

THE MYSTERY OF SPIRITUAL SENSITIVITY

*Your Practical Guide to Responding
to Burdens You Feel from
God's Heart*

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Foreword

Many have written articles and some have composed books that include passages about burden bearing. Some have inadvertently revealed how little they really understand about this most mystical and mysterious of the Lord's callings upon our lives. Carol Brown has written a comprehensive work replete with comprehension because she has lived burden bearing from its stumbling beginnings in her heart to its climax in expertise. She knows the subject inside out, as you will if you persevere not only in reading but in practicing burden-bearing prayer and ministry.

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...” (Hosea 4:6). As the Holy Spirit has tumbled us into new revelations and gifts, increasingly since the middle of the 20th century as Joel 2:28 is being fulfilled before our wondering eyes, we have all come to understand Hosea's text experientially, sometimes ruefully. It seems we can't enter into anything new in the Spirit without suffering the pains of trial and error—which is probably the Lord's providential wisdom. How else would we come to fully own what He wants us to know? Pearls are the symbol of wisdom because when a grain of sand irritates an oyster, it works to cover it and beauty is formed. So it is with us.

Burden bearing, though a most basic calling for all Christians, has been almost totally neglected by Christian teachers, and very little understood my most—teachers and pupils alike. The depths of it remain new revelation to all but a miniscule portion of the Body of Christ. Now comes Carol Brown, uniquely prepared by the route of trial and error and the fires of the illness of multiple sclerosis (MS) to expose the secrets and joys of burden bearing to the Body of Christ.

As readers will learn, burden bearing is not something exotic and thus the exclusive property of a few elite. It is a calling upon us all, and an elevation into ministry to the very heart of our loving Lord Jesus Himself, a constant practice in the art of loving others as Jesus loves, a supreme labor that is love itself. As Galatians 6:2 tells us, “Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.” The law of Christ is to love as He love, which is to lay our lives down for each other. Hopefully you will come to appreciate the fullness of what that means as you read and put into practice what you learn here.

Precisely because burden bearing is such a priceless gifting and high calling, it can to that degree be subject to error and consequent suffering Carol makes that abundantly clear throughout the book, and teaches how to avoid pitfalls and bear burdens rightly in our Lord Jesus. You may find great relief as Carol explains the dynamics of burden bearing in marriages and other close relationships (Chapters 5 & 6).

For more than 40 years Paula and I have pioneered in the discovery and teaching of inner healing. Know then our qualifications when we say that except possibly for the field of deliverance ministry, we know of no other calling more fraught with pains and aches from lack of knowledge than the field of burden bearing. That is one reason why this book is so timely and so desperately needful for the Church in these days, as the Lord purifies His servants a la Malachi chapter 3 for ministry as the times crescendo to mountains of need and the Lord calls

His own to stand in the gap for the multitudes, and as He trains us for the coming greatest revival in all of history.

“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the work of Christ” (rom. 10”7). We will know that. But how often did Jesus say, “Let him who has ears to hear, hear?” Many if not most peoples’ hearts are too laden and confused for the mind to hear the good news of the Gospel. Therefore, all too often the preaching of the word of Christ” falls on deaf ears. There has never yet been a great revival without first great intercessory prayers. Burden-bearing intercession uniquely prepares the hearts of people to hear God’s word and respond. If multitudes are to be converted, and then healed unto salvation, thousands, even millions, must come to join the ranks of God’s burden-bearing intercessors.

And beyond the great revival, as the prophesied tribulations of the endtimes increase exponentially, we are going to have to have an increasing army, a vast host, who know how to stand for the Lord in burden-bearing intercession and ministry for the transformation of the Father’s broken children. Today, there are yet too few.

Read with expectancy. You are being led onto the ground floor of the vast newness God is building. You are privileged to be part of it—partners with Him in the coming glory. Therefore, study to show yourself worthy...this book is full of revelation.

John Sandford
Elijah House

Preface

Mystery is a word you use to describe those things that try as you may, you cannot find words to communicate what you experience. You use mystery to describe the things that elude reason and logic, yet there they are. They cannot be completely define, measured, and repeated in a scientific setting. You cannot wrap your mind around it; not completely.

For example, have you ever wondered what comes over you from time to time? Ever have, oh, say, two mood swings before you reach the top of the stairs? Ever have excessive emotions or feel completely out of sync with the circumstances of your life? Often feel of little value, not chosen? Do you feel used up, burned out, and cast aside, not at all like a son or daughter of God? Do you become irritated and overwhelmed with people, lights, noise, or too much motion—like when shopping at the mall? Do you feel sad or angry when you have nothing to be sad or angry about?

I want you to know that you are not crazy; you are different. You are not wired like most people, and God has a reason for making you that way. I have walked this path and I know how hard it is. I know what it is like to feel God planned something for you, but you have no idea what or how to become the person He intends you to be. I know the temptation to try to make like better for other people, but at the same time you must narrow your own life to make it manageable, which makes it hard to help others! I know what it is like to feel like a magnet walking through the pin factory of life, with all the pins and needles flying at me point first. Life hurts.

