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BRENDA J. BOYD

OPERATION SERVICE: REJUVENATING AND LIFE CHANGING

“If you want to live a long life, focus on making contributions.”

—Hans Selye

A Casual Idea Turns to Reality

When I started working at Loma Linda University in May 2006, all I wanted to do was work hard and hopefully never have to endure a layoff again. In 2001, around the time of the stock market crash and the year of the fateful September 11 attacks on the United States, I was laid off from a marketing director position, subsequently ending a 22-year career in marketing communications and public relations. Between looking for work, deciding on a career change, going back to school, and getting a new job, I had no energy to think about being healthy. I knew I was living a life of totally burning myself out, but at the time I didn't realize what it was doing to me. I just had one thing in mind: survival. I wasn't concerned about my health, spiritual well-being, or renewal. I was just charging forward to get back into the workforce.

Shortly after I began my new teaching career in medical radiography at Loma Linda University, between more schooling and starting a new job, in spite of my continuing charge forward, I had a fleeting moment of “what if” thinking. I had a vision of what I thought my life should include in the future. Casually, I asked my supervisor, “Would it ever be possible to have a mission trip for X-ray students, since dental, medical, and nursing students go on mission trips?” Not really thinking that a mission trip would become a reality for me nor for X-ray students, I went on working hard, pursuing graduate school, and trying to establish myself in a new career.

I knew something was missing from my life, but I didn't have time to

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take the time to figure it out. I knew I was still totally burning myself out by my lifestyle—I was beginning to see what it was doing to me, but I still kept driving myself. I was no longer in “survival” mode, but I was still pushing to get myself re-established in a career. I was sort of concerned about my health, but not enough to slow down—I still had more to do.

Then one day, three years after that fleeting moment of “what if” thinking, my boss—the same one I shared the crazy mission trip idea with—called me into a meeting and told me that I had six months to plan a mission trip for our X-ray students. Talk about a surprise! Sure, I knew that a mission trip endowment fund had been started, but I didn’t know how much interest it had gained. I learned that for the past three years alumni from the Department of Radiation Technology had been giving in record numbers to this mission service fund, and it was time to use some of the funds so that the alumni would know that their giving was making a difference in the lives of others.

Over the next few weeks I investigated several mission trip ideas. One rose to the top as the best idea. Instead of a mission trip just for X-ray students, the concept of an interdisciplinary mission trip for all the students in the School of Allied Health Professions was developed. Within a matter of weeks, plans were in place for Operation Service, a trip to Haiti with medical radiography, physical therapy, and occupational therapy students. And within months of returning from Haiti, the plans commenced for the second interdisciplinary Operation Service mission trip, this time to Belize. The momentum from the first trip led to students from not just three programs but six allied health programs participating on the trip—medical radiography, physical therapy, and occupational therapy students, as well as radiation therapy, speech therapy, and clinical lab students.

Now into the third year, plans for Operation Service are in place for the next mission trip, this time to Cameroon. In addition to serving others in a health clinic and at an orphanage, the group will also enjoy spiritual reflection and social time. From a crazy idea of an X-ray mission trip came an amazing concept of an interdisciplinary mission trip. The mission of providing interdisciplinary trips for any student in the School of Allied Health Professions has grown to include a vision of linking international clinical experience with physical, mental, social, and spiritual renewal.

On the surface, it is obvious to most people that a mission trip is a wonderful, life-changing experience for students. What isn’t so obvious, though, is what happens to the leader and to the students when they unite around a voluntary purposeful leisure activity such as a mission trip.

Mission Trips and the Four Elements of Revitalization

Stephen Covey (2004), in sharing the results of Hans Selye's monumental research on stress, summarizes that a happy, healthy, and long life comes from making contributions and having projects that are meaningful and personally exciting, projects that bless and contribute to the lives of others.

Linda Caldwell (2005), a researcher in the therapeutic and health benefits of leisure, agrees with Covey when she states that leisure activities contribute to health and well-being. According to Caldwell, leisure activities serve as a preventive mechanism to help ward off poor health and risk behaviors before they occur. They also can be a stress-coping activity and a means to transcend negative life events. Leisure activities, which include creative, outdoor, or volunteering endeavors, contribute to one's sense of personal meaning. Caldwell proposes that leisure activities promote health because they are distracting, generate optimism, and are personally transforming.

For me and for the students, these mission trips have become a catalyst for leisure and service. Caldwell's (2005) research on leisure and health is consistent with what Stephen Covey (2004) has called "sharpening the saw." Sharpening the saw, according to Covey, means protecting and revitalizing the greatest asset we have—ourselves.

