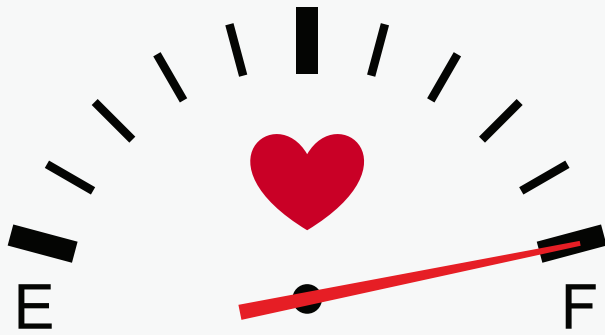


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# Conscious Service



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**Ten ways to reclaim your calling,  
move beyond burnout, and  
make a difference  
without sacrificing yourself**

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**Elizabeth Bishop**

As an educator in the field of health sciences, I often get asked by my students how I got “here” and how did my motivations and values shape my career trajectory. I often have stressed the need to follow my gut and the challenges in maintaining balance when you literally want to change the world. I have often wished there could be a resource to support their exploration into their own sense of purpose and abilities while filling the gap that is need in the “real world” without burning out. This book is the guide I have been looking for, as it encourages curiosity and a holistic approach to service. I will definitely be recommending this book to my students, who are aspiring health professionals, to help them promote their own well-being while becoming curious about their own journey to conscious service.

*Paola Ardiles, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University*

As a social worker, educator, and clinician, I have worked in various aspects of burnout prevention for over twenty-five years. *Conscious Service* offers a fresh and meaningful perspective on what it means to serve others while honoring the self.

Elizabeth Bishop offers a holistic invitation into a deeper understanding of what conscious service truly means and how to achieve it. Her thoughtful storytelling combined with calls to reflection and action is both informative and inspiring. While this is a book about service, it is ultimately a resonating call to helpers to come home to themselves in loving, compassionate, and caring ways.

This work speaks to the mind, body, heart, and spirit of helpers, asking provocative questions that encourage those of service to remember the self. Bishop invites us into a “pilgrimage of self-connection.” She asserts that compassion doesn’t make us tired; rather, overextension of the self is what exhausts us. If you want to sustain meaning and increase satisfaction in your service work, and you want to avoid patterns of abandoning yourself that can happen easily to those of us who serve the needs of others, this empowering book is for you.

*Lynda Monk, MSW, RSW, CPCC,  
Director of the International Association for Journal Writing*

In an era of unprecedented global pandemic and employee exhaustion and burnout, resignation of health-care service providers is a growing universal phenomenon. Paradoxically, the health-care community all too often serves others at the expense of their own health and welfare. Our natural predilection toward altruism all too often negates care of self, without which we are seriously constrained in our ability to serve others.

*Conscious Service* provides a way out of this destructive health-care paradox. Brilliantly written, this treatise in how we process thoughts and connect with others fosters what may be a new generation of thought for training our future health-care providers to be knowledgeable, skillful, dutiful, and altruistic. Such physician traits are required for accreditation of all AAMC medical schools and teaching hospitals. *Conscious Service* would be a useful addition to medical humanities, community science, and bedside rounds for all health-care professionals. The future livelihood of the health-care professions may benefit greatly from the contents herein.

*Dr. Brian W. Tobin, PhD, Executive Director, Synergy Global Health Foundation, Inc., Washington, D.C., and former Associate Dean, Department Chair, Professor of Medical Education, Biomedical Science, Family and Community Medicine, Pediatrics, and Internal Medicine, USCSOMG, PLFSOM, MUSM, AECOM*

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Editor's note:

This publication is not intended as a substitute for the advice of health-care professionals. All the stories in this book are based on actual experiences and personal interviews. Names and certain facts have been changed to protect the anonymity of the people who so generously shared their stories for this book.

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*For Barb*

*Without any words, my profound teacher*

*and*

*To Life*

*An endless source of mysterious curiosity*



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To those who agreed to share their stories for inclusion in this book, and to those who offered to read and endorse this work, my deep gratitude. And to all my spiritual teachers—past and present—whose wisdom I continually work to integrate. Your collective work has inspired my understanding of spiritual qualities and human connection.

For my loved ones now departed from this world, I am grateful for our relationships and your ongoing presence in my life. The veil is thin, indeed.

To my sisters and brothers through blood or blessing: Margaret and Steve, Sally, Michelle, Silvana, Erika, Greg and Jelena. Thank you for the laughter, tears, and safe place to land.

For the inspiration to be at my best, especially when I lose my place, my children, Taylor and Shino; Melanie and my beautiful grandson, Cohen—I love and appreciate you with all my heart.

I am forever grateful for the learning and growth that's come from each of you whose paths I have crossed in a service relationship, whether I was the provider or the recipient. I have been endowed with the gift of your stories and embraced by your willingness to hear mine.