Life really hurts for those who feel like an emotional soccer ball—kicked about, used, and dropped with little regard. After a while you begin to wonder why God put you here, why you have so little value. No one seems to understand—and no one seems able to help. Pressure builds within, but then you meet someone who hurts more deeply than you do and your heart pulls you back to reality. And there you go again, helping and going home overwhelmed. Why? You may be one of God's "Special Forces," designed with a highly sensitive nervous system that allows you to empathize on deep levels with God and others.

Readers

Although I address readers who resonate with these and other feelings that will be described, I also want you who are not aware of having such feelings to read as well. If you live with someone I've described, this book will help you understand them—your mate, your children, or someone who you work with or for. Understanding will help pastors and church leaders prepare people for what the Lord may ask of them. The examples you will read about are actual people and experiences. Names have been changed to protect their privacy with a few exceptions which include individuals who have given me permission to use their names.

Why I Write

I don't want you, or someone you know, to live one day longer with a sadness that seems bottomless. I don't want your inner pressure to build to the point that you are tempted to numb the pain you feel. You are one of God's "Special Forces." Your nervous system is different than most. You are uniquely designed as a highly sensitive person, one who can join Jesus in the work He began and continues to do—reconciling people to God, people to themselves, and restoring relationships between people.

But you need to learn how to bear burdens rightly. From unraveling my own mystery of spiritual sensitivity life experiences, I explain our unique design to help you understand yourself. Understanding what it looks and feels like, how it affects you, and discovering common reflex reactions to high sensitivity—physical, emotional, and spiritual—will allow God to use your sensitivity to develop spiritual maturity—yours and others. This is empathetic burden-bearing intercession. The high sensitivity required to sense and feel what other people experience is what makes life painful; it also makes it possible to sense, feel, and hear from God.

Being a pastor's wife, mother of two lively girls, and a college instructor can be a full plate. However, I experienced an exhaustion that my circumstances could not explain. That's when I heard Mark Sandford teach about burden bearing. I was desperate. "OK, God, if there is anything to this, let's do it." I began to pray through my life, period by period, cleaning out the residue of burdens I had accumulated throughout my life. When I finished, I felt 40 pounds lighter.

My learning curve began at that point. I began to pray first and then call people when I experienced a sudden severe headache, strange (to me) thoughts, chest pains, flashes of uncharacteristic anger or sensations, overwhelming sadness, etc. Time after time they confirmed that I was indeed sharing what they themselves were experiencing. My husband, David, affectionately called me his "canary." He could understand people dynamics by watching my reactions. I was drawn more and more into ministry with David. He was the counselor/teacher and I was the teacher/intercessor.

When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1995 my life changed dramatically. Life would be different, but not ruined! Previously, through the gift of knowledge (1 Corinthians 12:8), the Lord allowed me to feel powerfully what another person experienced—to give vocabulary and a voice to those who had no voice. It is my hope the writing of this book will give voice and vocabulary in ways I could never imagine, and can no longer do. My loving Father is not requiring my body to experience burden bearing in the same way since December 1995 because He knows my frame. Stress is not healthy for me, so He gives me another way to discharge my calling.

Five months after being diagnosed, I woke up to life well enough to do something but not well enough to do anything. I had to do something or go mad. I could not teach or speak before an audience now...my thoughts were disjointed fragments. I could not be on my feet for more than a moment. Visual images didn't stand still, and reading is still difficult. I had no endurance.

The enemy of my soul tried to remove every reference that told me who I was. I think he hoped I would be so depressed I'd forget to pray. All I could do was sit.

I taught myself to knit and began to write, sometimes for only five minutes, then ten, then maybe half an hour. The fog in my brain would clear and a thought would stand out so I wrote it down, phrase at a time, story at a time. But always the thoughts and stories were about burden bearing and the mystery of spiritual sensitivity. I can't remember for how many years that went on, but at some point I realized I had a pile of incoherent, disjointed pieces that could become a book—this book.

The Lord is redeeming the time the enemy thought he could steal! Scripture says, "all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord.

Understanding

You will learn what the characteristics of a natural burden bearer are, the elements foundational to this form of intercession, and what is involved in the process of solving the mystery of spiritual sensitivity. Burden bearing dynamics work in all relationships, but we look at the two most fundamental in everyone's life—husband and wife, parent and child. Blessings come to you when you bear burdens, but there are also inherent vulnerabilities that complicate life for the highly sensitive. Lack of nurturing or misunderstanding of your sensitive nature can cause wounded spirits and emotions, and can negatively impact your life, so these issues have been addressed. You also need to know how to pray for healing. You will learn that burden bearing, for you, may be a very important feature of your development into your destiny—a son, a daughter of the King. And finally, I share another perspective on burden bearing—one you may not have imagined!

Having been a burden bearer these many years, I can assure you that any struggle you may have is redeemable. Hurt you have endured can be healed. Spiritual sensitivity can become a blessing. The blessing of knowing yourself as one who inherits His Kingdom and being close to the heart of God is worth the effort to understand and accept your unique design.

