

Are People Naturally Generous?

Are people essentially good, or are they naturally predisposed to evil? Are we resourceful and generous, needing only support and encouragement to liberate our natural generosity? Or are we more foolish and greedy, people who need to be taught how to share, how to be kind, and how to give to others, rather than always first to ourselves?

Human beings will innately be kind, the way water allowed to run its course will always flow downhill. —MENCIUS

Throughout history, humans have sought to understand their essential nature. In the creation story shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, God creates the world and declares, “It is good.” After creating man and woman, God says it is “very good.” But soon thereafter, stories of disobedience and a fall from grace follow, revealing our human fallibility. In another tradition, the Buddha says people have an “innate natural perfection” which, distracted by daily living, we often forget.

By wrestling with these age-old questions about our essential nature, we can learn a great deal about who we are and what we are capable of becoming. We can also learn from the examples that are around us each and every day.

If we were every day with one another in the way that we were when those twin towers were first hit, it would be a totally different world. It was about human beings suffering, saving, and giving to one another.

For me giving is like tumbleweeds; once it starts it’s almost uncontrollable. It just keeps going and it just keeps gathering more and more. If we could live our lives with that kind of generosity of spirit, it would be a different world.

I certainly recognize people who have a generosity of spirit. They just give for the love of giving. That’s generosity of spirit. And you know what? They don’t even think about it. It’s just kind of the natural thing to do. I think that giving is a natural way of being, in that everybody has that capacity. We either keep the channel open or we close it. Sometimes it gets closed because of experiences, disappointments, and anger, or it may be closed because of a sense of scarcity.

—Patricia Moore Harbour

The outpouring of generosity following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, reveals how quickly people give when there is an obvious need and a simple way to be generous. In the eight months following 9-11, St. Paul’s Chapel at Ground Zero served as a place of rest and refuge for recovery workers at the World Trade Center site. There, volunteers worked twelve-hour shifts around the clock, serving meals,

making beds, counseling, and praying with fire fighters, construction workers, police, and others. People volunteered a variety of skills and talents, including massage, chiropractic care, podiatry, counseling, and music, in an effort to aid their fellow citizens in a great time of need.

A sociological study of love and compassionate service at Ground Zero finds a variety of types of strengths experienced because of the exchange of loving behavior shared at this site: “the power of love to inspire an offering of service; the power

of love to conquer the fear and horror of Ground Zero, enabling compassionate self-offering despite self-concerns; the power of love to create; the power of love to bless; the power of love to unite humanity with one another; the power of love to unite humanity with unlimited love; the power of love to enlighten; and the power of visionary love.” The researcher notes the data exhibit a “hopeful glimpse of our potential as a species for altruism and harmony.”¹

Questions for Reflection

Is generosity an intrinsic quality of being human, or just a learned behavior? Can you describe someone who is naturally generous?

Someone who has learned to be generous?

Do you believe that the more we practice generosity or believe we live in a generous society will affect our ability and tendency to be generous? Are there examples in your experience that shape your understanding of this?

If human beings are naturally giving, do we need to foster generosity?

Would we be more generous if the ways to give were clear and the opportunities simple, direct, and easy?

Do you think of yourself as a generous person? Why or why not?

What helps you feel more generous toward others?

What makes it difficult for you to follow your more generous impulses?

The following stories are particularly relevant to conversations on the themes covered in this section. We encourage you to read them aloud to each other and let the conversations flow! They can be found on www.learningtogive.org and soon in the anthology *Tell These Secrets: Tales of Generosity from Around the World*.

- *The Lord of the Cranes*
- *The Collared Crow*
- *Five Eggs*
- *An Ox for a Persimmon*
- *The Last Camel of Emir Hamid*