This concept of sharpening the saw and self-renewal is about taking time to reduce stress, connect with others, and refocus on taking care of one's self. It's also about expanding and exploring spiritually, creating space for creative and strategic thinking, and regaining control of priorities. It means having a balanced program for self-renewal in the four quadrants of life: physical, social/emotional, mental, and spiritual. Physical rejuvenation involves eating in a healthy way, exercising, and resting. Social and emotional renewal is about making meaningful connections with others on a social level. Mentally sharpening the saw is about learning, reading, writing, and teaching. Finally, spiritual revitalization is focused on spending time in nature, expanding spiritually, and exploring activities such as music, art, prayer, and service.

Without renewal, the body grows tired and weak, the mind becomes dull and mechanical, the emotions get edgy and raw, the spirit becomes insensitive and harsh, and a person drifts to a focus on self rather than on others. But when a person focuses on her total well-being, the result is wholeness, which is a state of robust good health and being vigorous and free both in mind and body (Wholeness, 2013).

Even though the mission trips at Loma Linda University School of

Allied Health Professions started with the focus on service, the result has been much more. The planning team is now intentionally working to create trip plans that include a balance of physical, mental, social, and spiritual renewal, not only for students, but also for the leaders. The results have been amazing and life changing.

The Students' Renewal Experience

When the students signed up to be considered for the first and second interdisciplinary mission trips, the most often stated reason for wanting to go was to do something outside of their comfort zone and to make a difference. But something more happened to the students while on these first two trips. Besides making a difference through their service, students experienced rest, better health, inspiration, teamwork, hard work, meaning, and spiritual growth. They developed new friendships and a greater appreciation for other professions and cultures. And they discovered new skills.

On the Haiti mission trip, students had the opportunity to work at the Adventist Hospital of Haiti in various clinical settings, such as radiology, prosthetics, surgery, and orthopedics. Outside of the clinical setting, they worked together on several building projects that included painting, cleaning, pouring concrete, and rebuilding a home for orphaned children. Additionally, the students were able to help with the start of a rehabilitation science program to train the local Haitians in physical and occupational therapy.

“In Haiti I learned that I am valuable,” said a student about his experience. “After struggling through a tough time in life, Haiti was a breath of fresh air and a chance to put aside my worries and simply serve the Lord. I felt capable in Haiti and since leaving I've felt inspired to let go of things I cannot control and ask God each day how I can be of service to Him.”

“I felt like a completely different person when I got back,” said another who went to Haiti. “To be honest, I was quite sad for a few weeks after returning because I just didn't feel right not waking up in the morning and having something so meaningful and worthwhile to do for others. I missed all of my companions from the trip, as well. Now, I am trying to find a way to help people whenever I can, whether at work or school. This trip really showed me how rewarding service can be, and taught me to not take things for granted.”

A physical therapy student shared how this trip impacted him toward future service: “I was inspired in many different ways on this

trip. From the orphanage work to meeting the Haitian students enrolled in the rehab tech program, I was impacted by the large necessity of people like our team to be involved. I feel changed because I have a desire to go back and make a longer commitment to serving those in need, whether it be teaching a class next summer or visiting the orphanages.”

In Belize, the students were involved in several projects at La Loma Luz Hospital, including building a cinderblock wall to enclose a main stairwell in the administration building, doing inventory in a medical supply room, setting up the first digital radiography equipment at the hospital, visiting an orphanage, and working in various clinical departments at the hospital. The daily schedule in Belize was also intentionally created to provide personal spiritual time, group sharing, and restful downtime.

Commenting on the Belize experience, one student noted how well the group bonded and got along. In addition, he commented on the personal spiritual effect the trip had on him: “I really enjoyed the spiritual environment and emphasis on worships and personal time with God. I appreciated it very much.” Another student shared a similar experience: “The most I have changed as a result of the trip is that I have a desire to have daily devotions (or have personal time with God) again, which I haven’t consistently done for the past few years now.”

The total trip experience to Belize impacted students in profound ways. “The experiences shared, people met, and new perspectives gained have changed me,” said one student. “I returned with so much more than I took.” Another student commented, “I’ve become more confident and learned how to think more positively.”

“My view on material things has changed,” stated a Belize mission trip traveler. “The people of Belize have so much more than we do here in the United States. Yes, we have material things and things like money, but they have a stronger sense of community, family, looking out for each other, equality, and culture, overall.” As a result, says another student, “I am more appreciative of the things I have in my life. Family is more of a priority now.”

The Mission Trip Experience for the Leader

As the leader of these interdisciplinary mission trips, my first priority has been to be true to the mission and vision of the mission trip experience for the students. What I never planned on was the impact the trips would have on me personally.

As a leader and “doer” in every aspect of my life, I have never really given myself permission to rest or renew without some sense of guilt.