Chapter 1

Perspective

Jesus' dear friend Lazarus fell ill. In John 11:1-44 we read that his sisters sent word to Jesus, but rather than quickly going to heal his friend, Jesus stayed where He was for two more days. Lazarus died. When Jesus finally arrived, He walked into a cloud of grief. "When Jesus saw her [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (John 11:33).

In John 11:35, "Jesus wept." In verse 38, Jesus was "once more deeply moved." Jesus had no reason to grieve his own tears; He knew Lazarus would rise from the dead. Indeed, earlier (John 11:14) He said, "*I am glad, for your sake, that I was not there, so that you may believe.*" Jesus' display of emotion is most likely a result of burden bearing. He came alongside His friends and drew some of their burden into His spirit and soul, thus lightening their emotional load. He felt what the sisters and friends were feeling—He was fully in sync with them. He felt their grief and sadness, and was moved to tears. Always in touch with the Father's heart, He was able to speak God's response of life to Lazarus.

So what, exactly is burden bearing? Let's back up for perspective.

"But I say to you..."

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit [look after] orphans and widows in their distress... (James 1:27 NASB).

Giving alms to the poor, providing for orphans, widow, the blind and lame have been accepted as appropriate ways to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2)—ways to come alongside, to lighten the loads of others. The Lord began to teach a deeper level of understanding OF THE Scriptures in Matthew 5:17. He said He came, not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He said that your righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. Throughout chapter 5 and 6 of the book of Matthew, He offered examples that went beyond the currently accepted righteousness: "you have heard it said that...but I tell you..." challenging every Christian to go beyond what is normally accepted.

In this same spirit of expanding upon that which is already right and good, I would say that all material and tangible means of lightening a person's load pleases God. But, He does not want you to stop there. Rather, He designed you and me to be highly sensitive, with a remarkable and quite human capacity to share in, carry, and thus relieve emotional and spiritual burdens as well. This is empathy, the foundation for the kind of burden bearing explored in this book.

*This type of "burden bearing" is a form of intercession that begins in the heart of God. The burden forms in the heart of God as He sees a need in someone's life. Rather than barge in and fix it, He respects a person's free will and asks you, as His servant, to be part of His solution. He wants you to be the **person through whom** He draws the pain of a hurting person to Himself.*

He asks you to be His hands on earth to relieve physical suffering, and to stand for Him as an emissary of comfort and freedom from emotional and spiritual bondage.

To this end He designed your body, not only to be an instrument of praise, but of prayer. This type of “burden bearing” involves the body, the emotions, and senses all working together. I believe this is what the apostle Paul was talking about when he said, “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of His body, which is the church” (Col 1:24).

Empathy is key. Without empathy you cannot sense the heart of God where burden bearing originates.

Sadly, most are not aware of their capacity for empathy, nor imagine in their wildest dreams God’s purposes for it. Most live unaware of the extent to which others’ troubles affect them, and vice-versa. Everyone bears burdens because that is how humanity is designed, but many do it wrongly. God designed burden bearing so as not to harm a person. When sin entered the picture, humankind has been turned around, upside down, and operating only somewhat according to design—but there is something missing, causing us hurt.

There is much to be gained for the Kingdom of God when you bear burdens rightly, and much error and suffering when you bear burdens wrongly due to lack of knowledge. Our lack of knowledge caused us to live out only a portion of our “design capabilities.” I believe burden bearing is an important part of His plan. You bear burdens because that is who you are, much as a gifted composer composes because he must. You are highly sensitive; you empathize and bear others burdens because you cannot do otherwise.

The Sensitive Human

God designed you with a broad capacity to relate, to connect with others (but especially Him), and to experience something of what others experience. This is a primary function of your human spirit—that eternal part of you that will return to God.

The neural hardware you are born with determines your conscious capacity for sensitivity.¹ This neural hardware is responsible for how much data you take in. It simply is—it has nothing to do with personal worth or value, and varies person to person. It is part of what makes you a unique individual.

Empathy is the ability to feel what another person experiences by matching their inner state of being and energy level. This is possible because of our neural hardware. Life experiences (family, school, work, etc.), positively or negatively affect your ability to function empathetically. Your ability to connect empathetically can be even further diminished to the extent sin separates you from yourself, and distorts your sense of who you are in relation to God and others. Conversely, you strengthen your empathy muscles when you experience nurture, acceptance, support, seek hard after God and develop a deep personal relationship with Him—a deep, mature prayer life.

Synchronization is another term for the brain's ability to match the state of mind and/or energy level of another person by means of communication from right brain to right brain.ⁱⁱ This communication happens at such a speed that you seem to experience another person's state of mind or energy level simultaneously. High sensitivity is pivotal for the ability to synchronize with another; it is the core of empathy, and empathy is the core of burden bearing. It is a physical, mental, emotional *and* spiritual activity.

God designed people physically and biologically for relationships. Every human being is born with the raw materials needed for empathy, and all experience it to one degree or another. When you actually "touch" what other people think and feel, you gain a "knowing" about them that is deeper than if you simply identify with, imagine, or feel sorry for how they might feel. Empathy allows you to begin to share in the emotional life of another.