I have worked with some of the most amazing people over the course of my career, including colleagues, adult learners, and community partners. Our shared journeys have left permanent etches in my heart and are deeply cherished.

To my traveling companions. When and where our challenges overshadowed the love, thank you for walking the thorny path with me.

Sometimes life shows up in unexpected ways and we are forever changed. Thank you, T, for being such a sweet surprise.

And finally, I thank the work of conscious service itself. You came to me and through me like a divine gift—at times embraced, at times rejected. I am humbly aware that your intent was always for my highest good. I'm glad you didn't give up.

And I am deeply grateful.

## PREFACE

Because you are holding this book right now, I assume you have some kind of a desire to serve in the world. You might have built a years-long career in health care or education or human services, or maybe you're just starting out. Perhaps your calling is to a healing profession like massage or Reiki, or to some specific work beyond or complementary to what have been called the traditional helping professions. You might be looking for ways to volunteer your time or donate your effort. Or maybe you're caring for a loved one at home and facing facts that might alter your identity as well as affect the way you spend your days and nights. Opportunities to serve are ever present. Sometimes they arise out of the blue. These days they can seem more urgent and apparent than ever.

As the harsh realities of the messes we have created in our relationships with each other and the planet continue to emerge, illuminated and catalyzed by a global pandemic, we're starting to see cracks in the ways we've understood and embodied vocations of service. We've also become more aware of how service providers like you and me seem set up to suffer. Hard as it is, this moment of dawning awareness is a gift. Let's honor this opportunity. Let's decide that the work of service doesn't have to automatically include sacrificing our sanity, health, safety, and soul. Let's build a new way to serve each other from the heart of our humanity.

I heard a call to serve very early in life, and I knew that whatever I chose as a career would involve some kind of service to others. I dove deep, gave all I had, and sought to change the world with the power of my goodwill and my love. When, some years later, I found myself feeling defeated, exhausted, and empty, I didn't know what had happened or why I felt like such a failure. I didn't understand the important relationship between who I was at my core and what I could offer the world.

In the years that followed, I embarked on a journey of spiritual exploration and personal development. Along the way, I began to see

that if my desire to serve the world with my gifts and my energy and my time was going to be sustainable for me and accessible to and effective with the people I wanted to serve, I had to get to know and love myself. Through this lens, my view of service expanded. Service's generous power could not be reserved for my career; it also had to matter in my personal relationships—including the way I regarded and treated myself.

I came to imagine service as an energy that can be expressed in long-term relationships with the people I love most as well as in a moment with a stranger. Service isn't simply a career category or a day job. It is a way of life, and it begins with being of service to our own hearts first.

Writing this book has been a personal, spiritual, and evolutionary process for me. I share with you because our vocations of service connect us. My learning has emerged through my traditional career in services, my curiosity about alternative approaches, my commitment to spiritual exploration, and the richness of my personal relationships, not to mention my deep dives into the dark corners of my own soul.

As new principles and insights have emerged, I've made it my mission to determine how they apply in every experience. I want you to be able to use these insights, as I have, to embrace who you are. I want you to be able to integrate this knowledge, which has rippled into nearly every area of my life, into what you do. Life rarely offers wisdom that applies only to a single person or situation. Our calling includes applying what we receive and sharing it with others.

We each have a unique story. I share from the perspective of my experience and what I have learned and grappled with over the years. I hope you feel an affinity with these ideas and the insights they invite. I hope that the call to conscious service resonates with your life and what you've learned and loved and struggled through. And throughout that experience, I pray that you can give voice to your personal story—past, present, and future—and embrace the ways more conscious and self-connected service can add peace and joy to your life and love to your work.

With all my love,  
Elizabeth

# Conscious Service





# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vital importance of first responders, health-care workers, and other service providers—many of whom have been deemed “essential” in policy as well as in popular imagination. This designation has served as a kind of honorific, highlighting the heroic nature of people whose callings expose them to unique hazards. It has also prompted a conversation about how we as a society actually value, care for, and reward those whose daily work is vital to the basic function of public health and safety (as well as to social services, commerce, education, and elder and child care).

The occupational hazards that service providers face are not limited to contagious diseases like the coronavirus. These years of ongoing crisis have also revealed the burden of secondary trauma, demoralization, and burnout that many of these jobs include. These effects, distressingly familiar to many in the service industries, have only been heightened by the relentlessness of the pandemic, by the ways it has been politicized, and by the surge of human need that has been exacerbated by the added demands this global health crisis has placed on every category of human service.

Fueled by fear and a kind of desperation, we have developed a language about service often includes metaphors borrowed from warfare. We talk about “front lines” and people serving “in the trenches.” Solutions to challenges are addressed with “boots on the ground” and “plans of attack.” Our words are geared up for battle. It’s no wonder that we so often see a challenge as an enemy and a service relationship as a place to win or lose.

