

Leo Tolstoy writes of a man named Ivan Ilyich who loves society, wealth and prestige. His position as a judge allowed him to exhibit his talents, maintain a luxurious home and have a lifestyle of entertainment. However, on his deathbed, Ivan comes to grips with the fact that he has wasted his life. Enveloped in selfishness, he had squandered the time given to him. At some point, every single one of us, like Ivan, will have to grapple with that issue. Will we die knowing we have lived for others, or simply for ourselves? Are we drowning in selfishness, or sowing seeds of generosity? There is a way to escape a wasted life and leave a lasting legacy. Putting aside pleasures and self by embracing a giving spirit is the key to a life of purpose. Through sacrifices, monetary gifts, and a lifestyle of service, one can touch many and escape the mire of self-love.

I was once told a story about a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. Being the only one available with compatible blood, he was asked if he would be the donor for his sister. With an air of solemnity, he agreed. As the needle was inserted and blood began flowing out of his arm, he looked up at his mother and asked, "When will I die?" Although this little boy didn't have to give the ultimate sacrifice for his sister in blood transfusion, he was ready and willing to do so if necessary. Here in America, citizens are so used to the comforts of life that it seems to them a crime to lose one or two of those arbitrary pleasures. Coffee. Running water. Electricity. The idea of real sacrifice doesn't even come up on the radar screen. Are we too attached to our things to take our breakfast to the hungry, as Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy did in *Little Women*? Or are we willing to spend our precious time visiting the sick and lonely? Balking at small sacrifices, many are not ready to find the fulfillment that comes as people extend themselves more for others. What if everyone was willing to sacrifice like that little boy?

Uncle Chris, in the movie *I Remember Mama*, is a gruff old man who scares his great nieces and nephews with his bellowing voice. As the result of an injury, Uncle Chris, who walks with a limp, cares deeply for crippled children. After his death, relatives find that no money is left. Instead, they discover a little notebook with the names and ages of children who can now walk and run because of his donations. His willingness to give opened up a whole new world to needy children. With the plummeting of the economy, many have less money than before. Yet, we are concerned about being able to buy favorite brands of cereal or lattes, while children in Africa worry about finding food and clean water the next day. Has the spirit of consumerism and the mindset of materialism robbed Western nations of their generosity? Organizations like World Vision, Heifer Int. and Samaritan's Purse offer ways to give hope to needy families. One can buy school supplies, farm animals, food and more through these catalogs in honor of a friend or relative. Or, one can sponsor a child in another country to provide clothing, nutrition and education. The hardship on Wall Street should be a reason for us to consider the plight of others in need. Wouldn't it be wonderful, like Uncle Chris, to know that the destitute have hope because of our care?

Jaime Sullivan in the book *A Walk to Remember* is a girl who loves to help others. In fact, she is known all around town for her caring and compassionate spirit. For her, giving is not "something to do", it's a lifestyle. Imagine a neighborhood, town, or a school where people cared - really *cared* about everyone around. People like Gerasim, the compassionate young man who sat up many nights, holding Ivan Ilyich's feet on his shoulders to ease the dying man's pain. People not simply trying to earn community service hours or lead a balanced life – but giving of self because they *want* to do it. When

we realize the joy of service and the impact we can have, maybe there will be more Jaime Sullivans and Gerasims in our communities.

When I get to the end of my life, I want to know that I did not live in vain. I want to die in the assurance that others' burdens were eased by my sacrifice – by the way I spent my money and the way I cared. Ivan Ilyich was grasping at a faint dream that maybe he could do something in his last hours that would rectify the 40 some years wasted. He died clinging to a shred of hope– wishing that he had seen the light decades earlier. Don't miss your chance. Only a life of giving is worth living.

Works Cited

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