Have you ever experienced a horrible feeling in the pit of your stomach, like you were going to be ill, and at the same time "know" a loved one was in some kind of trouble? Later you learned that was—a car accident, a marriage crisis, or perhaps a severe illness.

A son sadly confides in his father that he "knows" the coach is going to cut him from the team. He cannot say why he knows. Soon the coach, with grief in his voice, admits he must bow to the pressure of politics and drops the young man from the team. The boy felt the coach's grief; he felt his burden and that was how he "knew" his coach was about to cut him from the team.

A wife working at home or elsewhere may experience weariness or anxiety as her day progresses that she cannot explain from her circumstances. She finds later that her spouse had a very frustrating and unproductive day at work.

My friend shares a story about the time when her mother called the school because she felt certain something horrible had happened. At the time my friend was attending junior high school and was wandering the halls near the principal's office in tears after receiving her very *first* low grade on a math test. Her mother felt her daughter's distress.

Certain individuals or places give you "creepy" feelings. You instinctively know to avoid some people but have no concrete reason to do so. Sometimes you do not trust people who are "so sweet." What do you sense below consciousness? The Holy Spirit plays an important role in unraveling the mystery of spiritual sensitivity.

The Oxford Dictionary 10th editionⁱⁱⁱ says that empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. But I define it a bit differently, to be more pertinent to burden bearing. Empathy is "receptivity to the sensory and emotional experiences of another to the point that you feel what they are experiencing." This is not extrasensory perception (ESP). Scripture is quite clear that God speaks to His people as written in the Books of Joel, Acts, and specifically Job 33:13-14.

Sometimes God speaks audibly. For such cases, He built us with physical ears to hear Him. But, usually He speaks inaudibly. For those times, He built us with spiritual ears. It is not evil to have such "ears." But it is indeed evil to turn them toward any other source than the Holy

Spirit. Turning spiritual ears toward a source other than the Holy Spirit is called extrasensory perception.

ESP is using God-given abilities without the boundaries and protection of the Holy Spirit. In the use of these abilities a “spirit” may unknowingly aid some; others consciously use a spirit other than God. Dependence upon a source other than God is what you are *not* to do! No one cares for you more than God. He knows what is in your best interest. Such dependence is an open door for forces of darkness, and such use of high sensitivity is divination.

The Oxford Dictionary defines divination as “the art or practice of obtaining hidden knowledge from supernatural powers” other than God. A second definition is “unusual insight; intuitive perception.” I would add to that definition by saying that it is unusual insight and intuitive perception without God’s authorization or protection. In other words, peering where not invited, out of curiosity, seeking status, control or personal gain—such as fortune telling, taro cards, Ouija boards, séances, etc. God does not endorse such practices. Scripture is clear that believers are not to be involved in such practices. (See Deuteronomy 18:10, 14; First Samuel 15:23; and Second Chronicles 33:6.)

Burden bearing is different from ESP. To burden bear rightly, you die to your ability to see, sense, and feel and instead ask God to allow you to see, feel, or sense only through the direction of the Holy Spirit. Your abilities are crucified, resurrected, and harnessed to God’s will. It is no longer you who is doing this work, but the Holy Spirit in you. The Holy Spirit is central to burden bearing rightly. Without the Holy Spirit, burden bearing rightly does not happen.

The Holy Spirit uses your resurrected and redeemed ability to empathize and connects you with those who need His love, help and healing touch. This is one expression of the gift of “word of knowledge” (1 Cor. 12). At the Holy Spirit’s direction you feel their pain. Their pain alters you to their needs and informs your prayer so you will accurately and compassionately invite the Lord to heal that hurting person. Like a neural synapse in the brain, the Holy Spirit forms a “spiritual synapse” from a hurting person to one who can help lighten the load.

For whom do you empathize?

Worth a Thousand Words

Your neural hardware makes it possible to subconsciously receive spiritual, physical, and emotional information—state of being information. As an infant you learn how to interpret and respond to that information. Empathy is to the spirit and emotions what words are to the mind. Words can be inadequate sometimes when you try to express emotion or your state of being! You try to express yourself with zero success, and have a sinking feeling as you watch your loved one walk away. You think, “They don’t have a clue about what’s going on with me.” The problem intensifies when you, yourself, do not know what is churning around inside.

Imagine the value of the empathetic friend or loved one who somehow knows you better than you do, and can put words to your feelings. When you learn to recognize, interpret, and respond appropriately to state-of-being information gathered by means of empathy with others,

they receive the gift of companionship, and at a deep level—a sense of connection. Empathy is good as far as it goes, but it is not yet burden bearing, not until it is crucified, resurrected and dedicated to the Lord’s service.

Angie (not her real name) was receiving ministry from my husband. Her emotions were one massive ball. At any given time she didn’t know how to express what she was feeling. David invited me into some of their sessions, and the Lord connected me to her. My function was to empathize with Angie and give her vocabulary. She experienced feelings, but had never learned the label associated with the feeling. The Lord connected us so completely that I would call her outside of the sessions when I suddenly had a headache that I knew was hurting Angie. “Do we have a headache?” I’d ask her on the phone. “Uhhh...” “Right side of your head? Right above your eye?” Angie would respond, “Yes, yes, you are right!” And so it went with other feelings and symptoms.