Our current situation is a potential catalyst for transformation not only in the ways we structure our public health and social service systems, but also in the words we use to imagine and describe the work

itself. We can step away from us-versus-them thinking and learn how to serve each other as a unified human collective.

Service is an energetic force. Service is about reciprocity, fulfillment, and responsiveness. Too often we experience it as tinged with exhaustion, burnout, and social and cultural warfare. Conscious service invites us to access and harness this energy, contribute to the transformation of dysfunctional systems and ways of being, and join in creating vibrant and sustainable communities that are marked by hope instead of fear.

This generation-defining era offers an opportunity for us to think and act differently. We stand in a moment where the faults and shortcomings of our current thinking and organizing in the human service sector can be first noticed and then transformed into healthier and more human-centered models. It's time for a paradigm shift in the way we service providers approach and understand our work, and for a similar shift in the way our society educates, trains, deploys, organizes, and supports those of us who take on callings and careers as service providers.

The emotional and spiritual challenges facing service providers have been of concern since I started in the field over forty years ago. Today the crisis facing service providers has become apparent not only to those of us experiencing it, but also to those who love us, as well as the community at large. This isn't just because nearly everyone depends on or will depend on some kind of service in our lives; beyond the crisis of the coronavirus pandemic, the current state of disharmony, inequity, and marginalization in the world has deepened these concerns and brought them into wider focus.

It's time to make the happiness, health, and joy of service providers as essential as the work we're called to undertake in service to the world. In his wonderful book *A Deep Breath of Life*, Alan Cohen puts this quite simply: "If your vision of service does not include your own happiness, you've left out a very important person."

When we first step on the path of service, few of us really know what we're getting into. We have grand visions of how we can contribute. Often, we're ill-prepared to include our happiness in this vision, and

poorly supported when it comes to managing the discrepancy between our ideals and the realities we come to know in our work.

In the professional sector, many service providers go through a process of disillusionment. We wonder how we went from “I’m going to change the world” to simply struggling to get through the day. This personal angst eventually shows up in the quality of our service. Engaged and effective service is next to impossible when the human resources—the people at the heart of every human service effort—are strained, overwhelmed, disconnected, and unsupported. And everyone loses.

I believe we lose because our approaches are based on outdated and often contradictory beliefs about service. These include cultural assumptions about altruism and the self-sustaining nobility of self-sacrifice in service roles, as well as employer-driven directives about the need for compartmentalization and rigid boundaries. As a group, service providers have readily absorbed these contradictory myths and instructions. The result is an unsustainable paradox whose tension our bodies and minds must hold: we try to effectively and compassionately respond to the serious and interrelated needs of others while also obeying ineffective—if well-intentioned—directives about self-care and professional distance.

Many people believe that the solution to what ails us is achieving a thing called work-life balance. To avoid burnout and its related problems, we’re told, we need to find a way to separate our lives from our work.

Managing work-life balance has become a kind of holy grail for those who are concerned about worker turnover and employee morale. This interest isn’t limited to service industries. The premise assumes that being at work isn’t and shouldn’t be a part of living our lives.

Behind most prescriptions for creating work-life balance is a suggestion that when we’re engaged with our work, we ought to be estranged from other aspects of our lives, and when we go home we should simply reverse that process. This model may have addressed the needs of a twentieth-century automobile assembly-line worker, but those of us whose vocations involve the emotional, relational, and spiritual energies

of service along with the physical and cognitive labor of hands and head need something altogether different.

Most interpretations of work-life balance are based on the false dichotomy of separation. The truth is that our work and our lives are intertwined, no matter how many guidelines and boundaries we build to make them seem separate.

So what can we do?

We can begin with the matter of balance. If you are feeling out of balance when it comes to your work and your life, reorganizing the *shape* of one or the other is like the proverbial rearranging of deck chairs on a sinking ship. Instead, see what you can do about the *substance*.

Conscious service is concerned with the substance.

This approach is based on the radical assumption that the work we do can be a source of joy and fulfillment, and that joy and fulfillment are not merely fringe benefits of service; they're the heart of the matter. Conscious service acknowledges the good intentions behind superficial strategies for self-care, and it moves beyond them to access the power of responsibility, choice, and inspired action with which we can connect to ourselves in respectful, compassionate, and life-giving ways—ways that take seriously the forces that motivated us to pursue a life of service in the first place. Conscious service begins with the premise that service is a form of love and that our ability to authentically and honorably love others must begin with our capacity to respect and care for ourselves with compassion and affection. It recognizes that compassion does not make us tired; overextension of self and lack of self-compassion are what exhaust us.

