A selfless person is one who is more concerned about the happiness and well-being of another than about his or her own convenience or comfort, one who is willing to serve another when it is neither sought for nor appreciated, or one who is willing to serve even those whom he or she dislikes. A selfless person displays a willingness to sacrifice, a willingness to [put aside] personal wants, and needs, and feelings. [Peterson, "Selflessness," 66]

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A few years ago my son served in the Ukraine Donetsk Mission. About a year and a half into his mission, I received a letter from two sister missionaries serving in that same area. While attending fast and testimony meeting one Sunday, they had heard a touching story shared by a recent convert that involved my son and his companion. The sister missionaries were sure my son would never share this incident, so they took it upon themselves to write and tell me the story. This is the story they shared in their letter:

A brother who was a recent convert in a small branch in eastern Ukraine was a hardworking father who made very little income from his job but tried diligently to provide for his family. All of his income went to buy food and to pay rent, utilities, and tithing. There was nothing left over for extras. But the one thing this dear brother wanted most of all was a tie to wear to church when he could bless the sacrament.

During the preceding couple of months he had saved a few pennies from each of his paychecks and put the money in a small leather coin purse with the hope that one day he would finally be able to purchase a tie to wear to church. By the week before fast and testimony meeting he had gathered sufficient funds to purchase his tie. He was so excited! Then, in the middle of the week, a family member became ill, and the saved tie funds were needed to purchase medicine. This dear brother was quite disappointed that another Sunday would go by without a tie. The days preceding church he silently prayed that somehow he could acquire a tie—not an expensive tie, just a simple, plain tie—so he could respectfully administer the sacrament of the Lord.

Late Saturday afternoon there was a knock at his apartment door, and when he opened the door there stood Elder Abegglen and his companion. As he gazed down at Elder Abegglen's hands, his eyes locked on a tie the missionary was holding.

"I understand you can use this tie," said Elder Abegglen.

With tears in his eyes, this good brother said, "I am here today to tell you God knows the simple desires of our hearts, and He sends forth His servants to answer our prayers."

In his address to his people in the Book of Mormon, King Benjamin said, "I tell you these things . . . that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17). Whether it's a tie, a baby blanket, a smile, or a thoughtful note, there is something each of us can do to improve another's life.

Over the last two years I have had a wonderful opportunity to accompany nursing students to Ghana for a global health and diversity course. While in Ghana the students engage in wonderful opportunities to provide service. Ghana is inhabited by amazing, loving, poor people. Their village homes are simple—many made of mud with tin or thatched roofs. Furnishings consist of a few mats on the floor and wooden benches to sit on.

The nightly news pays little attention to the fact that in this day and age in the world there are 10 million children under the age of five that die from preventable causes every year. Out of those 10 million that die, four million are under the age of one. And of these four million children, one million die in the first few days of life (see Joy E Lawn, Simon Cousens, and Jelka Zupan, "4 Million Neonatal Deaths: When? Where? Why?" [Neonatal Survival 1], *The Lancet* 365, no. 9462 [March 5–11, 2005]: 891–900). Poverty, malnutrition, unskilled birth attendants, infection, and unclean water all contribute to this sad death statistic. But despite their poverty and lack of many material things, the Ghanaian people are happy; they are cheerful people, and they go forth every day with bright smiles.

Osu Children's Home in Accra is a wonderful, emotionally exhausting place for students to provide service. It is a simple place that needs painting, but it is a place that many

abandoned children call home. Infants are housed in one area, toddlers in another, and primary-school-age children in another. Each year as we prepare to depart for Ghana, it is amazing how our students and their families get involved in gathering toys, new and used clothing, books, and sums of money to be given to struggling individuals and families. Because of our own experience with our children and our grandchildren, you would think that little children in Ghana would be so excited by toys, new clothes, socks, and shoes. But at the Osu Children's Home, we found that the children would bypass the toys and the pretty clothing. What the children wanted most from our students was to be held. They just wanted to experience a human touch, to snuggle in someone's arms, to hear a heartbeat.

How much time does it take to hold a hand, to offer a comforting word, to snuggle a child? In Proverbs 31:20 we read, "She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy." I'd like you to remember that love is never wasted.

Sister Acquah is the president of the Cape Coast Relief Society. We were very busy this spring e-mailing back and forth to plan a health fair for the Relief Society sisters to be held on the first Saturday after we arrived in Ghana. As part of the health fair, this warm, caring person wanted the sisters in her stake to assemble hygiene kits and donate them to the children at a local school for the deaf and blind. She told me that for the last few years the Ghanaian Saints have been on the receiving end of many humanitarian efforts. It was time for the sisters to reach beyond themselves and give to someone else in need. What a moment of growth when people who have little learn to give to others. Selfless caring has a giving and a receiving component. We give that we might receive, and we receive that we might give again.

At the end of the health fair, the plan was that a small group of sisters would take the

hygiene kits to the designated school. As the sisters were slowly leaving the health fair, Sister Acquah came over to me with a big smile and gave me a hug. Her statement to me in the blunt style of the Ghanaian people was that the health fair had turned out better than she had thought it would. I was not sure if she lacked confidence in our ability to present classes or if she was surprised that 262 sisters were willing to walk from distant villages, come by car, come by tro-tro, or come any way they could to the health fair that day.

As we sat and rested from the warm summer heat and the busy morning activities, Sister Acquah asked, "Of course you and your students are coming with us to deliver the hygiene kits to the school for the deaf and blind?"

