

## Lesson 1

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# PRUNE CAREFULLY . . . AND OFTEN!

We need only look at all the people who rushed to help after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States to see the value of pruning. When needs are perceived, action is prized—no matter what the personal consequences are.

Contrary to popular thinking, I don't believe most people are self-centered today. In fact, in my experience, the opposite is true.

One of the greatest gifts we can offer when we reach out to those who need help—family members, coworkers, friends, and those we meet each day—is a sense of our own peace. Paradoxically, a serious obstacle to doing this is failing to take responsibility for properly focusing and limiting our giving, lest our reaching out to others becomes undisciplined activism prompted by anxiety, duty, and guilt (what I

call superego compassion) rather than by a true attitude of kindness (ego compassion).

In 1985 I visited with Henri Nouwen, while he was teaching at Harvard University, to reflect on my work and life. As we sat in his kitchen we discussed the early chapters of a manuscript I was writing on the topic of availability. Being a very practical person—as well as inspired—Nouwen emphasized not only the gift of availability but also its dangers. In the midst of one of his sentences, he stopped and said, “There must be a scriptural theme that makes the point I wish to emphasize.” Then, his face lit up and he said, “Pruning! That’s it. Pruning is the theme I was looking for. It not only speaks of cutting back but also of the ultimate blossoming that takes place when it is done properly.”

This theme has remained with me as I have moved through my life and work. It is rewarding to prune our inner life of the causes and tendencies that block true discernment of what burdens we should and should not carry. And in the end it will reward those we are called to help. Moreover, becoming aware of and sensitive to the unrealistic expectations others have requires that we recognize how easily our natural efforts to be helpful can become distorted.

In my travels I heard a story about a priest who spent part of each night making sandwiches for the homeless. He would travel around the poorer parts of the city and distribute them. Even though his day was already full, this late night activity didn’t overwhelm him. It actually made him happy. He didn’t do it out of guilt, duty, or external pressure. He shared freely and openly in a way that made a difference for

him. Even when the street people rebuffed his offer of food, he didn't feel rejected or angry, because he wasn't doing it for the reward of acceptance or appreciation.

The media found out about him and printed a story about his work. Instantly his reputation grew and he became a minor celebrity. The public, even his fellow priests, started sending him money to support his ministry. Much to their surprise he sent back the money to everyone with a one-line note that said: "Make your own damn sandwiches!"

This man obviously knew who he was. He didn't let the needs, expectations, and projections of others infect his own simple sense of mission in life. He wasn't manipulated by the reactions—even flattery—of others, as many of us are. His sense of personal satisfaction wasn't dependent primarily on the approval of others. Everyone enjoys being liked and admired. It's natural to enjoy positive responses from others. The question this man had obviously asked himself and responded to appropriately is one we need to pose to ourselves: When does the cost of approval become too psychologically and spiritually expensive? The reality we must face is that what we do for others is often not enough to satisfy them. Given the great needs of many of the people who surround us, no one person can do everything, no matter how loving he or she may be.

Have you ever felt that the more you seem to do for others, the more dissatisfied some of them are? Or the more you try to be a good parent, daughter, physician, friend, or helper, the more guilty you feel? Silly, isn't it? Yet those are negative reactions we experience when we haven't taken time to

become centered, to understand and reflect on what our mission is—what we’re called to be in life. Not having a sense of what we should do and be in life makes us prey to the undue influence and control of others. Rather than exercising our desire to do something good, regardless of the results, we become manipulated by guilt, the reactions of others, and a distorted sense of duty. Sadly, little peace is experienced by either the giver or receiver when this happens. Moreover, at the critical moment when people really do need us to walk the extra mile with them, we pull back because we are just too tired to go on.

In many currently popular books, a solution to personal exhaustion and feeling overextended is to simplify your life, which is a good place to start. However, in addition to trimming the externals of our lives so we can live in a manageable way, an even more important inner simplification or pruning must take place. In therapy, mentoring, and spiritual guidance, people are taught to practice an inner pruning process. They are taught to “take a psychological and spiritual step back” when beginning to feel overwhelmed. One way to do this is to search the motives, fears, expectations, and habits that are causing our discomfort.

Taking this step back is not easy. If we pull back for reassessment, we may worry about other people’s reactions or fear possible rejection. We may not want to look at our own motivations for fear of finding them selfish. Yet, when we do take the time and space to quietly and gently question ourselves, we can get clear on what is happening, and take steps to correct it.

Availability to others relies directly on our ability to prune poor motivations so we are not prey to unrealistic expectations—either ours or those of others. When we do this the natural beauty of our life will spontaneously emerge and nurture others.

Several years ago there was a show on Irish television called *The Gay Byrne Hour*. Some loved it, some hated it, but almost everyone watched it. One of the special features of the show was a live Christmas Eve broadcast held outside on Grafton Street, a main street running through Dublin. During this particular show the host would invite people to spontaneously sing, tell stories, and interact with him.

One Christmas, a young woman convinced a friend to go with her to Grafton Street and try to get on the show. She had a good voice and thought it would be fun to test her talent in a live broadcast, never expecting the chance would actually present itself.