This is burden bearing, but if we had stopped at this point, it would have been “unredeemed” burden bearing. I would have been bearing the burden in my body by my own strength for another. However, Angie and I went on to ask the Lord for prayer direction. Often physical pain calls us to attention, but the problem the Lord wants to address lies elsewhere. Listening to the Lord’s directions and praying accordingly, the Holy Spirit gathered all the burden from all the places it lodged in my body (and Angie’s life) and lifted it out of me, drawing that burden brought me and onto the cross of Jesus.

How Light the Yoke?

Jesus said His yoke was easy and His burden light (Matt. 11:30), but how easy, how light? Actually experiencing the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another can confuse the heck out of you! The biggest problem is to learn to recognize when these things are not your own, to know when it is not your pain, your heartache, or headache, as much as it hurts—to recognize when the burden is Holy Spirit initiated.

The wife who felt a seemingly baseless anxiety throughout her day was surely confused. Not until her husband came home from work did she recognize she had been experiencing all day long his emotional burden, stress, and pressure. She lightened his emotional/psychological load so he could continue to function in his workplace. However, if understanding is all the further she processes the burden; she is burden bearing in her own strength, without the aid of the Holy Spirit. This is not God’s original design for burden bearing. But, it is exactly what happens to far too many people.

This woman needs to build in the reflex of turning to the Lord and asking why she feels as she does, and interceding as the Lord directs. As she seeks the Lord’s direction and prays accordingly, the Holy Spirit draws her husband’s burdens through her, neutralizing them on His Cross, keeping her from becoming exhausted. With no prayer involved, without the Holy Spirit drawing the burden through her to the Cross, the residue becomes a weight upon her spirit, emotions, and body. Burden bearing rightly, which works into us the nature and character of Christ, is discussed at length in a later chapter.

Empathy confuses the mind because most of us are not skilled in identifying and acknowledging our emotions. Unfortunately, as children many of us learned that feelings are not safe or acceptable to have, and we erected barriers to them— these barriers carried over into adulthood. Some put uncomfortable feelings away and escape into whatever will distract them. Some keep a full or over-full social or work schedule that will eliminate the time to feel. Emotions are left unidentified when pushed out of the way. Most people condemn what they do not understand. Most people remain woefully ignorant of what is inside.

If you are fearful of emotions, you will try to barricade empathy from your life. Family and society teach you not to pay attention to emotional information—your own and other's. All too often, you do to yourself what someone did before—disbelieve, minimize, and repress. As an adult, you think you are unable to sense what another feels. Or, you may admit to being empathetic but not to being able to sense. However, empathy is part of the human package, and cannot be suppressed altogether; it will manage to operate to some degree. When you do not understand empathy, most of the time you do not know what is happening. Almost certainly, you will not at all like being so sensitive. You do your best to cope anyway.

Coping With Emotional Pain

Everyone develops coping mechanisms to protect against the onslaught of our own sensitivities as well as others' reactions. *We have to develop defenses. At a foundational level, people tend to avoid emotional, psychological, and spiritual pain, trouble, and turmoil.* We find ways not to be where emotional pain is; we huff and puff to make it go away and leave us alone, or try to fix the person or the problem and make the pain go away. When we fix a troubled person, and lower their distress level, we feel less distress ourselves. When done rightly, in Jesus and for His sake, lowering someone's pain is good—but when done only to escape feeling it, it is not good.

Avoidance by Creating Distance

Your parents may have used emotion (anger or sadness) to shut down expressions of emotion so the force of the combined energies of the family would not overwhelm them. As an adult you may use the same technique to create distance from the source(s) of turmoil.

Another way to avoid emotional pain and troubles is to *fade quietly away*. You create distance by staying around the fringes of life. In doing so you may *appear* shy, timid, or introverted when in reality you may not be shy at all, but rather, unwilling to come close to people. You learned that interaction is burdensome, confusing, and even painful. Some continually battle with the desire to withdraw from life.

At the far end of the spectrum, some natural burden bearers develop a hermit-like existence, shutting out the world in an attempt to escape the turmoil they cannot turn off. You can become so overwhelmed you want to escape from life. You can walk a mile through the forest and not be tired, but walk 100 feet through a mall or market and be exhausted. For others, malls and markets are OK, but parties are torture. These places become problematic because your spiritual pores are open. You soak up all the trouble, tension, and anxiety around. You

quickly become exhausted and flee to whatever refuge you have. This will be the case until you learn to call on the Lord to be your filter. He can block out everything except what He knows you can bear.

God designed you to be a “people” person, able to be with hurting people and carry a portion of their load to Jesus. Many do not understand themselves or know how to function properly, so they color themselves “gone,” and quietly withdraw from people and life. Everyone loses when a burden bearer resigns.

Avoidance by Stifling Others

Some “avoiders” appear to be insensitive because they stifle others’ expressions of distress. They fill up with emotional freight until they cannot bear one drop more. My husband, David, and I knew such a woman—Jane (not her real name).