In a forty-plus-year career in service, I have personally experienced burnout, addiction, recovery, and personal loss alongside the joys of falling in love, being a mom and grandma, connecting to my passions, and achieving many personal and career goals. I've witnessed the impact of tragedy, trauma, healing, and faith. These experiences have led to insight, growth, and expansion as I've made connections between how I live my life personally and how I show up in service. The process is not always

pretty. My own journey seems as layered as the proverbial onion. Yet it has shaped the insights I offer here.

This book is for individuals in vocations of service at all stages of career development, from educational preparation through retirement, from direct service provision to management. It speaks to those in both traditional and alternative roles. Even if service isn't the core focus of your vocation, you can discover keys to feeling better as you serve, live on purpose, and contribute with impact.

If you are interested in finding and sustaining meaning in your service, this book and its ten invitations are for you. If you need creative ways to manage stress and burnout, you're welcome here. If you're committed to high-quality service and can't quite figure out where or how that can happen, come on in. Millions of people like you and me are motivated to participate in the betterment of our world and don't know where to begin.

You can start today, right where you are.



## How to Get the Most from This Book

This book is built as a series of ten invitations. Imagine each is addressed to you personally. I lined them up with some reasons in mind, but you're welcome to open the book and consider them in any order that suits you or seems right. Each invitation offers a way into the experience of more conscious service. Some of these may seem more attractive to you than others; that's okay. It's actually perfect. Invitations are intended to make you feel welcome and wanted, not obligated. Come as you are.

Beneath the broad banner of each invitation, you'll find a short introduction followed by a handful of brief sections. Each brief section is intended to offer a window on one or more aspects of the main invitation. Some introduce important concepts or follow lines of logic that help make the idea at work come alive or make more sense. Some share stories that illustrate how the invitations to conscious service have been embraced and accepted by people in all kinds of callings. Occasionally I'll share a snapshot from my own experience—some moment that cemented an idea or brought me to a different level of awareness or offered a key insight. Every now and then I'll pipe up with a special word of encouragement or clarification.

As you peruse these invitations and consider what accepting their call might mean for your life as a service provider, I'll challenge you to pay attention to your feelings. You'll come to learn that the conscious service approach takes our intuition seriously. Call it your gut, your instinct, or the voice of your heart. This special human sense is often a reliable guide as we consider something new—whether that's a relationship, a big life decision (a change of jobs, a move), or a new idea or perspective.

The heart's guidance isn't usually as exact as a turn-by-turn GPS. It often emerges through the contrasting feelings of resonance and resistance.



## **Resonance**

Resonance is a lot like recognition. When something resonates with us, we usually have a sense of familiarity and alignment. Bells ring. The lightbulb goes on. It is an “aha” moment. Something old makes a new kind of sense. I hope this happens a lot for you as you read this book. I believe a great many of the experiences you read about will be familiar, sometimes lamentably so.

Resonance might show up in how easy it is for you to read, or how fast you can digest the content. This feeling can also activate the energy of your curiosity. It can make you want to explore more, learn more. It can even lead you to connect dots and loop in ideas that I’ve not considered or included. This is a gift.

When you feel the deep chime of resonance, when your experience seems affirmed by being seen and reflected, and when the urge to discover more rises up within you, you are on the brink of breakthrough. Follow that.

## **Resistance**

It’s not all bells of recognition and flashing lights of heartfelt homecoming, of course. Some of this material may irritate you or make no sense. I may offer an idea or suggest a concept or share a story that leaves you shaking your head and rolling your eyes. But don’t worry. This doesn’t necessarily mean either of us is right or wrong about anything. It just means you’ve identified a place of resistance.

Resistance is an indicator. It means we’re in uncharted or unfamiliar territory. We can use this feeling as a cue to run back to the places where we feel less exposed and uncertain, or we can stick around long enough to look at things from a new perspective. Put your resistance to work for you. When you notice your inner judge is ready to raise its gavel, pause for a few breaths. Ask clarifying questions. Delve deeper. Investigate the source of your discomfort. You may stumble upon the very nugget of wisdom that you have been waiting for your whole life.

Even though resonance is usually a more enjoyable feeling—it's lighter, clearer, and more exciting—resistance is an equally powerful tool for enlightenment, growth, and expansion. We learn through contrast as well as correspondence, and from people who push our buttons as well as friends we've had forever (who often push our buttons in their own ways).

## **Self-Abandonment**

Self-abandonment describes the experience of repeatedly choosing against one's own needs in the moment. It's the emotional equivalent of walking away from yourself precisely when you need a friend by your side. One of my wise guides, Sensei Christopher Witecki, was the first to teach me about this spiritual and psychological phenomenon. Compared to the active energies of resonance and resistance, self-abandonment is simply an absence. When we abandon ourselves, we step away from the possibility of authentic connection with others as well as new ideas, approaches, or possibilities in our lives.

