

How Can I Help?
By Ram Dass and Paul Gorman

Ram Dass, aka Richard Alpert, is one of my favorite spiritual teachers. With the assistance of Paul Gorman, he wrote a book which is profound and enlightening. I often talk about how important it is to keep our “energy balanced” when we are giving so that we can be fully present, and not burn out in the process. What follows are some of the insights and quotes afforded by this book along with my comments.

- When it comes time to give, we find ourselves asking where to draw the line, how much we’re prepared to give, and what we need to hold on to. When we wonder what we have to offer, we’re really questioning our self-worth. Who are we to ourselves and to one another will all come down to that.
- “The reward, the real grace, of conscious service, then, is the opportunity not only to help relieve suffering but to grow in wisdom, grow in greater unity, and have a good time while we’re doing it.”
- According to Einstein, our separateness is a delusion of our consciousness. “Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” Albert Einstein.
- “So often we deny ourselves and others the full resources of our being simply because we’re in the habit of defining ourselves narrowly and defensively to begin with.”
- We don’t have to be “this” or “that,” we are free simply to *be*.
- “I catch myself in self-importance ten times a day.”
- “Freedom [from the attachment of the ego] is priceless...worth whatever the cost.”
- Affluence has brought us privacy and the ability to isolate poverty, old age, and death.
- A patient can tell the difference between somebody just caring for them and somebody trying to protect themselves.
- When we create a “gotta do” approach to giving, we can create “toxic tension,” which is the last kind of mental state anyone who is suffering needs.
- It’s OK to feel a little nervous when caregiving. A little afraid, embarrassed. When acknowledging our weaknesses, we can soften our defensiveness and we’re much more likely to be there and hear each other.
- “Discomfort in the presence of suffering is usually less toxic and infectious when it’s no longer denied.”
- “The predicament of others in pain awakens our own fears and loss of control. It is easy to empathize with their reactions of resistance to their circumstances.” The “why me, what did I do to deserve this” response can evoke our own fear and suffering.
- “Consider the possibility that the resistance to the pain may be more painful than the pain itself.”

- “Under no circumstances do we judge or condemn another’s suffering. We merely continue to work on our own.”
- “*He is a warm, open space, which encourages them to trust whatever they feel.*” Ram Dass describing a chemotherapy nurse in a children’s cancer ward, and the person most children ask for at the time they are dying.
- “Perhaps there is nothing we can do. Then we can only *be* and be *with* the person and his or her pain, attending to the quality of our *own* consciousness.”
- “Reckoning, judging, evaluating, leaping in, taking it personally, being bored—the helping act has any number of invitations to reactivity and distraction.” *In this state, we can find ourselves primarily in our thoughts, not with another person.*
- It is important to be an observer of our emotions as much as anything else in our awareness. Sometimes we must step back. Step back so that we can look at it all.
- People want to be able to share their story. (So let them tell it!)
- “*Everybody’s nobody most of the time.*” But, go to a place where you’re needed or where you can help and then you’re somebody.
- “Sometimes we have to be shown that all of us are better off when we’re free of attachment to being helpers.” *Then we can just be present. The goal is to find a point of connection beyond our roles of helper or sufferer.*
- “My God, he knows more than I’ll ever know about all this. He sees the whole situation.”
- “When we see that service is not a one-way street, we find that those we are helping give us a continuous stream of clues to help us escape the prison of our self-image.” The prison of our roles.
- “We need great compassion for ourselves—exactly the way we are.”
- “*People don’t like to be ‘should’ upon. They’d rather discover than be told.*”
- “At some level what we’re communicating is the feeling that *we know* others don’t, and we’ve got to Change Minds.” *This is the trap of the negative hero, and as a result, the loved one, patient, or prospect, feels like they’ve been “should” upon.*
- “Our aim is to awaken together and see what follows, not to manipulate each other into this action or that.”
- “Helping out gets heavy.”
- It’s not always our efforts that burn us out; it’s where the mind is standing in relation to them. One way to avoid burn out is to take the *M*A*S*H* approach. We encompass the craziness of the situation, so we can be skillful within it or playful when there’s nothing to do but ride through the contradictions.
- “How can you be sure if you’re really helping someone or if you’re meddling? Service is ultimately a journey into the unknown. When we are the witness, we are focused on *what is*, not what might be or could be.”
- “So, at some level, we care with all our heart...and then we finally let go.”
- “Each time we drop our mask and meet heart-to-heart, reassuring one another simply by the quality of our presence, we experience a profound bond which we intuitively understand is nourishing everyone.”
- We always have to watch our limitations: “I’ll help, as long as it’s *safe* for me to do so.” “If only everybody dealt with this just like me.”
- “*Nobody ever treated me like I had anything to give. Just to take. So that’s all I ever did. Take.*” [A young black criminal who learned about connection from a little, old Jewish lady that was one of his targets.]

- *“I’ve done enough time. I’ve done enough taking. Time to be free.”*

Conclusion: The stories set forth in this book are heartfelt. The languaging around helping itself, is very helpful. In answering “How can I help?” I wrote down these pointers:

- Look people straight in the eye.
- Be there with them.
- Speak for myself. They will do the same.
- Be honest with them.
- Be caring towards them.
- Don’t just focus on just the “bad” things.
- Laugh with them.
- Challenge them.
- Ask permission before offering advice.
- Let them be the hero.
- Forgive—all the time.
- Let go. Your job is not to save everyone.

And remember this: there’s always something else going on—with me, with them, and in the environment. In fact, there’s a whole lot more going on. Maybe they/me/them are in the middle of a difficult divorce, or their kid is sick and they’d rather be home, maybe they are interviewing elsewhere, or maybe they’re just hanging onto their job. Maybe their self-esteem is so low they’ll never make a decision. Maybe they’re so burnt out they’ve gone numb and they don’t care about making any decisions. Maybe they’re in a great deal of pain and they’re ready to hurl it at you with the slightest provocation. Maybe your expertise is intimidating so they are afraid to ask you questions.