With one big generous breath, Jan would do incredibly loving things, go out of her way, and use great quantities of energy and money to care for other people. However, her next breath could be harsh, critical, resentful and insensitive. Her moods were as stable as wind in a storm.

A couple in Jane’s church volunteered as youth leaders. Their first-born child died three days after he was born due to complications during the birthing. A year passed and it was Christmas time. We were rehearsing Christmas music, a beautiful lullaby about Mary and the baby. Quiet tears began to roll down the woman’s cheeks. Jan saw the tears and said, “Oh, are you *still* crying about *that*? Don’t you know your baby is better off in Heaven?” The mother was devastated. The grief that she had been quietly giving to the Lord was rudely jammed back down her throat. The message was that her grief was unacceptable and in appropriate.

We discovered later that Jane’s first husband had died 20 years before and she had vowed never to cry. She felt she had to be strong for her children. She had not allowed herself to cry since then. The mother’s quiet, appropriate grief called to Jane’s grief which threatened to spill out in her own tears. *That* was what was unacceptable to Jane. In her childhood she learned that only weak people show tender feelings. Jane was unconsciously trying to protect herself from her own grief by stifling the grieving mother’s.

Avoidance by Denial

Some choose to separate, or dissociate, themselves from their feelings and hide, often in the intellect. Books, ideas, and concepts do not talk back or lash out. Libraries, laboratories, and research are wonderful places to avoid interaction with people, and what interaction there is can be objective and non-personal. Logic causes and effects, rules and formulas appeal. Your mind can wrap itself around science and logic. That is much easier to manage than the irrational, illogical world of feelings and emotions.

Consequently, many highly sensitive, creative burden bearers can be found with their legs wrapped around laboratory stools, among the musty tomes of libraries, hiding behind computers and Petri dishes, seeking welcome refuge from trouble and confusion. These are social

acceptable and often lucrative hiding places! For many the body exists to carry the head from one place to another. Some disdain those less successful in coping with or hiding from spiritual, emotional or psychological pain. I can understand why a person would choose this refuge; I did for a long time. Nonetheless, it is an escape; fleeing from the good works the Lord designed focus to accomplish.

Avoidance by Hiding in Hobbies

Losing yourself in a hobby or avocation is another socially acceptable refuge from relationship. Those who choose this avenue concentrate on the hobby and block out cries for help, silent or otherwise. If you acknowledge someone's cry for help, you will feel obligated to do something. You create your ruts, and appreciate people who do not intrude, who do not show you a larger picture of life, or call you out. You feel justified in hiding.

Avoidance by Narrowly Focusing

Avoiding the ocean of need by focusing on one small wave narrows your focus. Sometimes the "fix it" response is an attempt to rescue people and become their savior. This way you can narrow your focus and concentrate only on one slice of life, not all of it. Focusing narrowly allows you to push the clamor for attention into the background. The subconscious rationalization for not responding to all you sense and feel is that if you spend all your time and resource on one person or cause, you have neither time nor resources to attend to anything else. You cannot do everything, but you can do this. You cannot be everything for everyone, but one bit you can do.

Saving someone from his or her situation is not always pure selflessness. It can be an attempt to lessen other people's pain not so much for their benefit but to lessen the intensity of what you feel empathetically. There is a payoff in lowering the intensity of someone else's pain. You may very well be concerned for that person, but at the same time indulge a self-serving motivation.

For example, I could feel Deedee's distress over a looming work deadline. Helping would shorten the time I had to feel her distress. If I did not want to endure those feelings, all I had to do was step up—a self-serving motivation. My choices were to help do her work—actually do some of her work—or not help and pray that the Lord strengthen her so she could endure the stress of learning the lessons she needed to learn so that deadlines did not become crises. For me, it was an opportunity to learn when and how to intercede and encourage rather than enable dysfunction. I could have been her savior and stepped in to help, thus lowering my stress level, but doing so would deprive her of an opportunity to mature.

The Sponge Effect

The burden-bearing design is such that, like a sponge, you sop up a portion of someone else's emotional load. A sponge retains dirt after water evaporates. As I said earlier, you retain residue from another person's trouble even though time and distance separates you. This is true whether it is a positive or a negative load. You probably know people who are light and bright and you

always come away from times with them feeling lifted up. It is a blessing to absorb and retain some of their positive emotion.

In the same way, when you are around negative people—you come away feeling heavy, sad and confused, angry or depressed. This is true of Christian and non-Christian alike—empathy, that drawing, absorbing, retentive quality of your spirit operates whether you realize it or not. Any created being must operate according to its design—fish swim, horses gallop, birds fly, and your spirit connects through empathy whether you like it or not, whether you believe it or not, and whether you intend to empathize or not. It is something your spirit knows to do and does. Like gravity or the law of physics, the absorbing qualities of your spirit operate whether you know, understand, or believe.

Whoa!