The risk and lure of self-abandonment, as well as its many self-negating expressions, will be a core theme throughout our shared exploration. As a concept that describes an experience, self-abandonment is especially applicable to service providers.

We service providers often describe ourselves as sensitive souls. Frequently motivated by a desire to do good and make a difference, we can also be quite externally driven. Any time we are more comfortable giving than receiving, we are at risk for self-abandonment and overextension. This often shows up in symptoms like burnout, exhaustion, and disillusionment.

And these feelings really suck.

They lead us to try and soothe our symptoms and escape painful experiences through all sorts of strategies, many of which seem like self-care but end up as self-harm. Too often this leads to substance use disorders or other patterns of addictive behavior. By the time we're engaging

in any form of addiction, we've likely been unbalanced, out of alignment, and hurting for a while.

As you make your way through the following pages, you will have an opportunity to explore your own personal escape routes as well as the experiences, both internal and external, that have you looking for those ways out.

You might experience a sense of shame as we take up these topics together. Most of us have been conditioned to hide our pains and traumas, along with any activities we use to manage them. Addictive behaviors carry stigma in many of our callings, and the suggestion that service providers might need assistance is sometimes met with scorn or suspicion. For now, simply be aware of any resonance or resistance you might feel as we discuss substance use and self-destructive behavior and what these might mean for you, both personally and as a service provider.

Also trust that relief and recovery are real and possible. Conscious service begins with the invitation to embrace yourself wholly and with love, no matter what condition you're in at the moment.

### **Guiding Questions**

Before you open whatever initial invitation may have caught your eye when you scanned the table of contents, I've got one more word about how this book works. At the close of many of the sections you will find a question or two. The questions are meant as prompts for your imagination and anchors for applying the ideas at work within each invitation to areas of your life where they can matter. Reflecting on and responding to them is one way you can make reading this book an active process.

You'll note that most of these questions are about you and your experience. Remaining centered in understanding our own path and determining our next step is more productive than seeking answers for or about other people. When the ideas and concepts you're reading lead you to wonder how others might react or respond (or, worse yet, how you think others might want *you* to respond), try and refocus your attention on yourself and what you want to understand more clearly or more fully.

The most powerful guiding questions illuminate a wide range of possibilities for learning and growth. Questions that keep us mired in over-analysis of the past keep us stuck there.

### **You Are Welcome Here**

As you consider the ten invitations to conscious service, pay attention to what resonates with you and what triggers your resistance. Hold your hurts with compassion, and gently set aside any impulses to step away from your own side. Stay tuned in to your feelings; they will help you decide where to focus your energy. Stay curious. Use questions as opportunities to test ideas and experiment with integrating these ways of being into your whole life. Trust that this journey welcomes all of you. Follow the power, the energy, the curiosity, and the whispers of your heart. These things exist to guide you.



# Know Why You're Here

## An Invitation to Purpose

In a book full of invitations, this first one welcomes you to wonder about why you do what you do, and what makes you *you*.

And if that sounds a little too heady, read the title again. This chapter invites you to consider—and even take a shot at saying—why you're here: on the planet, in your life, at your best. It's an invitation to discover and describe your purpose. *Purpose*, as I'm using the word here, is less to suggest that there's one narrow and specific use for you in the world, and more a way of describing how actions taken *on purpose* are completely different from events that happen by accident.

Knowing why we're here allows us the opportunity to live on purpose.

When we don't know why we're here—when our life and work seem accidental or incidental—we often end up feeling insignificant and lost. It is challenging, in any case, to capture evidence in the external world that the things we do even matter. This is often true in our personal and professional relationships as well as in our service. When we're able to describe our unique reasons for doing what we do, we have a way to find and feel evidence of our impact according to an internal set of measures that align with and reflect what is most important to us.

The invitation to purpose assumes that each of us would rather make choices and invest our energies and do things *intentionally* instead of by

accident. It assumes we'd benefit from knowing what we're doing, and why, rather than stumbling along without a clue. It assumes we'd rather understand and enjoy how who we are and what we do is meaningful to others, and how our contributions make a difference in the world. These assumptions apply to our whole lives, by the way, not only our jobs.

Connecting to our purpose can provide a beacon in dark and murky times when we feel lost, adrift, or stuck. On a practical level, being able to articulate our purpose can help us avoid unthinkingly adopting or copying someone else's. It can also help explain why some situations or jobs or relationships seem to baffle or bewilder us and some feel easy as anything.

This chapter invites you to become more aware of what drives you, what fulfills you, what comes naturally to you, and how you'd like to feel as you pursue your callings. It also tries to point out opportunities to deepen your capacity for service.

Purpose is a benchmark against which you can measure not only the actions of your service, but also your areas of personal contribution and where you want to grow. In exploring the elements that help define and describe your personal purpose, you'll learn how to better align what you do, how you do it, and how it feels to do it in ways that reflect your most treasured values and deepest beliefs.