"Oh," I said, "you should really take the sisters who prepared the hygiene kits. They should experience the reward of their service project."

"Some will come," Sister Acquah said, "but I really want you and your students to come."

So we did. What a heart-changing experience followed for us that afternoon.

We all grumbled a little as we got on the bus to ride from the stake center to the school for the deaf and blind on the outskirts of Cape Coast, Ghana. I was thinking, it's a four-hour ride back to Accra, and it's late in the afternoon. There were giant rain clouds gathering on the horizon, and dirt roads and rain don't mix well. We turned off the main road and bounced our way down a dirt road toward the school. As we pulled into the school yard, the school seemed very deserted. I was thinking that somehow we had gotten the day or maybe the time of day wrong. But as the bus stopped and we started getting out, we saw smiling, squealing children appearing in the open windows of the assembly hall.

The Cape Coast sisters and the students helped arrange the hygiene kits on the table in the front of the assembly hall as restless

children wiggled on their benches. They would wave and smile. The blind children's choir sang the opening song—"I Have God in My Heart." We were asked to respond, and in turn we sang to them "I Am a Child of God," and then the deaf and partially deaf children responded in sign language and voices singing a song called "Heavenly Father Loves Me." The Spirit was so tender in that bare room as these songs were exchanged. We knew why we had come. We had been fed by the Spirit in that room. Each one of our students helped to hand out the hygiene kits. These beautiful children greeted our students with hugs and squeals as they received their plastic bag containing soap, a toothbrush, a towel, toothpaste, and two combs. To them it was like Christmas. After hugs and many unexpected tears, we loaded up the bus and started on our trip home.

No one complained about how long it took to return to Accra or how scary the thunder and muddy roads were. They were so grateful to have been a part of delivering the hygiene kits to the school for the deaf and blind. In her reflective writing assignment related to her experience that day, one of the students shared the following quote: "She went to minister to them and found then ministering to her. She went to teach and was transformed by what she learned" (author unknown).

For 30 years I have had the opportunity to live in a wonderful neighborhood. I won't tell you where it is, because you'd probably like to move there. Every day I witness in this neighborhood selfless acts of service: friendly greetings, hot loaves of bread being exchanged, a widower being invited for Sunday dinner, a forgotten garbage can being pulled to the curb on garbage collection day, a thoughtful note left on the door, a ride to the hospital, and sack lunches prepared and delivered to the Food and Care Coalition. In times of sadness people gather to comfort. In times of celebration they are there to celebrate. We are never too young or too old to engage in selfless service.

In the BYU Museum of Art there is a large painting of the Savior healing a man by the pool of Bethesda. Historians believe the pool was most likely a natural spring rich in dissolved solids and gases. Today we would call it a mineral spring. These waters were reputed to possess curative powers, and many afflicted folks came there to bathe. The spring was a pulsating variety, where at intervals the water rose with bubbling and then receded to normal levels. It was believed that whoever was the first to enter the waters after the bubbling was made whole.

I love to sit in front of this picture. We are fortunate enough in the College of Nursing to have a smaller version of the painting. I sit on one side and see the perspective in the painting. Then sometimes I move to the other side to determine if there is something else I can see. Sometimes as I gaze at the picture I see myself as a spectator, someone who blends into the crowd and watches as others do. Sometimes I look at myself in this picture and try to think of myself as the Savior—patiently listening, focusing on the needs of the individual. The Savior always focused on individuals face-to-face, eye to eye, voice to ear, heart to heart, spirit to spirit, and hand to hand. His approach was and is loving, His voice soft and gentle. Sometimes as I look at this painting I picture myself as the suffering individual waiting by the pool to be healed, waiting for someone to help me into the pool of healing waters.

Quietly, with a soft voice, the Savior looked at the helpless man and said, "Wilt thou be made whole?" Of course the man wanted to be made whole. He was eagerly waiting for his moment in the pool.

"Sir," said the man to the Savior, "I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool."

With tenderness in His eyes, the Savior replied, "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk."

The man obeyed. He took up his pallet and walked away. (See John 5:5–9.) Many present at

the pool that day missed the whole marvelous interaction.

I often hear the Savior's words in my ear: "Wilt thou be made whole? Then serve thy brothers and sisters."

To be like the Savior is to be whole, which implies that we are engaged in acts of selfless service. Selfless service requires personal action, a desire to pick up our beds and walk. It is easy to give away excess money, used equipment, and used clothing. It is more difficult to give of our time, to give of our personal presence to help others. There is much beauty and goodness in the world today if we look for it. The evening news tells us that things are not very good and that there is a great deal of sadness. But there is a great deal of beauty in the world.

For those of you who this summer are at this university for the very first time, you need to know that there is a great tradition of service here. You have entered to learn and to serve. We want you to stretch and enlighten your minds and enrich your hearts while you are here. There are many wonderful faculty members who serve as examples of selfless service in the local community and in the

extended global community. Find them. Work with them. Your loneliness from being away from home for the first time will be less if you use your power of one and engage in serving another person.

In the Gospel of Matthew the Savior conversed with the righteous people gathered around Him. They asked Him:

Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. [Matthew 25:37-40]

We all need caring people in our lives, and we likewise need to care for others. May we humbly recognize our individual ability to have an impact on other lives for good and have the courage to do so, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

