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A close-up photograph of a hand turning a silver door handle on a wooden door. The door is slightly ajar, revealing a bright, warm light from the other side. The background is a blurred wooden floor.

Second Edition

90% of
helping is just
showing up

JAMES R. KOK

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James R. Kok



Grand Rapids, Michigan

The discussion suggestions that accompany each chapter were prepared by Beverly Muffin, director of the House of Power pastoral ministry at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California.

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Introduction

I want to be a caring person. I want to help others feel they are cared for. From the depth of my being, I have learned that caring is an art form, and every day I seek to share the discoveries of my journey—being there and caring by doing.

Caring is not a feeling. Strong feelings or deep concerns for another person may be called caring, but until those feelings or concerns trigger constructive action on the other's behalf, they are only interesting emotions.

Caring is best understood by looking at God. Until God became human, we could not knowingly experience his love. Incarnation was essential. The Word had to become flesh—an audiovisual, tactile message we could understand.

Christ's people continue to live by this model. They turn feelings into concrete, observable, practical expressions of love. Awareness of need is turned into positive help. That's caring!

Feelings are a gift from God. We can respect, value, and listen to them. But they are intended to move us to do something. They have little worth unless they ignite a plan, which will then be followed by deeds that improve the world—by helping to correct or modify the pain or injustice in another's life, for example.

All the hurt we feel when we learn of a friend's serious illness does not make us caring people. My deep mental anguish over the plight of someone cut by unemployment does not prove I am a caring person. When it comes to caring, having strong—even agonizing—sympathy means little. Talking gravely, too, proves nothing. Only action counts as sympathy (empathy).

Action may be prayer, an understanding word, a personal visit, a phone call, or a card (always with a handwritten note). It may be attendance at a graduation, wedding, funeral, or a farewell open house. Being there is caring.

There are endless practical ways to care for others when tough times occur. Wendy Bergen, a woman struggling with cancer, wrote down some of her ideas. They range from very concrete ways of helping—bringing food or offering to baby-sit—to the more abstract ways of showing concern—allowing a person to feel sad, touching them, telling them how great they look, and sharing humor. Bergen’s ideas suggest how resourcefulness can produce especially helpful acts of caring.

Turning our feelings into deeds models Christ’s incarnation—the Word becoming flesh.

What People Really Need

Most people want to be helpful. They will try to aid and assist friends in need in a variety of practical and resourceful ways. Caring colleagues generously support each other through many creative, self-denying acts and gifts.

But one mode of helping easily gets overlooked in the human rush to make things better for fallen comrades. Call it "just being there" or "walking with" or "intimacy." Often this is the most vital ingredient in any recipe for restoring a broken heart or a shattered spirit.

Give Them Intimacy, Not Answers

People need intimacy, not answers—that is what we must remember when we are trying to comfort someone who is hurting. Unfortunately the typical response to another’s distress is to try to give answers. Our tongues swing into high speed, and we overflow with glib sayings and spiritual moralisms. Few of our words help; some even irritate or distance us from the people we are trying to help.

Some years ago in a small group setting I spoke candidly about my dismay over the devastating illness of a dear friend. Needing comfort, I received instead a lecture on current cancer treatments and an assurance that “a miracle can always happen, you know.” I politely thanked the lecturer for his concern, but his comments weren’t helpful to me.

The Way of the Wolf by Martin Bell contains a wonderful story titled “The Porcupine Whose Name Didn’t Matter.” For obvious reasons the porcupine was a misfit in society and had no friends. But one day he stumbled upon a raccoon who had been shot and was near death. The porcupine remained with the raccoon and heard its sad story. Then both fell silent. After a while the raccoon asked, “Are you still there?”

“Yes,” replied the porcupine, “I’m still here. I was just wondering what to do now.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do anything!” said the dying raccoon. “Honestly, I mean that. Just stay with me for a little while. Just be there. Don’t go away, please. I’m afraid. You won’t go away, will you?”

Perhaps the reason that the simple gift of intimacy is so difficult to give is that it is best given with silence. However, when we are silent in the face of suffering, we run headlong into a terrible feeling of helplessness. If we talk or actively assist, we feel

helpful; just “being there” confronts us with our own weakness and dependency.

