

## ***The Phelps Family***

The people in the Phelps family stories are a lot like me and some people I've known ...and maybe they're like you, too?

### ***Like A Different Person***

Well, of course I'm upset," Bernice said. "Your father will be in the hospital for another week and I'm not even well enough to visit on my own."

"Once he gets home," she added, "we'll both be stuck inside all winter. Last year was tough but I'm afraid this one will be worse."

Cindy was sorry she had asked. Usually her mother looked on the bright side, but she had done nothing but complain ever since she got in the car.

They pulled into the hospital ramp, looking for a spot that would shorten their walk.

"Remember a few years ago how Edith became my mother-in-law from hell?" Cindy asked. "All of a sudden I couldn't do anything right for her precious son and grandchildren."

"I remember that she nearly ruined our Thanksgiving dinner with her snide little comments." Bernice said. "And she gained so much weight! The exercise that woman needs is to push herself away from the table."

"Well, her weight is still an issue, but she's like a different person now," Cindy said. "The change seemed to happen after she got involved in the Community Caller program."

"What's that?" Bernice asked.

"Well, it's a program that trains people to volunteer as either a 'Friendly Visitor' or a 'Telephone Buddy'. Apparently, she learned a lot about community resources for seniors, but I think it was the stress management and communication training that made the biggest difference.

“She’s a lot calmer now, and doesn’t take her frustrations out on me. I even enjoyed her company for a whole day last week,” Cindy added.

“Well, that’s a little hard to believe,” Bernice said. “But I have so much to worry about; I could never get involved in something like that.”

The car stopped and Cindy turned off the engine. “Are you sure, Mom?”

## Helping Others is Good for You

Here’s a quiz:

1. A group of seniors were assigned to either get a massage, or give a massage to an infant. Which group reduced their stress the most?
2. How much happier are adolescents who want to help others, compared with those who don’t care about helping?

Answers:

1. The seniors who massaged the infants had a greater reduction in stress hormones.
2. The adolescents who wanted to help others were THREE times happier than the others.

Study after study<sup>7</sup> shows that helping others can improve *your* emotional and physical health.

- Consistent volunteering is associated with reduced depression in all age groups, and particularly in those aged 65 and older<sup>8</sup>
- People who volunteered were 30% less likely to experience physical limitations, even after controlling for lifestyle and prior health factors<sup>9</sup>
- A large California study<sup>10</sup> showed that those who volunteered more than four hours per week had an 44% reduction in mortality, after controlling for their health status

Evidence also shows that the opposite (i.e., being self-absorbed) is bad for you. For example, a study<sup>11</sup> of college students showed that “narcissists” (whose focus was on themselves) were more likely to have shorter romantic relationships. They were also more dishonest, over-controlling or violent than students who were more caring.

## Because of All the Pictures

Donald wondered if the noise from his stomach was louder than the clunky heater of his rusty car. As he rounded the corner, he grabbed at the textbooks that slid across the seat. He figured his fingers had been cold for about a half hour.

He crunched his car against the snow bank that walled the little house from the street. The TV flickered in the front window and he knew Mrs. Phelps was waiting.

He caught a whiff of the chicken dinner as he opened the insulated chest in his trunk. “Still warm,” he thought, remembering he just needed one since Joe was in the hospital. A minute later the rattle of the lock was followed by a creak and Bernice peered from behind the door.

“Ah, it’s my favorite caterer” she said as he stepped in, repeating the same joke Donald had heard every Tuesday and Thursday for nearly a year.

He smelled the cookies before she gestured to the covered plate. “Here, I’ve made you some oatmeal raisins to make sure that meat stays on your bones,” she said. “Come and sit for a minute and have a few with me.”

“Oh, no, I’m running late...” he started to say, noticing the warm brown eyes behind her thick glasses. “Well, maybe just a few minutes.”

“Good,” Bernice said, turning on her cane. “I’ll get you some milk to go with them.”

She smiled a little as she put the glass down. “You know, I’ve always wondered... Why does a young man like you spend the middle of a busy day delivering meals to an old lady like me?” She sat next to a table cluttered with tissues and medicine bottles.

Donald stared out at the snow as he chewed. “Well, you know... I think it was because of all the pictures at my Grandpa’s funeral. When I saw him as a young man with my Grandma, it really hit me: I’m a lot like him - and some day I’m going to be old, too.