She and her friend went, and much to her surprise and delight, she was picked out of the crowd and asked if she would be interested in telling a story or singing something. She said she would be happy to share a song and started singing “O Holy Night.” People who were present said that as she was singing, all of Grafton Street gradually went silent. She sang like an angel. A man living in Ireland at the time told me that he felt almost all of Ireland went silent. One voice. No expectations from within herself or others. It was the unexpected hand of wonder in the ordinary. Never could this woman have expected the impact she would have. Yet, as in the case of the priest who made sandwiches for the

homeless, it was a natural way for her to share herself. The process of giving was the reward.

If only we could remember to prune away the unrealistic expectations, then the simple gifts we have could be shared without so much stress. They could reap rewards in sometimes unseen ways, no matter what the apparent results seem to be. But it is not easy to withstand the influence of a world so bent on overt accomplishments and public achievements. Still, when we are able to set aside the need for ongoing successes and ceaseless praise, not only will we feel a sense of joy, but we will touch many others with that same joy as well.

There is a cemetery in the United States famous for its impressive monuments. Probably the most imposing among them is one for a deceased military hero—a general. It lists all of the battles he fought and his lifetime accomplishments. Right next to it is a small stone erected for a beloved young wife who died when she was only twenty-one years old. Unlike the general's long epitaph, her grieving husband had only one line engraved in remembrance of her:

*Everywhere she went,  
she brought flowers.*

As Nouwen pointed out, the blossoms are the ultimate benefit of pruning. When we do this inner pruning, we are more likely to be aware of the flowers we bring to those we encounter along the way. Knowing this helps us to step back and reassess when we feel overwhelmed by unrealistic expectations that we or others hold. This first

lesson on pruning relies on our ability to gain such a sense of perspective by ensuring we are clear about our goals, especially when we are exerting more and more effort and feeling less and less satisfied by what we are doing. It is stepping back and reflecting on our motivations that makes all the difference.

## RECOGNIZE YOUR RENEWAL ZONES

When speaking with helping professionals after the September 11 attack on the US, I saw the feelings of futility in their faces. This was not surprising. I had seen such looks before during my two visits to Cambodia to work with employees of social service organizations working there. I saw how drained they were by their efforts to reach out to the Khmer people who were suffering from years of torture and horror. Some workers had never taken off two days in a row because they felt guilty that they were not doing enough.

I saw it again in the faces of relief workers evacuated to the US from Rwanda and Angola after atrocities and violence pulled those countries apart. Like most survivors of catastrophes, they viewed their situation with a feeling of luck and guilt for having been spared, for being able to move on.

As I listened to their stories of guilt, frustration, and futility in such situations, often I felt myself pulled in the



same downward direction. I started to think: “What can I do? I’m just listening. What good is that?” As soon as I became aware of this negative mood change, I stepped back within myself and realized how important the gift of a listening presence is. I also became thankful that I have carefully taken care of myself. By availing myself of the safe zones in my life, I can stay afloat to both relish and share my life with others who are undergoing rough times. After all, what good can you be to others if you’ve let yourself burn out in the process?

Sometimes the stress we face at work mingles with what we must face in our personal lives, and if we are not careful, we can sink psychologically and spiritually. Once, after a very intense couple of weeks in my own life, I decided to deal with the stress by stepping back slightly from my normal routine. Though usually an early riser, I rescheduled my early appointments and planned to sleep in a bit later the coming morning.

Instead, a ringing phone woke me even earlier than normal. Still half asleep I couldn’t figure out what the caller was trying to tell me and I said so. She finally realized she had woken me up and started her story again:

“There was a tornado yesterday here in Maryland and it killed two college students who were sisters, and injured their father.”

“I’m not sure why you’re calling me about this?”

“Well, the young women were daughters of a woman with whom your wife taught.”

That’s how the day—and next few weeks—got started.

When I arrived at the college later that morning, there was an email from someone at the Pentagon regarding the impact that the terrorist attack continued to have on his coworkers. This was quickly followed by a visit from someone who debriefed White House staffers following threats to their safety.

As I sat with all of this, the phone rang. It was my wife calling to tell me that her sister, who was at the heart of the family, had died in New York City. In several hours we would be on the road.

My first thought after this quick succession of events was: "Let me go home before anything else happens!" After arranging for the necessary coverage while I would be away, I went down to my car only to find a student sitting stunned and crying in the car next to mine. She was from New Zealand and had just received word that her father was dying. Shocked and upset, she was uncertain about whether or not she should make the twenty-hour flight home now or wait.

After we reflected about this for a few minutes, I offered a few words of support and went home. There I found out that traveling to New York would not be easy. Officers of the Bridge and Tunnel Authority were stopping automobiles and doing random checks because of a bomb threat. Consequently, traffic entering the city was backed up for hours. So, we took the train.

During my sister-in-law's wake, I spoke with family members who were involved in the rescue and security details at the World Trade Center. Their stories were poignant, powerful, and moving, but I didn't realize how deeply those