Because I never wanted to be viewed as lazy or unproductive, resting and renewal activities were few and far between. But my perspective of rest and renewal has changed over the past two years. I have now experienced first-hand how mission trips have led me to a deeper meaning of Covey's (2004) concept of sharpening the saw, the vital importance of taking care of myself on all four levels of renewal, and the life-giving activity of leisure. I have also discovered that mission trips are as much for me and my own spiritual and emotional renewal as they are for students and their renewal. Let me explain.

In 2013, the main focus of my life has been finishing my Ph.D. in Leadership from Andrews University. In January of 2013, I started the sprint to the finish line with presenting my oral defense of my 15-competency portfolio. After a few months of rest from that major accomplishment, I put all of my focus into my research project and the completion of my 200-page dissertation. In the middle of this project, I led the 10-day student mission trip to Belize, immediately followed by five days of rest and then a seven-day church mission trip to Haiti.

From the outside, I received questioning looks and remarks about why I was doing two back-to-back mission trips in a one-month period when I was so close to finishing my Ph.D. My response was that it was something I just had to do. My heart was leading me to Belize and Haiti, and I knew that what I needed to complete the program would be found during these two trips. It was like my mind and body were searching for a way to handle my stress, and doing these mission trips was my solution to regaining optimism about the future.

What I found on these trips in the summer of 2013 was rest and renewal, which led me to physical, mental, social, and spiritual rejuvenation. By serving both students and the people of Belize and Haiti, I found purpose. Through physical labor, I found focus. Through reflection and time away from the routine of life, I found meaning. Through bonding and social interactions, I found connection. Through the mental stimulation that came from learning new skills, I found stimulation. By taking time for unhurried time with God, I grew spiritually. I found that by getting outside of myself to focus on others, something amazing happened—I was renewed, and I found a new level of creativity and strength. I found emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental health again.

Between mid-June and mid-July, my life was only about mission trips; the details of my dissertation were far from my thoughts. When I returned from the second mission trip in mid-July, I picked up the baton of dissertation research with renewed drive, interest, and energy. And

because I trusted in the message from my inner soul to do these service activities for others, as well as for me, I have been blessed.

Education for the Whole Person

Ask a hundred people what a great life looks like and you'll probably get a hundred different answers—but certain answers will make virtually everyone's list. A great life includes . . . knowing that you made a difference in the lives of others, knowing that you got something out of it, and you gave something wonderful back. (Zandra & Yamada, 2009, p. 1)

Higher education has historically implied a concern for “the whole person.” This means that the “whole person”—the integrated personality at home, in the world, and with himself or herself—is prepared for leading, and for leadership positions in society (Englund, 2002). Jacob (1961) argues, and Hersh (2005) agrees, that education has succeeded at developing the intellectual knowledge and skills for addressing the issues in society, but has failed at developing the person at the personal core, where meaning, growth, and self-direction reside, and where the person will take personal action toward a problem in society. It has been believed that education has played a role in educating individuals to be key players in social leadership, such as public administrators, who are instrumental in running community programs; however, education has fallen short in its influence to develop “conscientious private citizens” who have the personal motivation to give back (Jacob, 1961).

Tom Rath and Donald Clifton (2004) demonstrate this point in their bestseller *How Full Is Your Bucket?* They share a parable of the dipper and the bucket. They say that “each of us has an invisible bucket.” This bucket is filled and emptied depending on what others say and do to us. In addition, each of us has an invisible dipper. Rath and Clifton describe it in this way:

Each of us also has an invisible dipper. When we use that dipper to fill other people's buckets—by saying or doing things to increase their positive emotions—we also fill our own bucket. But when we use that dipper to dip from others' buckets—by saying or doing things that decrease their positive emotions—we diminish ourselves. Like the cup that runneth over, a full bucket gives us a positive outlook and renewed energy. (2004, p. 5)

What this parable means is that when a person acts in such a way that demonstrates caring and service to others—whether the activity is small, private, and at home, or large, public, and supported by a corporation—“the bucket” gets filled. But when a person acts selfishly, irresponsibly, or unethically, he is emptying the bucket; as a result, he is

diminishing himself.

Romans 12:2 offers some perspective: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (NIV). In the School of Allied Health Professions at Loma Linda University, the Operation Service mission trips were created to help our students to develop at the personal core level, where they would have an opportunity to grow personally and spiritually, become more sensitized to the problems of the world, and be renewed through international travel and interdisciplinary relationships.

When I look back at the day that I asked the “what if” question of X-ray students going on a mission trip, I now see that my own body and soul were crying out for help. Since I have added mission trips as a key leisure renewal activity in my life, I am constantly being revitalized, rejuvenated, and restored with vigor, new life, vitality, and soundness of health. Feeling good and being healthy doesn’t just happen. We must be intentional. Living a life in balance means taking the necessary time to renew ourselves as well as to give back to others.

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