

How Volunteering Can Improve Your Health

“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.” – Ruth 1:16, NIV

The above verse is a beautiful, poetic expression of selfless devotion spoken tenderly by a woman who’d lost everything to a woman who’d lost everything.

After a widow named Naomi lost her two sons to untimely deaths, she told her widowed daughters-in-law to part ways with her and return to their former homes to find new husbands who could support them. One of the women, Orpah, kissed Naomi goodbye, but Ruth remained, still clinging steadfastly to her mother-in-law. It is then that she promised a lifetime of loyalty to Naomi. She would travel to a foreign land, worship its God, and even be buried in its soil amidst a people that considered her an unwelcome pagan.

Needless to say, Naomi couldn’t convince Ruth to depart from her, and so the two destitute women traveled to Bethlehem together in time for the barley harvest; perhaps they would be able to gather enough leftover grain to keep themselves alive.

Can you picture yourself in Ruth’s shoes (sandals)? Imagine being overseas, thousands of miles away from your family and friends, when several deaths of loved ones devastate your household.

You and one other are young and resourceful; you can return home and start a new life. The other person under your roof is an old, pessimistic, and terribly despondent woman; the chances that she can provide for herself or be wed again are slim. She encourages you to leave and begin afresh. The next move seems simple: do as she says and leave.

What would you do?

To be 100-percent honest with you, the first thing I would do after the funeral is book the next flight home to Texas. I, out of sheer selfishness and fear, would be like Orpah. I would be inclined to retreat to greener pastures where a hearty meal and warm welcome were awaiting me.

Our society loves to transmit self-centered messages such as “Look Out for Number 1!” and “Love Yourself!” When something upsetting and unexpected happens, we’re encouraged to do whatever it takes to make ourselves feel better. We turn inward and self-medicate with media, alcohol, junk food, pills, and pampering without any regard for the nearby Naomi’s struggling and suffering far more than ourselves. We tell ourselves that when we feel better, *then* we can help those in need.

It turns out that what truly makes us healthier and happier is *not* looking after ourselves, but reaching out to others. In a survey commissioned by United Health Group, the vast majority of 3,351 adult participants reported feeling mentally and physically healthier after a volunteer experience.

- 76 percent of people who volunteered in the last twelve months said that volunteering has made them feel healthier
- 94 percent of people who volunteered in the last twelve months said that volunteering improved their mood
- 78 percent of them said that volunteering lowered their stress levels
- 96 percent reported that volunteering enriched their sense of purpose in life
- 80 percent of them feel like they have control over their health
- About a quarter of them reported that their volunteer work has helped them manage a chronic illness by keeping them active and taking their minds off of their own

problems

- Volunteers have better personal scores than non-volunteers on nine well-established measures of emotional wellbeing including personal independence, capacity for rich interpersonal relationships and overall satisfaction with life.
- Volunteering also improved their mood and self-esteem

Nowhere in the Book of Ruth is our humble heroine recorded as complaining or bemoaning her unfortunate lot. On the contrary, she doesn't hesitate to announce her unflinching faithfulness to Naomi. In essence, she *volunteered* to be her lifelong helper and friend by placing Naomi's needs above her own and promising to stand by her side come thick or thin, even unto death:

"Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried." (Ruth 1: 17)

Ruth is a stunning picture of a servant's love, the love that Christ has called us all to embrace and extend toward others. Her humility and selflessness so pleased the Lord that He gave her favor in the eyes of Boaz, a rich landowner who married Ruth and redeemed her family, as well as a place in Jesus' family tree.

What would our world be like if every follower of Christ gave of themselves as Ruth did? What would our own lives be like if we silenced our selfish desires, ignored our fearful impulses, and sought instead to follow our Shepherd and care for His flock?

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