As you will hear over and over again in the following pages, your human *being*—your unique self—is an integral element of the service you offer in the world. *You* matter. Always. Exploring what matters to you, and why, is a powerful first venture toward conscious service. The self-knowledge you find here will guide you throughout our shared journey of conscious service, even as your motivations, values, and belief systems continue to evolve and transform.



## The Call to Service

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Many service providers I know have experienced, in some way, a sense of being called into service. Whether it was through the encouragement or example of someone they admire, a book they read, a personal experience of being on the receiving end of care, or an instance of divine timing, there was a voice within that told them, *This is it! Keep going!*

One colleague described her experience of being called as a “deep knowing” that her specific contribution was needed. Another friend says it feels like an unshakable desire to make a difference in the world. Most people who use the language of *call* to describe what they have heard and responded to say something along the lines of “I *just knew*.”

The call in my own life arrived through a book I read as a teenager. In addition to sparking and affirming a lifelong path of service, this experience also revealed the magic way books are able to connect us with life-changing stories of people we’ll never meet. The book was called *One Child* by Torey Hayden, and it opened my imagination to how changing the world often starts with making a difference in one other person’s life. At the age of fourteen, I *just knew* that answering this call would also make a difference in my own.

I wasn’t wrong.

I used to believe that we each receive a single, divine calling and that I had heard mine. This belief, inspired by an amazing story of the resilient power of love, helped me focus my passion and make courageous personal decisions and career moves. It led me to teachers and companions and experiences that changed my life and expanded my mind and heart in profound ways.

My long and winding journey since has given me a broader perspective about the call. I’ve come to understand that any time our soul desires expansion, a new call is in the works. Each call offers an opportunity to strengthen our commitment, refine our contribution, step more deeply into service, and know ourselves more fully.



Some of these ongoing calls affirm our direction. Others alter our path entirely. The latter usually arrive when we're so wrapped up in a struggle that we require a lightning flash to get our attention.

Years into one career, I found myself standing in the shower on a Tuesday morning preparing for another mundane day at the office. My unconscious mantra at the time was something like "Just let me get through the day."

When had I gone from "I'm going to change the world!" to struggling to survive? I felt myself come awake. I realized how far away I was from the energy and optimism of that original call, and had been for months—maybe even years. In my state of disconnection, I had missed all the signs that were telling me it was time for a shift. Instead, I found myself hiding in the shower, mumbling about making it through a work shift, dreading the moment I'd have to turn off the tap and face the day.

If you'll pardon the pun, that watershed moment marked a divine turning point for me. Prompted by the voice of my discontent and discomfort, the call had spoken again. Having heard, I could pay attention to the guidance it was offering.

In addition to providing us with specific directions, our calls contain a plethora of information that offers direction and detail as we begin to notice and respond to them. Sometimes, the path is very clear. We take a step in a desired direction and another door opens. Feedback and progress keep us moving forward. The more we understand the nuances of this calling, the more clarity we access when it comes to our unique expression of service in the world.

Sometimes trying to understand these nuances is a process of trial and error, attempt and rejection. This can feel like fumbling in the dark, with only our heart's sense of direction as a compass. For me, these more difficult experiences have offered the most powerful opportunities for transformation and brought me to places and people who were ready for my contribution.

Often we have help in hearing and understanding these calls.

I once job-shared a position with a friend and longtime colleague. We worked well together and had a shared vision. Planning our

organization's activities a few months at a time, we would focus on specific goals we hoped to achieve. We honed in on the qualities we were striving to encourage and develop in the service provider teams we led. As part of this process, we took time to check in with each other as well.

As we named goals and highlighted the successes and the frustrations related to meeting them, we would ask each other if there was still more for us to contribute. And more powerfully, we asked one another if we still felt inspired to contribute—if we still felt called. When the answer was affirmative, we carried on with a deepened commitment. Eventually, that answer changed. We had the combined sense that our part in the work there was complete, even though there was more that could and would be done. We recognized that the roles we held now required a different energy, not ours but someone else's. It became clear to both of us that it was time to move on.

When something stops calling you, pay attention to that. Don't try to track it down. Sometimes it's time to let go. A new call is emerging.

## What Am I Even Talking About?

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The idea of a divine call might not resonate with you for any number of reasons.

That's okay.

I've met lots of people over the years who heard very distinctive calls to serve at one point or another, but not everybody has this experience. Some of us simply found ourselves on the path of service and fell in love with it after the fact. Some of us showed up in these callings because we needed to step on a career path somewhere and it looked like service could be an accessible place to begin.

