

Reflection & Prayertime: Acute Compassion and Chronic Empathy

March 8, 2021

“Even youths grow tired and weary, and even young men stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” Isaiah 40:30-31

“So let’s not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don’t give up”. Galatians 6:9

I read a quote by Sigrid Ellis last year that I found very intriguing and have returned to it several times. It says, “Americans are really good at acute compassion, but pretty bad at chronic empathy. We, without question, haul strangers out of a raging flood, give blood, give food, give shelter. But we are lousy at legislating safe, sustainable communities, at eldercare, at accessible streets and buildings.

It is the long-term work that makes the disasters less damaging. But we don’t want to give to the needy, we want to save the endangered. We don’t like being care workers, we want to be heroes. The world does not need more heroes. We need more care.”

Earlier today in a video about our Volunteers of America founders Ballington and Maud Booth I shared that they were heroes of mine and they are, and on this International Women’s Day I will even call Maud my shero. But in light of the quote above let me say that they are heroes but also chronically-empathetic care workers and also like us flawed human beings just responding to God in the best way they know how. I imagine maybe heroes lifts them up on a pedestal that they likely would humbly disavow.

But I think in taking a realistic view of our founders, we have to acknowledge that their life and ministry likely constantly had a daily grind feel to it. I shared earlier today about Maud Booth looking for a focus for her work as she broke away from Salvation Army into this new Volunteers of America organization and she responded to invitations to speak to men in prison. After she spoke at Sing Sing prison, she wrote in the VOA newsletter the Gazette, “I thought how I should feel if I was in their place...I realized what they needed from my lips was something that would carry their thoughts away beyond the gray walls, and some message of Christ’s dear heart of love.” She had offered them that message and 50 prisoners had responded that day and she developed relationships by visiting and writing to them and putting structure to the Volunteer Prison League where they could offer mutual support to one another.

The prisoners revered her so much they nicknamed her “Little Mother.” I imagine that was quite a feel-good moment for her, to receive such an endearing nickname and to know that she was stepping in the gap of perhaps estranged or missing family and that her guidance was so

valued that she felt like family to them. That could have been the end of it, she could have rested on the laurels of acute compassion expressed so well, but she didn't. She was driven to make things even better for the men in envisioning and bringing to fruition the 4 Hope Halls that served men leaving prison that gave them stable housing while they worked on rebuilding their lives. This was chronic empathy in action.

I doubt that Ballington and Maud Booth were familiar with the terms compassion fatigue but I can't help but believe they experienced it and lived it. How difficult to break away from family support into something new and untried. Their faith and passion for what they envisioned must have sustained them, but I can picture them in my mind's eye relying on some of these Bible verses that address weariness and fatigue. In the words of Hamilton, I'm so glad Maud and Ballington did not throw away their shot.

When Maud left Dannemora prison she carried with her a donation of \$55 from prison officers and \$100 contributed from the prisoners themselves from the few cents per day they were paid. That \$100 represented a genuine sacrifice, but the hope it gave them was worth it. I mentioned in the video shown earlier today that one of our program graduates now uses the technique called the "instillation of hope" with her clients in her counseling practice. I believe the prisoners were gifting Maud Booth with their meager funds to both instill and install hope for themselves and others like them.

May we like our founders not be afraid or unwilling to acknowledge weariness. At the end of this week we mark the anniversary of the beginning of our world changing so dramatically due to Covid-19 with the presidential declaration of national emergency. No doubt we are tired of this new normal but have stepped up to do what needed to be done. Today, on the 125th anniversary of our Founders' Day may we feel God's instillation of hope in us even as we participate in the installation of hope in our programs and services. May we not grow weary in creating systems and structures that creating opportunity for positive change in our communities and our world, thanks be to God. May we not grow weary in this life-changing work. May we press on with chronic hope and empathy.