Whoa! This is way too much sensitivity! When you are unaware that you absorb what is in other people, you walk around like a sponge with your spirit open and unprotected. You indiscriminately attract all sorts of things, such as other people's emotion, trouble and turmoil—and it feels like your own! When you look at your home life and work life you see no reason for the feelings you have. Your family life is relatively smooth, your schedule isn't crazy—yet you feel grief and sadness, confusion, anxiety or rage. The confusion from the disparity between what you feel and what you intellectually know your circumstance to be multiplies the feelings, which compounds emotion to the point of excruciating intensity. People look at you and shake their heads when you share such feelings. They say, "It's not all *that* bad!" "What is your problem?" The problem is the weight of an overwhelming, crushing load you did not even know you were carrying!

For example: I met my friend Vivian for coffee. We talked through a series of her losses. On this particular day she was numb with grief. She spoke in monosyllables, her face was emotionally flat, her eyes were dull, but she insisted she was fine. It was obvious she was not fine. For half an hour, I tried to engage her and finally flashed with an intensely impatient irritation. I was only conscious of feeling compassion for the state she was in. My reactions were entirely in appropriate and surprised both of us. I apologized and ended the visit. I went away shaking my head—what was that all about? I wanted to comfort my friend, not be angry with her. She needed comfort, and I made matters worse. I felt like a lousy friend.

Damage to Others

When you absorb a portion of someone else's crushing load and do something that is *appropriate to that load*, your behavior can still be inappropriate for you—like my irritated response to Vivian. My response was inappropriate; it did not express my feelings of care and compassion for her. Even if I had been irritated because she would not share, irritation would not help her. However, if Vivian were the one being angry over her loss, that would have been appropriate. I expressed anger that she was not yet in touch with. Inappropriate responses would and confuse others. God wants you to soak up pain and trouble and pray it to the Cross and thereby help people, bringing them closer to their source of healing.

Be aware that satan will turn these potentially healing encounters into hurt and division. When you are inappropriate, you can wound a person who is already hurting. When your responses seem insensitive, wounded people will not come your way again with any expectation of comfort, help or healing.

“What is wrong with me?”

Even for the strongest, carrying heavy loads can result in chronic energy drain. Making empathetic connection with others consumes large amounts of physical emotional and psychological energy. Collecting, and carrying everything you collect, requires even more energy; thus, many burden bearers are tired beyond their circumstances. You may wonder why you are constantly weary, and succumb to the growing sense that there is something drastically wrong with you. “I can’t cope. I am so lazy. I must be crazy.” Condemning thoughts affect your self-esteem and color how you see yourself, in some cases to the extent that they threaten your mental health.

Why Is it Killing Me?

If God designed me to empathize, why is it killing me? Are you supposed to walk around soaking up “stuff,” filtering the spiritual environment? Yes and no. Any filter left unattended clogs, resulting in great damage to the system. You can hurt yourself by doing too much for too long. Isn’t God supposed to protect us? Yes, but... He also gives you spiritual armor. Wouldn’t you assume He expects you to become adept in its use? He gave you intelligence and common sense for the same purpose. He respects the free will He gave you to operate as an individual. You are in a war not of your own making. The Lord protects, but He also wants you to stop walking around wounded in a war zone.

The Lord gave me a word picture to help me understand His desire to redeem empathy. What do I mean by “redeem empathy?” Jesus’ death was the price, the ransom paid for your release from sin and its effects in every aspect of your life. However, out of respect for the free will He gave you, you must ask for that redemption to be applied to your gift of empathy as well. When you ask Him to redeem your ability to empathize, it means you ask Him to crucify it—allowing you to die to that ability. To redeem it means the Lord then resurrects that ability to empathize, even as He resurrected Jesus. It means that Jesus will be in charge of this resurrected ability.

When emotional, spiritual, and psychological freight builds up without discharge, weight collects until something breaks inside. You withdraw or block out awareness of anything more. For the sake of your relationships as well as your health, ask the Lord to redeem and be in charge of your empathy and your burden-bearing capacity. This ability, like all other aspects of your humanity, needs to come under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

When He is in charge, you have access to His wisdom, light, life, and power. When He manages the functioning of your spirit; He will provide protection and direction. This ability is a blessing under the management of the Holy Spirit. Empathy operating without the safeguards of the Holy Spirit can result in burnout, depression, physical breakdowns, and can damage the relationships the Lord meant to bless and refresh. Empathizing can feel like a curse when you

don't know how it works. Although you can "feel" a person's trouble, you alone can do nothing about it. Because you merely sit in the pain with them after a time you come to resent people, for you know, on a subconscious level, that they are the source of your distress.

Working Together

Empathy and natural areas of strength work together. Some capacity for empathy is resident in everyone regardless of natural strength. Your natural strength is something you do well and easily, like teaching, mechanics, administration, music, etc. You easily channel compassionate responses to information from empathy into the area of your expertise. Empathy advises and compassion moves a mechanic, a nurse, or a doctor to volunteer their services. You are at ease using the information your spirit gives you to guide you into action in many areas of service. Though these "sensings" are quite subjective, you have used them so objectively for so long that you think nothing of acting assuredly on subtle nuances.