It is possible that you find yourself in a service role and aren't sure how you got there. Maybe you backed into a teaching job or a gig driving a school bus, and now you love it. Maybe you never felt divine clarity or stirrings in your heart to give back or change the world. Maybe you sat down with a guidance counselor in high school and social work or pharmacy tech or law enforcement popped up on the list and looked interesting or easy or like it paid pretty well.

Maybe your family always expected you to go into nursing or neuroscience. Maybe a career in medicine was an unfulfilled dream they had for themselves. Maybe the honor and status associated with one particular career was part of a story you inherited and pursued without question.

Maybe you are both family member and service provider. Maybe you are a parent or a child or spouse or sibling of someone with extraordinary needs. Maybe this person's needs require an investment of your time, energy, and love that is greater than you ever expected.

I don't know how you got here, but I know that you're here now. Somehow you've landed in a place where your skills and gifts and presence are positioned to make an impact in somebody else's life. In the next few pages we're going to explore what keeps you going, what can keep you grounded, and what might make whatever service you're uniquely equipped to offer more rewarding and satisfying for you and more whole, human, and helpful for whomever you happen to serve.

## Two Types of Motivation

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Motivation is what keeps us going along any given road. Think of it as the gasoline in our metaphorical tank. Without enough fuel, we won't get far. With the wrong fuel, we might be able to sputter along for a while, but we risk damaging the engine.

External motivators are those that fuel us from outside ourselves. They're contingent, which means they depend on people or circumstances or events that lie beyond our control. In the metaphor, external motivators are like the gas in the pump, which needs to be regularly replenished by someone whenever it gets low.

And, depending on your mileage or how heavy you are on the pedal, it gets low pretty often, and sometimes fairly fast.

Internal motivators come from inside us. They're unique to each of us and don't depend on the actions of others. They can be affected by other people and external circumstances, but they exist on their own, and they provide energy and direction all by themselves.

This is, of course, where the metaphor of the engine and the gas breaks down. Cars are incapable of internal motivation. They only start and move when the right combination of external forces comes together to make them do so. But people aren't machines. We human beings have the ability to mix the ways we are motivated and to draw power from within ourselves as well as receive and rely on the energy and assistance we get from others.

Both types of motivators have merit and impact in our lives. External motivators can be extremely powerful drivers toward specific outcomes or achievements. They can also lose their effectiveness as what matters to us changes. Internal motivators are usually related to longer-term processes and experiences. They're more likely to offer energy that lasts.

**What keeps you showing up in your service vocation?**

**What parts of your work feel most rewarding?**

## External Driving Forces

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External motivators are easy to recognize. They sometimes even put food on the table or gas in the literal gas tank. But by themselves they will always be insufficient to the task of keeping us going in ways that help us thrive. Most external motivators demonstrate diminishing returns, meaning they require more and more inputs (money, power, recognition) while offering less and less of the energy they once supplied. For a time, they seem to supply something we're seeking; the energy we gain from each reward sustains us and powers us along toward the next. But before long each reward begins to seem lighter, or the work of reaching the next one becomes heavier—or both. As soon as those scales tip—and they always tip—we can find ourselves depleted, confused, and even angry.

Added to this, the more external the motivator, the less effective it is. It might work for a short period of time, and then the bottom falls out. That's why so many New Year's resolutions—promises motivated mainly by the passing of an arbitrary date—have fallen apart by Groundhog Day.

### The Almighty Dollar

Money is often seen as the ultimate external motivator. In vocations of service, this basic understanding has become complicated. Many of us have come to equate being of service with low pay and meager benefits. We've been taught that service, unlike selling shoes or trading stocks, ought to occupy a space that is somehow above merely financial matters. We *shouldn't* want to earn a great living as a result of our service. It *should* be an altruistic act that has nothing to do with financial gain.

No matter how often it uses the word *essential*, our culture of productivity has a hard time rewarding service to humanity in tangible ways. Nearly all health-care organizations, educational institutions, and human services systems operate from a position of scarcity. The unrelenting message is *There's not enough*. Not enough workers. Not enough funding. Not enough resources. Nothing left in the budget. This running

assumption about scarcity, combined with an unwillingness to value the work of schoolteachers and home health aides as highly as the work of bankers or advertising executives, perpetuates the myth that service requires sacrifice. A system that's based on this foundation both encourages and expects service providers to burn out.

It's not surprising, given this, how so many service providers have come to exclude ourselves and downplay our personal desires in the process of providing service. We might equate the desire for financial abundance or freedom with being greedy or with having ulterior motives. We might feel like we are being shady or selfish if we benefit financially while those who need and rely on our service continue to suffer.

Those working in traditional service roles frequently rely on side jobs and overtime to make ends meet. Facing a public that doesn't always understand how to value their gifts, alternative service providers can have a hard time pricing their services. It can feel tempting to just give away your time or energy. Personal service providers are rarely financially supported in their roles with loved ones and are often required to work full time, provide care for their loved ones, and regularly incur expenses to hire additional supports.

