

# PAUL SUTHERLAND

## THE HEART OF MONEY



**PAUL SUTHERLAND** is chief investment officer of the FIM Group and founder of the Utopia Foundation, which sends volunteers around the globe through [utopiavolunteers.org](http://utopiavolunteers.org).

## Should I Take a Volunteer Vacation?

**I need a vacation, and I'm happy to spend my hard-earned money someplace that needs it. But my husband wants to try a "volunteer" vacation. He says working to help desperate people will feel better than lying on the beach. I think we'll be providing free (unskilled!) labor to a place with already high unemployment. I'd feel better by overtipping. What do you think?**

**Paul Sutherland:** The great UCLA coach John Wooden said, "Anything you do for someone that they could do for themselves takes away from that person." So I understand your reluctance to provide "free" labor. I also think it is important that you and your husband are clear about your own intentions. If you are really going to volunteer, you should commit to three things.

1. Commit to help
2. Commit with an intention not to create dependency or replace local labor.
3. Commit 100 percent, 24/7.

If you're helping people in someplace cool like Kathmandu, South Africa, Nairobi, or Guatemala, and you also want to trek in the Himalayas, go on a safari, or see Guatemala's Lake Atitlán, do it after or before your service. There are real needs in each of these wonderful places, and you will doubly "earn" your vacation through your volunteering. It may be the best vacation you've ever had. I know this as the chairman of Utopia Foundation: we send volunteers to all these places ([utopiavolunteers.org](http://utopiavolunteers.org)).

At first, I wanted to call our volunteering program "Baby Huggers" because I wanted to send our volunteers to orphanages to rock and hug babies. I've been to enough orphanages to know that if you help out at an orphanage, you will be providing a much-needed service—wherever you go. You cannot spoil a baby by giving it food, shelter, love, and nurturing. You are not hurting a baby by teaching English and basic skills to the aunts and other caregivers. You are only helping.

In Africa, for example, the combined effects of AIDS, war, famine, indifference, and other calamities have created a situation where there is often no sister or brother, grandmother or grandfather to take on the burden of raising the child of a mother who died in childbirth. And many of the childbirth deaths happen because no one taught the community safe birthing practices. So let's suppose you teach English, or teach English speakers to read—perhaps a future mother and her kin will read a book that guides them to healthy birthing, healthy child rearing, and healthy living practices. That's a wonderful service.

Many organizations now specialize in vacation *voluntourism*, and many are just in the business of placing people in experiences—often called "volunteer experience." This is a feel-good thing and can look good on a résumé, but the programs often fall short of any real help—and they can hurt by creating dependency,

enabling unhealthy behaviors, or displacing locals. So if you're thinking of providing unskilled manual labor like painting a building, or counting green fishes, or chasing turtles into the sea, I would ask yourself if you really are helping. You want to leave the people and place you work better off for your having been there. It is also nice to end up feeling as though your time, energy, and expense was a good deal—better than just sending a check to the charity.

There is plenty of need. If you are a teacher, early childhood specialist, doctor, veterinarian, nurse, health practitioner, carpenter, engineer, yoga instructor, artist, musician, skilled in computers, or a craftsman, your skills are needed. The key is finding the right organization that needs your skills.

It pained me when I met a pediatrician who went on a weeklong mission trip to build a school and came back

with calluses. He had replaced local labor instead of doctoring to the local needs. When I was chairman of Safe Passage, a organization that works with children who get their sustenance from a Guatemalan dump, people showed up from 100 miles away when we got a doctor to come to our school. Our visiting doctors would go home exhausted but fulfilled.

A friend of mine just came back from a week in South Africa, where she volunteered with the local staff of a rural health clinic. She used her computer and organizational skills to create a simple patient information system, so that when the clinic sends someone to the hospital they can print out the patient's history to show the admissions people. The system also enabled the woman running the

clinic to apply for government grants because she now has documentation for her patients. She actually wept when she started using the system—it will change the course of the clinic's destiny. One week can make a huge difference.

I believe that providing altruistic, loving service to others who are most in need will do you more good and make you happier than going on any meditation retreat, reading every dharma book ever written, or visiting every spiritual site on our earth. I suggest you and your husband put your résumés together, find a good fit for your skills, and try a week, month, or a year in a place you're more likely to come home from with diarrhea and itchy hair than a suntan. I will guarantee that you will smile when you tell your friends how you spent your time off from work. I also am sure your worldview and the way you relate to the world will be transformed. **S&H**

To ask Paul a question, email him directly at paul@spiritualityhealth.com.

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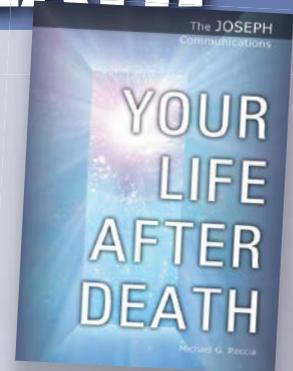
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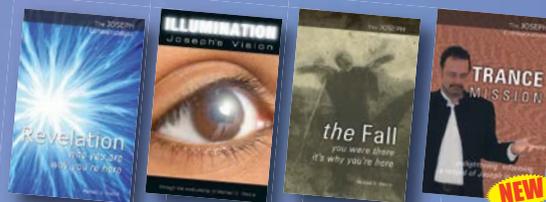
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