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Service Over Self (or Service and Self)

“Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty” is a phrase coined by a Berkeley peace activist in the 1980s. It was meant as a direct response to the 1970’s increase in violent crimes, but these simple words echo a concept well-rooted in cultures, religions, and even modern science: service to others is not just noble, it is essential for a life that is not only longer, but also more meaningful..

There are innumerable references on the importance of serving others, for the individual receiving the service, for the sake of the greater good, or for the benefit of the server themselves. The Catholic faith speaks strongly to this, as Pope Francis reminds us, “Rivers do not drink their own water; trees do not eat their own fruit...Life is good when you are happy; but much better when others are happy because of you.” These words don’t just describe generosity, they capture a deeper understanding of human purpose.

And the benefits of service go even deeper. Scientists, too, agree that compassion and warmth are fundamental to who we are. Our very lives begin with care. From birth, we rely on our mother’s love for survival, and as we grow, our well-being continues to depend on the support of others. With this deep connection it is no surprise that we experience joy when we help others feel joy. We are physiologically and spiritually wired for service. Research has shown

that people who regularly engage in volunteer work have lower mortality rates, better cognitive health in old age, and reduced risk of chronic illness. A 2013 study in *Psychological Science* even found that people who served with no expectation of reward lived longer than those who did not. This reinforces what religious teachings have long said: service driven by love, not obligation or recognition, is what transforms us.

At Cardinal Newman, the CBSL program challenges us not only to serve but to reflect. We are not only asked to think about how our experiences affect others, but also how they affect us. Through service, we are shaped into more compassionate, patient, and grounded people. We begin to ask better questions, less about personal achievement and more about how we can contribute. Service teaches us empathy, reminding us that behind every need is a person with a story. It brings humility as we encounter new struggles, and it strengthens our character, as we discover that real purpose often lies not in what we do for ourselves, but in what we give to others.

As the Dalai Lama said, “If a person is happier, his or her family is happier; if families are happy, communities are happy; and if communities are happy, nations are happy.” When we serve others, we build healthier communities and a more compassionate world.

That’s what makes service so powerful: its ability to uplift both the giver and the receiver. It sets off a chain reaction; one act of kindness can spark another, and then another, until lives and communities are transformed. The phrase “practice random acts of kindness,” while simple, holds a profound truth. As the Dalai Lama also reminds us, “Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can’t help them, at least don’t hurt them.” It is a path to inner peace,

stronger communities, and a better world. And perhaps most importantly, it is the path that helps us become who we are truly meant to be.