

Deep acting at 35,000 feet, and in the grocery-store line

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My friend Jan [recently uninstalled the Disaster Alert app on her phone](#). Her hope was that the app would move her to pray and respond to natural and human-inflicted disasters as they happened. Instead, the app overwhelmed her and stressed her out.

Some years ago a Twitter acquaintance went through a terrible crisis. I followed the sad progression of events and grieved the person's loss even though I had never met anyone involved. On one level, this is a beautiful thing: community that transcends the traditional boundaries. On another level, it left me depleted, and for no good purpose. There was nothing I could "do." Compassion fatigue is very real, and in the digital age, its effects are compounded by being connected to more people than ever before.

Last week at CREDO we talked about emotional labor. Emotional labor is the work involved in responding appropriately to different emotionally fraught situations. Many professions involve heavy doses of emotional labor—ministry is one of them. We might go from leading a staff meeting, to celebrating a job promotion on the phone with a parishioner, to navigating a conflict with a co-worker, to visiting a dying person in the hospital, to teaching a group of 6th graders at the mid-week children's program. And that's before we get home and have another set of emotional issues to respond to among our families and friends. Lots of stops and starts. Lots of switching gears.

It can be tiring.

Emotional labor was fleshed out by Arlie Russell Hochschild in her book *The Managed Heart*, which looked at flight attendants and the ways they must put on a persona in order to respond to airplane passengers. During the presentation, we received [an article by Barbara Brown Taylor for the \*Christian Century\*](#) some 14 years ago. From BBT's article:

Emotional labor must not show, however. If the flight attendant feels tired and irritable, this must be disguised. If a passenger turns hostile, the flight attendant is taught to reconceive that person as a fearful flyer or 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. ...

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 awhile, 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 is the impoverishment of their emotional lives. They have sold their hearts, and do not know how to buy them back.

What happens at CREDO stays at CREDO—there’s a confidentiality I won’t breach. Suffice to say there were many lightbulbs during this presentation, and also many tears throughout the week as these good clergyfolk got in touch with some deep wells of emotion, wells they may have thought were capped and done with.

Since returning from CREDO I have been monitoring my own responses and reactions as I go throughout my day, and I had an epiphany in the grocery store. While waiting in a long line I did what many of us do, which is fiddle with my phone. I saw something on Facebook that took my breath away: a picture of a child I care about very much, who is going through leukemia treatment. I saw her hairless head and her bright smile as she beamed at the camera. I saw her [beads of courage](#), ropes and ropes of them around her neck. I read the accompanying message. She is a warrior. But she is a small child. And no child should have to fight in any war, even (and perhaps especially) a war against cancer.

I wanted to cry for her, and I *could* have cried for her, even in the checkout line. But I did not. I checked myself... but this time, *I was aware of checking myself*.

Emotional labor.

Like many people, I have long wondered about (and written about) the impact technology has on our attention spans and our ability to be present in the moment. This is something I struggle with, and strive to put boundaries around (grocery store checkout lines notwithstanding). But I saw another way that our constant access to technology can harm us: sometimes we are not in a place to respond emotionally to the images we see, so those emotions get suppressed. That can hurt us in the long run.

It's an irony—we praise technology (often rightly) for the ways it connects us, but we become disconnected from ourselves in the process. We have sold our hearts—how do we go about buying them back?

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