

Lesson 1

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.