The truth is that your basic needs for health, security, and safety are as important as the needs of those you are hoping to serve. Your having less does not mean someone else will have more. No amount of lack that you accept, identify, or create in your life will automatically provide abundance for someone who has less than you do.

Of course money matters. Financial security and predictability are a cornerstone of stability for everyone, and service providers are no exception. Your work has value and worth, and you deserve to be compensated in ways that correspond to this value and allow you to live comfortably.

**When it comes to money, what would be a fair wage  
for the work you do as a service provider?**

As powerful as it is, the “almighty dollar” isn't the only external motivator in town. It shares space with a few common but less obvious forces.

## **The Impact of Our Contributions**

Since we tend to be uncomfortable talking about money, many service providers point to outcomes when we're asked about what motivates us. "We're not in it for the paycheck," we say; it's enough to see the light of learning in a child's eyes, or to be one link in a lifesaving chain that starts with first responders and ends with physical therapists. We want to make a difference in the world, and when we see that happening because of something we did, it feels really good. In the world of service, reports of positive outcomes and anecdotes about success are the currency that gets us noticed and supported, and these things frequently supply energy to keep us going.

And this works pretty well. Until it doesn't.

When we are unable to see or measure or describe the impact of our service, the energy-producing feedback loop between action and effect loses its power to motivate us. If we've relied on this external motivator as a primary driver, we can start to feel defeated or jaded or hopeless.

**What specific difference do you want to make in the world?**

**How will you know when you've accomplished this?**

## **Power**

Even when wages are low and money is tight, many service providers find motivation in the authority that comes with our roles. Whether you're a corrections officer or a second-grade teacher, being in charge of situations and people carries rewards as well as specific responsibilities.

In most relationships of service, power and agency are not equally distributed. Even if others have voice and choice, it's usually the service provider who facilitates access to the supports and solutions that affect people's lives in concrete ways. We're often the gatekeepers and decision makers. Some of us even bear the authority of the state from time to time. This can mean the difference between someone obtaining assistance or being denied or delayed. In some cases, it can mean making decisions about someone's freedom. Even alternative service providers

have been entrusted with power in service relationships with people who rely on them for help.

I wish I could say every service provider wielded this power well and always respected and responded to the needs and interests of the person seeking service. The sad truth is that we don't. Later in this book, we'll explore misuse of authority and identify ways we can monitor and manage the privilege that comes with power. For now, it's enough to notice that the authority and access that comes with many service roles is part of what keeps some of us in the work, for good or ill. Because it relies on relationships and transactions with others, power is an external motivator.

**Where does your current calling provide you with power over someone else?**

### **Status, Strokes, and Other People's Opinions**

Some people in vocations of service are motivated by the status that serving others can offer. We like to be recognized by friends and family—and even strangers—as people who put others before ourselves. It's not too hard to get accustomed to the recognition you get for the special qualities you must possess to be able to help people less fortunate. "I don't know how you do it." "I could never do what you do." "It takes a special kind of person to . . ." If you're at all like me, you enjoy the sense of importance that these remarks bestow on you.

And who wouldn't? In lots of ways they're true. Much of the work of service really does require a certain skill set and suit certain types of people. It's a fact that not everybody is cut out for the roles we serve. Part of the long work of changing the way our culture values and compensates service providers will include recognizing the truly essential nature of our work and the sophisticated skills and qualities of character that service requires.

If we have any doubts about our motives or integrity as service providers, getting this kind of praise can feel awkward or undeserved, but external affirmation and recognition, especially when it comes from a



trusted colleague or somebody we respect, is usually deeply motivating. The energy we get from being seen and understood by someone who knows what they're talking about is powerful. As we saw earlier, these relationships can be experienced as part of our ongoing call.

But working for the emotional rewards of positive recognition and celebratory feedback can be just as exhausting as chasing a paycheck. Doing anything solely for the sake of getting something or pleasing someone else has a shelf life.

**Whose opinion about your work matters most to you?**

**What are your top two external motivators?**

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*Finally! Conscious Service without burnout. If you're on a mission to save the world—or anyone in it, including yourself—this book will be your saving grace!”*

—Linda Sivertsen

This book is for anyone whose daily (or nightly) work includes caring for, teaching, helping, healing, being responsible for, or loving another human being. Although we call the people who provide these services “essential,” too many suffer from stress and burnout. Serving others seems too often to be making us sick. *Conscious Service* is about reclaiming the positive power at the heart of these callings.

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Elizabeth Bishop is the creator of The Conscious Service Approach™—practical principles designed to enhance both the experience of service providers and the quality of service they offer. She has taught at the post-secondary level for more than twenty-five years. Through teaching, writing, podcasts, and organizational consulting, Bishop facilitates an ongoing international discussion about what it means to be of service.



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