A trained speaker or teacher senses and reacts to subtle nuances of acceptance and rejection in audiences. It becomes so automatic he thinks nothing of it. He can easily sense when his audience is becoming fearful in reaction to what he is teaching or proclaiming, and check or counterbalance statements to ease their hearts. This is a function of empathy, to inform and guide him about how and what he says.

However, even though we trust and use empathy on a daily basis, most are woefully untrained and ignorant about what may happen when empathy turns to burden bearing. That same speaker, so adept at adapting to his audience, may become confused or frightened when the Holy Spirit begins to draw the fear of many in the audience through to Himself. The speaker has given himself to the Lord; therefore, he may feel the fears of the people streaming like a river through him to the Cross. If he is theologically, biblically, and experientially untrained, the fear that he senses has now become so much more intense than simple empathetic sensitivity that he becomes confused; he cannot understand it and begins to tremble, or stutter, or lose his train of thought. Satan can take advantage of this situation to haul things up from bad memories to convince him that all the fear is his own, that he ought to quit trying to be a teacher for the Lord.

"Blessed is the man who finds wisdom...then you will go on your way in safety" (Prov. 3:13-23). "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow His precepts have good understanding. He will have no fear of bad news" (Ps. 111:10; 112:7). We need God's wisdom to rightly understand and use our empathetic muscles to bear one another's burdens.

God's design is for your spiritual gifting and natural talents to work in Harmon. When the Holy Spirit is in charge of your empathy, you find yourself drawn to a person or situation. The Holy Spirit connects you with wounds in another by empathy. If you train yourself to do so, you can pray specifically and intelligently because you feel what the person is struggling with. You may also be motivated into other appropriate actions. Compassion, born of empathy, can more easily move a person to action in the area of their natural gifting.

If I am a mechanic and I sense sorrow or pain in you, I want to help, so I ask if there is something I can do. How can I bless you? Can I work on your car and thus take a load off? On

the other hand, if I am financially blessed, empathy informs me of need, and compassion moves me to respond by helping financially. Empathetic sensing works to call you into action through your natural gifts. God wants you to have compassionate, practical, and tangible responses to information gathered by empathy. He does not want you to stop with reading each other, with gathering information, absorbing and retaining emotional energy.

Rather, He wants to add to what you are currently doing. He is asking a new thing of you, but at the same time is repeating the call to the Church to “act justly and to love mercy,” (Mic. 6:8) and to set captives free (Isa. 61:1). In other words, He wants you to lighten emotional and spiritual loads and connect people with Jesus in this way *in addition* to the practical helps.

I believe the Lord wants you to develop a prayer reflex to people’s burdens and to be consciously aware and understand your responses to these burdens. The Lord wants you to know what you are doing and become skilled at it. When feelings, mood swings, and sensations come out of left field, He wants you to have an informed, intelligent prayer response, a burden-bearing response to such information rather than assuming all such things originate within you.

The human design includes empathy. It will operate, but if you are ignorant of this aspect of your being, you will not know “what comes over you” from time to time. You will respond as if what you feel is your own and you may cause hurt to others and yourself. You can inadvertently damage the very relationships you cherish, and the person the Lord wants you to help will not receive the aid He intended, because it feels so natural, so full of common sense, you are probably not aware of God’s heart at work in stirring you. Too often people respond inappropriately and miss the call to lighten someone’s burden by bearing a portion or aspect of their burden to Jesus and on to the Cross. God does not want you to stop doing the practical. He is calling you to go beyond material help and bear a portion of others’ loads to the Cross, be they spiritual, physical, emotional, or psychological. In this way you imitate Jesus and function as a child of God, which is what He designed you to be.

Sin separates and divides. Empathy connects. Burden-bearing intercession for another overcomes the division, clarifies the mind, and restores a person’s capacity to see options and make wise choices. Burden bearing goes over and through the dividing wall between God and a person. Sin is defeated. Empathy connects, allowing you to know what others experience. Responding to what you perceive empathetically by bearing that burden to the Lord provides the opportunity to mature and develop into God’s plan for your life—your destiny.

The ability to sense and identify with what is in another connects us in our spirits and makes us corporate beings. Without empathy no one can function optimally as a child of God, for empathy connects us to each other. It binds us together corporately as families and groups. It is our greatest hope because it enables us to be in relationship with God and each other. We have lost awareness of our connectedness—of our corporate nature. Empathy is our greatest resource to restore awareness, rebuild relationships, and renew our sense of being part of something bigger than “me.”

ⁱ Your neural hardware determines your soul's capacity to communicate, soul to soul, but does not affect your human spirit's capacity to communicate human spirit to human spirit. This explains why those born with developmental delays, retardation, or autism can still have an amazing capacity of spirit. The human spirit does not have the same limitation as the soul. For more information see Arthur Burke's <http://wwwtheslg.com> for connection to Sapphire Leadership Group, Inc. with its links to Plumline ministries (Tools to discover and develop you identity and express it powerfully in community) or Amthest Healing Concepts (Resources to Heal and Nurture the Human Spirit).

ⁱⁱ See appendix B regarding the development of the cingulate cortex.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/divinations>; retrieved 11/1/06.