

The managed heart

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [November 4, 1998](#) issue

A few years ago I bought a book called *The Managed Heart* on the basis of the title alone. At the time I was deeper than a decade into full-time parish ministry, serving a congregation of some 400 souls in rural north Georgia. My heart was sore from overuse. I had what is sometimes called "compassion fatigue," and I was looking for anything that might help.

The book, by Arlie Russell Hochschild, turned out to be a study of people whose jobs involve more emotional labor than either physical or mental work. By "emotional labor," she means work that requires the production of certain feelings in the worker, whose job entails the production of feelings in others. She focuses on flight attendants and bill collectors, among others. Hochschild interviewed scores of people whose livelihoods depend on the careful management of their feelings. Her particular interest is what happens to people's hearts when they agree to do emotional labor for pay.

Since I fly a lot, I was interested in what she had to say about the training of flight attendants. The one instruction they receive over and over again is to smile--and beyond that, to smile as if they mean it. Customers can detect strained or forced smiles, their trainers tell them, and this may diminish their enjoyment of the flight. From the cheerful delivery of drinks and meals to the upbeat communication of safety measures, the flight attendant's main job is to produce a positive frame of mind in the passenger.

This emotional labor must not show, however. If the flight attendant feels tired or irritable, this must be disguised. If a passenger turns hostile, the flight attendant is taught to reconceive that person as a fearful flyer or as a little child--anything that will help the attendant overlook the rude behavior and relate sympathetically to the passenger. The point of all these "feeling rules" is to win the customer's repeat business. The flight attendant gives the airline a human face by personifying the care of the parent company, leading the passenger to choose the same airline next time.

Hochschild found that most flight attendants cope by learning a form of "deep acting" that helps them produce the desired feelings in themselves. They learn other strategies for repressing negative feelings so that they do not erupt on the job. After a while, many say they have a hard time recovering their true feelings once their shifts are over. They begin to lose track of when they are acting and when they are not. Eventually they become aware that the hidden cost of managing their emotions for pay is the impoverishment of their emotional lives. They have sold their hearts, and do not know how to buy them back.

Flight attendants are not the only people who do this, of course. Hochschild estimates that one-third of American workers have jobs that demand some form of emotional labor. From the sales associate who is trained to make a good first impression to the physician who is coached on bedside manner, many of us learn how to manage our hearts in the workplace. What surprised me was finding out how much clergy and flight attendants have in common.

I have been out of parish ministry for almost a year now, but my memory is good. I also represented a "parent company" that depended on me to personify its values. I too was hired to serve people on their journeys, although in my case the trip was not from Atlanta to Newark but from birth to death. My company was only one of many that offered this service. If I wanted people to "fly" with my church instead of some other, then it was important for me to provide them with as positive an experience as possible. When I was tired or irritable, I tried to disguise it. When my passengers turned hostile, I worked hard to overlook their rudeness by focusing on their humanity. When I smiled at the door of the church on Sundays, I tried my best to mean it. I did not do any of this simply because I was paid to do it, but the pay was a factor.

The hardest thing was the misperception of my calling. Sometimes, when people complained that their coffee was not hot, that they didn't like their seats and, by the way, there was no more toilet paper in the bathroom, I wanted to remind them that fixing those things was not the main reason I was there. The main reason I was there was to get them out alive if the plane went down. I could handle a coffee pot, but it was the emergency exit I was really good at. I could find them a seat on the aisle, but it was mobilizing people to face disaster that I did best. I did not mind being mistaken for a waitress--isn't that at least partly what servant leadership is about?--but it was essential for me to remember that I was a lifeguard at heart.

Meanwhile, I was willing to manage my emotions. Who wants a surly waitress or an edgy pastor? Plus, you don't want people focusing too much on the plane going down (at least not if you want them to come back). They will find out soon enough, most of them. Something will happen that will make the temperature of the coffee suddenly unimportant, and when it does both you and they may be able to stop your deep acting.

Until then, it seems extremely important for those of us in professional ministry to protect our hearts from overmanagement. If we teach them to lie, we may never get them back. One way to safeguard them, I believe, is to separate the gift of our feelings from our salaries. As a good friend once reminded me, people can pay us to proofread the bulletin, watch the budget, attend committee meetings and deal with denominational bureaucracy, but they cannot pay us to love them. That part of the job we do for free.