“In the year before he died, I saw how much home-delivered meals helped him. There was also this Friendly Visitor program. Someone would come in to keep Grandpa company, so my Grandma could go shopping, have lunch with friends or just relax.

“So I decided I’d try to help other people who were, maybe, like my Grandpa ...or maybe like I might be some day.” He shrugged, and saw that her eyes were sparkling now.

He reached for another cookie. “How’s Joe doing?”

Suddenly, Bernice looked older. “Better, I think. But I don’t know what we’re going to do after he’s discharged.”

“Well, I’m not an expert,” he said, “but here’s how you can talk to people who have the answers,” pulling a flyer from a large envelope. “This describes the best places to call for anything from ‘affording what’s best’ to services to help you at home.” He paused while she looked at each page.

“The best place to call, huh?” she said, holding it a little closer. “Maybe this will help.”

A few minutes later, he steered away from the snow bank. “This is odd,” he thought. “My hands are cold, my car’s a wreck and I’m going to be late for my class. So why do I feel so good?”



*What do you think?*

- Donald didn’t make the connection that he was a lot like his Grandpa until he saw the pictures at his funeral.
  - How different are you than someone ....older than you? ...younger than you?
- How much satisfaction did Donald get from volunteering? ....How much satisfaction would you get?

## **Volunteer Opportunities**

Wherever you live, there are a lot of opportunities. Most communities offer similar programs (and similar benefits!) because they use the same state and federal funding sources. To learn more about the following, as well as other options, contact your local Office for the Aging or Department of Senior Services:

### *Senior Companion*

- The Senior Companion Program brings together volunteers age 60 and over with adults in their community who have difficulty with the simple tasks of day-to-day living. Companions help out on a personal level by assisting with shopping and light chores, interacting with doctors, or just making a friendly visit.
- Senior Companions may receive a tax-free stipend if income eligibility requirements are met. Senior Companions also receive pre-service and monthly training, an annual physical exam, transportation assistance and supplemental insurance coverage while they are serving.

### *Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP)*

- RSVP connects volunteers age 55 and over with service opportunities in their communities that match their interests and availability. From building houses to immunizing children, from enhancing the capacity of non-profit organizations to improving and protecting the environment, RSVP volunteers put their unique talents to work to make a difference.
- Volunteers are eligible to receive mileage reimbursement from their homes to their volunteer stations and back, or they can use their transportation expenses as a tax deduction. RSVP also covers volunteers with a supplemental insurance policy.

### *Your Own Organization*

Don't overlook volunteering for a club or church you may already belong to. You may qualify for Senior Companion or RSVP benefits for something that you're already doing in your own organization.

## **Practice the Golden Rule**

Whether you're helping someone as a volunteer, a friend or a family member, the Golden Rule stands out as a guide to follow.

This simple instruction – *Treat others the way you want to be treated* - is a good compass to navigate the complexities of relationships – whether you’re paid or not.

As detailed in the following table, the notion of “doing unto others...” is central to all major religions<sup>12</sup>.

<b>The Golden Rule as Expressed in Major Faiths</b>	
<i>Buddhism</i>	“Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” Udana-Varga 5,1
<i>Christianity</i>	"Do to others as you would have them do to you." - Jesus (5 BCE—33 CE) in Luke 6:31; Luke 10:27; Matthew 7:12
<i>Confucianism</i>	"What you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others." -Confucius (ca. 551–479 BCE)
<i>Hinduism</i>	“This is the sum of duty; do naught onto others what you would not have them do unto you” - Mahabharata 5,1517
<i>Islam</i>	"Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you" -- Muhammad, The Last Sermon. (570 – 632 CE)
<i>Judaism</i>	“Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary – Hillel the elder (50 BCE-10 CE)

The heart of helpfulness, therefore, may be found in the volunteers, aides, professionals, friends and family who are simply treating others the way they would like to be cared for.

### **...But Help yourself first!**

When family caregivers become exhausted, or aides burn out and quit, elders are no longer able to stay at home. Thus, it’s extremely important that volunteers or caregivers first take care of their own minds, bodies and spirits.

Help yourself first! You’ll gain better health of your mind, body and spirit. And *your* example will be a more powerful motivator than any book.