To bring comfort, we must learn to be comfortable with this feeling of helplessness. Job’s comforters did well when they sat with him in silence. Then their anxiety got the best of them, and endless stupidities flowed from their mouths.

The apostle Paul advises us to “weep with those who weep.” Paul realized that people who are hurting are often helped more by a kindred spirit shedding tears of empathy than by advice and counsel. Proverbs 25:20 (NRSV) says, “He who sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on a wound.”

In *The Book of the Dun Cow* by Walter Wangerin, Jr., we learn of the healing power of presence, of “being there,” when the Dun Cow comes to comfort the injured and grieving Chauntecleer, the regal rooster:

She put her soft nose against him, to nudge him into a more peaceful position. Gently she arranged his head so that he might clearly see her. Her sweet breath went into his nostrils. . . . The Dun Cow took a single step back from the rooster then and looked at him. . . . Her eyes were liquid with compassion—deep, deep, as the earth is deep. Her brow knew his suffering and knew besides that, worlds more. But the goodness was that, though this wide brow knew so much, yet it bent over his pain alone and creased with it.

Chauntecleer watched his own desolation appear in the eyes of the Cow, then sink so deeply into them that she shuddered. Her eyes pooled as she looked at him. The tears rose and spilled over. . . . He watched—felt—the miracle take place. Nothing changed: The clouds would not be removed, nor his sons returned, nor his knowledge plished. But there was this: his grief had become her grief, his sorrow her own. And though he grieved not one bit less for that, yet his heart made room for her, for her will and wisdom, and he bore the sorrow better.

The Dun Cow represents God's presence, from whom we draw all healing. But in this spirit-renewing episode, we also are reminded of the blessing *our* presence can be to others.

Sometimes we act as if the best things God has given us are words, information, and answers. In reality, God's best gift may well be his caring presence amid our confusion and struggles. Certainly the best gift we can give anyone is our presence: our crying, hugging, waiting, listening, smiling, and sharing.

If you ask weak, ailing, or aged persons what Scripture they would like to hear, many of them will request Psalm 23. Why? Because when we are in need, we want a relationship, not an explanation. Psalm 23 provides a comforting picture of the companionship, support, and presence of the good shepherd. When we read the psalm, we feel the Lord walking by our side.

The biggest challenge for many of us is to learn to eliminate our need to answer and fix, to straighten others out, to give them advice. Once we conquer this tendency, we can find the quiet strength to walk with others through their dark valleys. A current saying captures that thought well: "I do not care how much you know until I know how much you care."

Scripture Reflections

Matthew 26:6-45

vv. 6-7: While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.

What might the woman have said to Jesus as she anointed him?

v. 8: When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked.

Have there been times when you spoke as hastily as the disciples did here? What was the result?

v. 13: "I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

Why are good works so often well remembered?

v. 20: *When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve.*

Do you have intimate times and conversations around your supper table? If so, how often? What good may come out of those times?

v. 30: *When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

What do you think Jesus and his disciples experienced as they sang together?

v. 38: *Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."*

What was Jesus asking of his disciples?

v. 40: *Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter.*

Have you ever failed to just "watch" with a friend? Describe the circumstances and how you felt.

v. 41: *"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."*

Recall some times when you couldn't bring yourself to do good for someone else even though you knew you should. How might you overcome your weakness in the future?

v. 45: *Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."*

Imagine you were there with Jesus. How would you have felt when he awakened you?

Personal Reflection

1. On a scale of 1 to 10 (10=always, 1=never) rate yourself on the following:

When I feel uneasy, I tend to talk too much. _____

It is easy for me to be quiet. _____

I avoid intimate situations. _____

I am only comfortable when I have answers to people's questions. _____

I feel I must always do something to help people. _____

I give of myself easily. _____

I am a fixer. _____

I use the Scripture well in comforting people. _____

2. In "just being there," what are your best qualities?

3. What would you say to someone who has a terminal illness?

4. What would you say to someone who has lost a good job?

5. What would you say to someone who has lost a child?