

The Balancing Line

Dear Rachel,

When I was little, my father took me down to the Liverpool docks. It was at the height of the Second World War and he wanted me to see the ships from allied countries that had brought life sustaining food to Britain. *There's so many boxes Daddy*, I said in awe. *It's a wonder the boat didn't sink!* My father pointed out the plimsole line painted around each boat. *See that line*, he asked me, *that's put there by the boat maker. He alone knows how much cargo the boat can carry. The secret is to load and reload with just as much cargo as the maker intended it to carry.* The plimsole line was in fact *the balancing line*.

From time to time, I find myself thinking about that incident and musing that Christian ministers and missionaries are like boats. We all have a plimsole line around our souls put there by our Designer and Maker. He has charted the water we sail and chooses the cargo for each of our journeys.

In my long ministry experience, I have found that the secret of arriving in one piece at the planned port of call is the degree to which I understand who He says I am, where He says I'm going, who's going with me to help carry the load, and just what burdens He has determined I must carry! To carry a weight far too great is to risk sinking without a trace, while to carry a load too little is to feel somehow disappointedly unfulfilled.

For example, when I first began to work with young people in Britain, I accepted many invitations to help. The cargo of endless hours of listening, loving, playing, chasing, counseling and teaching was a happy burden that appeared easy to carry. But I had to learn early on that some burdens belong to others, and I would do them a disservice by taking them onto my ship.

After our boats (Stuart's and mine) had steamed across the Atlantic and landed in the States, I was asked to write and write, as well as teach and teach. Soon I was sinking under the weight of too many commitments. My primary responsibility was to our three teenagers and our burgeoning church. How much more could I take on?

Then I reflected on our Lord's ministry. He didn't do everything. But He did set about His Father's business. And loaded onto Christ's ship was a cross.

The *cross*, Rachel, is one type of cargo that God also asks us to carry on every ministry journey. Whatever ministry boxes are loaded onto our ships, the cross is always among them. For me, for example, it was in the form of meetings and periodic absence from my family. Yet I have discovered there is no sense of completion or fulfillment without willingly embracing it! If ministry costs me nothing at all, it will achieve nothing at all! It is the Lord who makes sure the cross is aboard. What blessings I would miss if I left it behind!

Another piece of cargo He lovingly loads onto our lives is the cargo of *crisis*. Thinking back over the major journeys of my life, none have been undertaken without some pretty heavy crisis cargo. Often I have complained *Lord we could make so much more progress without this piece of baggage!* Yet again

and again, I have realized that it has been this very piece of baggage that has kept the ship *balanced* in the waves and has given me the joy of accomplishing that particular voyage!

A third type of cargo that the Lord seems to load on every ministry journey is *compassion*. The Lord wants us to travel with a contrite heart—one that is sensitive to the things that break His heart. He is pained by pride, stubbornness, self-will, and a self-inflated ego. As John Stott reminds us, even *the pulpit is a dangerous place for any son of Adam [or daughter of Eve!]*. We need to leave the boxes of egocentricity on the dock. Then we have more capacity to carry compassion.

Many times I have misread His instructions. Occasionally, I have sunk myself, with all the unrealistic expectations that He never asked me to carry! At times, He has guided me into dry dock for repairs. At other times, He has allowed me to cruise without a storm in sight. But mostly He mends me as I sail and *balances* me up, keeping me stable however hard the winds blow.

In ministry I have struggled with loneliness, a low self-image, meager resources, people's expectations, separations and even criticism from my husband, kids or myself. Yet I have discovered each one of these *burdens* is on my boat by divine plan and by permission of the ship's Owner. He knows me so well; He made me. Balance is simply being in tune with the Maker of my ship.

Dear Rachel, we each sail into enemy territory loaded just right with the cargo of life-saving food for a world at war. What a privilege. There is no greater

joy, exhilaration or satisfaction than travel like this. And the best thing about being God's boat is that the Master goes along on each trip!

Bon Voyage!

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So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.

And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.

But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out

so that you can stand up under it.

1 Corinthians 10:12-13