
For Women Only: Living and Giving from the Inside Out

by *Debbie Smith*

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hen I arrived home last night after five days of travel, I realized that I had (once again) forgotten to ask my neighbor to water the plants on my patio. I've never had a green thumb, but for some reason,

I continue to give it the old college try. I love fresh herbs, and so every year I make another go of keeping a basil plant alive for the whole summer. This year I had the added challenge

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of receiving a beautiful flowering plant as a birthday gift in June. When my friend (who is a gardener extraordinaire) enthusiastically handed me the plant, I couldn't hide my anxiety. "If it's not here next year, don't take it personally," I sighed. Last night I saw my prophetic words coming true before my eyes. The plant was dry and shriveled from the Tennessee summer heat. Oh, and no water.

In spite of the odds stacked against the poor little thing, I went ahead and doused it with some water this morning, hoping to somehow prevent my self-fulfilling prophecy from becoming a reality. I'm hoping one last-ditch drenching will revive it and



somehow bring back the beautiful leaves and blossoms I have enjoyed this summer.

And as I reflected on my sad gardening experience, I realized that it is a perfect metaphor for the tension I observe in the lives of so many women, especially Christian women...especially Christian women serving in healthcare.

As women, we often choose or are put in roles where we are caregivers. As women in healthcare, it becomes a 24/7 deal. In the midst of so many needs and urgent demands for our time and energy, it seems downright selfish to think about anything other than a life of being continuously on call, for patients or anyone else who has our number and has a need.

For the past two years, I have had the privilege of facilitating a workshop at the CCHF conference, "For Women Only: How can I do it? Singleness, Marriage, and Children for the Disciple-Healthcare Worker." The purpose of the workshop has been to provide a forum for women who are on the front lines of serving others through the ministry of healthcare

to hear from their peers about maintaining personal well-being in the midst of so many needs

One of the issues that we have talked about both years is the belief that taking time to care for our own needs and well-being is selfish. Which would be like me saying that my plant's need for water is selfish. Crazy, right? Plants have to have water to live. Everybody knows that. But clearly someone forgot to consult the corollary design for human beings when they created the medical training process.

You say you're hungry? Diet coke and crackers will do while you run from one patient to the next. Tired? Forget about it. Sleep is for wimps. You want to take a break to go to the bathroom? Clearly you're not really serious about your career.

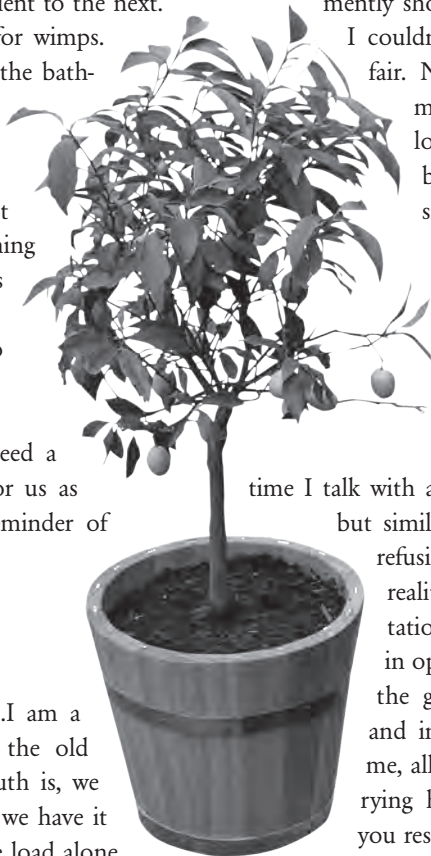
Sadly, these messages take root (sometimes way before medical training starts) and become ingrained beliefs and life patterns, which often results in the same thing that happened to my plant...withering and burnout.

So what's the antidote? We need a refresher course in God's design for us as His beloved daughters...a gentle reminder of who we are and who we are not.

REMINDER #1

I am not a rock or an island...I am a human being - In contrast with the old Simon and Garfunkel song, the truth is, we all have needs, and to pretend that we have it all together or that we can carry the load alone may for a short time gain the admiration of a few,

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but in the long-term it is a recipe for decomposition.

A few years ago I was standing in line at a rental car counter close to 10:00 pm. The woman behind me was a physician en route to another conference in the area, and she was struggling to corral her three rambunctious children who were obviously very tired and ready to find the exit. After awhile, a kind gentleman at the head of the line offered for my physician

friend to come to the front of the line and go next (in contrast with waiting for another hour in line). I couldn't believe what came next. Instead of graciously accepting his kind offer, my new friend vehemently shook her head and said "Oh no!

I couldn't do that! That wouldn't be fair. No thank you." Are you kidding me?! I looked at her, incredulous, and said "It doesn't have to be fair! It's a gift...receive!" But she was resolute.

The more I chatted with her that night, I realized that life had taught her to keep her guard up and carry the load all alone. I felt sad for her. I have that same feeling every time I talk with a woman who relays a different but similar story about the ways she is refusing to humbly acknowledge the reality of her human needs and limitations, which are meant to be built-in opportunities for us to experience the gift of community with others and intimacy with God. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

REMINDER #2

I am not the Vine...I am the branch – Living in America, it's easy to get the impression that the main thing about life is getting a lot done. Productivity. Achievement. Results. Even (or sometimes especially) in ministry settings, it's easy to be driven by numbers and results because that's how our donors or boards tend to measure success.

...WHILE BUSYNESS AND PRODUCTIVITY MAY BE MEASURES OF SUCCESS IN AMERICA, AS CITIZENS OF GOD'S KINGDOM WE ARE INVITED TO LAY DOWN OUR STRIVING IN EXCHANGE FOR ABIDING AND RESPONDING TO GOD'S MOVEMENT.

John 15 has been a passage I've spent some time pondering in recent years, and one of the main things that strike me about Jesus' words to His disciples here is the "inside-out" way He has set things up. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." Which means that you don't paste blossoms on plants. They emerge from the life source within the plant. So while busyness and productivity may be measures of success here in America (or in our family or in our church), as citizens of God's kingdom, we are invited to lay down our striving in exchange for abiding and responding to God's movement. Which means that sometimes we will say "no" to one thing so that we can say an emphatic "yes!" to where He is leading us. Times of solitude and abiding are the highest priority for yielding fruit in our lives. "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." (Isaiah 30:15)

My prayer for you as you read this article is that you will take a few minutes to stop and take stock of how you're doing. Are you trying to live in ways that ignore or disrespect your human needs and limitations? Are you open to asking for help when you need it? Are you willing to confront the cultural (and familial) messages about success that keep you striving for the approval of others instead of resting in God's pace for your life? Are you growing and flourishing in your role as a caregiver, or are you withering and in need of some nourishment? Perhaps one of the most unselfish things you could do today would be to open your heart to receive all that God wants to give you so that you are then free to give all He wants to pour out through you.

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