

A PROJECT OF  
THE FETZER INSTITUTE

**Living the Generous Life:**  
Reflections on Giving and Receiving

EDITED BY  
**Wayne Muller and  
Megan Scribner**

INTRODUCTION BY  
**Mark Nepo**



*If you knew what I know about the power of  
generosity, you would not let a single meal  
go by without sharing it. —BUDDHA*



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In 2001 the Fetzer Institute funded a project to inquire into the nature of generosity of spirit and its history as it appears throughout the stories of the world's various traditions. After four years of cross-cultural research, the project team has uncovered an amazing field of over 230 stories from more than twenty-four of the world's wisdom traditions, an unprecedented gathering of fables, myths, and stories that all focus on what liberates our innate generosity of spirit and what blocks it. Working with this material closely, the team has developed both an anthology of selected stories and this reflection guide, which bring the perennial issues surrounding generosity and the mysteries of giving and receiving to the surface as practical relational issues to be discovered in our lives today.

During the life of this project, we have sought to learn about the ways generosity moves and grows among people in communities throughout the world. We have listened to their stories, scoured the news of the world for acts of kindness, and interviewed a host of quiet "saints" who live, often invisibly, in nearly every community. We met regularly to share what we found; and we were invariably astonished to discover how rich, how varied, and how universal the stories of human kindness are around the globe.

We observed a wide array of philanthropy practiced by those blessed by material abundance and have been humbled by the astonishing kindness of those who live with poverty and hunger at the door. We have been inspired by acts of kindness in times of danger and personal devastation and witnessed how quiet acts of generosity during the course of an ordinary day can positively affect individuals, families, and communities.

During this time, we have come to see that generosity is an impulse that invokes deep and vital healing in the human family. With every story we heard, we came to realize that sharing our gifts with each other, whether they be gifts of love, time, attention, skills, or money, releases a powerful force for positive change in both the giver and the receiver.

As a result of this work, we have crafted a Story Circle Curriculum that comprises three tools that we hope will help you explore the countless ways acts of generosity can plant seeds of love, courage, and strength in our lives:

**A Cross-Cultural Anthology of Stories:** When we first consulted prominent anthropologists in search of a collection of cross-cultural stories, myths, or fables about human generosity, we learned that no such collection existed. After three years of research, interviews, and conversations with anthropologists and storytellers, we are happy to say that we now have such a collection. Compiled and edited by Margo McLoughlin and Ian Simmons, this resource reveals the myriad ways that generosity has served as a lifeblood for the human family. In addition to a broad range of these stories housed on the *Learning to Give* Web site ([www.learningtogive.org](http://www.learningtogive.org)), a smaller anthology, *Tell These Secrets: Tales of Generosity from Around the World*, will soon be available from your local bookseller. This publication will be a delightful tool to begin an exploration of who we are and who we can be, offering the wisdom of many traditions about the gifts and challenges of giving and receiving.

**A Reflection Guide:** The reflection guide you have in your hands introduces the topic of the generosity of the human spirit by offering a series of questions as a starting point for reflection and discussion. The age-old questions raised within this guide draw on the wisdom of world cultures to reflect on how we can best live together.

**The *Learning to Give* Web site:** In partnership with *Learning to Give* (an organization dedicated to promoting philanthropy and providing curricula for K–12 teachers), we have made all these materials available to you at no cost. At [www.learningtogive.org](http://www.learningtogive.org) you will find practical tools, with stories and questions, lesson plans, and suggestions for group activities.

It is our hope that the opportunities for reflection offered here will enable you to have ongoing conversations about the role of generosity of spirit in our life. By awakening and liberating our natural kindness and generosity, we believe it is possible to close the divides between us and seed the world with the strength of true community.

**Mark Nepo** Program Officer, Fetzer Institute

Our thanks to the team of generous people who contributed to this inquiry: Angeles Arrien, Jomie Goerge, Deborah Higgins, Margo McLoughlin, Wayne Muller, Peggy Quinn, Ian Simmons, Megan Scribner, and Zelene Wilkins. We are also indebted to the good, kind work of Kathy Agard and Rita Higgins, who created a home for the Reflection Guide and much more with the *Learning to Give* Web site. Finally, we want to thank the many people, from all walks of life, whom we have been privileged to meet and interview, for sharing so much of their heart and experience.

*Generosity—our ability to offer the best of who we are and what we have for the benefit of one another—is perhaps our most valuable human attribute. In fact, it may be the singular quality we possess that has the capacity to transform the world.*

Our generous love for one another is what we call on when we are most deeply challenged. It is what propels us through crisis, what we call forth from within us when pressed against disaster or despair. It can transform danger into opportunity, and tragedy into hope. It is our finest quality, our shining nature as human beings. Along with our courage and our wisdom, our hope and our faith, our generosity is, simply, the best of who we are.

Yet if you get your information about human nature from the nightly news or the daily paper, you might think that we, individually and collectively, are not very generous at all. Acts of generosity seem to be in short supply. Our generous impulses seem overshadowed by our violence and our cruelty, and by our mad rush to satisfy our thirst for acquiring more of everything—more money, possessions, thrills, status, and power.

The media are relentless in their warnings: murders and muggings, corporate scandals and impending dangers, war and economic despair, and political corruption and ecological disaster. We are repeatedly reminded that we are a people deeply and critically divided. As a result, many of us—at work, in our communities, even in the company of our friends and family—feel we are under siege. Despite our blessed position as one of the richest and most privileged nations in the world, we often feel driven by dread, scarcity, and deprivation. For when we are bombarded with only news of division, mistrust, and fear, it grows hard for us to dream together of a better future for ourselves and our children.

As we talked to professionals in a wide variety of fields—from medicine to education, from business to law, from governance to philanthropy, and many others—we heard a similar refrain: If basic human generosity is not fostered, a lack of generosity will quickly and deeply infect the workplace, family, and community. Fear, mistrust, isolation, and conflict grow quickly without the essential enzyme of generosity. And when we operate out of fear, we make bad choices. When we lose our inner compass, we forget how strong we are, or how wise. In this mood of alienation, we often misjudge the obstacles in our way and lose track of the resources we have to overcome them. The world soon becomes a place where people isolate, dig in, and fight to get their share.

Yet don't we all—Democrat and Republican, rich and poor, black and white—dream of a better world? We believe in strong bonds of family and friendship, and in raising healthy, happy children. We want everyone to have health care, live in safe neighborhoods, and have meaningful employment. We all, in our own way, have something we want to give, to offer to the family of the Earth, to care for those less fortunate in our country and the world. We may disagree—even passionately—about the means to get there, but in the end far more unites us than divides us.

Abraham Lincoln, in the dark days of war, called on our deepest capacities of love and generosity to bring peace and healing to an aching, divided people. He called these qualities “The better angels of our nature,” and he knew that without them, we would surely perish.

Each and every day, new stories are being inspired by the better angels of our nature—stories of ordinary people who, every day, try to embrace and fix what is in front of them. They give what is needed. They offer what they have. They pick up what has fallen down. They build what needs to be built. They have more good days than bad—though they surely have both. They make friends, they make mistakes, and they make the world a little better whenever they can.

When we share the best of who we are, we become wiser together. When we share what we have with one another, we make our community a richer place. When we bring our wisdom and our courage and our generosity to the common

table, we become infinitely better at solving our common problems. When we help one another, when we put the needs of others before our own, when we offer our best to serve those around us, we create a circle of support where everyone gets what they need. This is why we need stories of generosity. Stories of such kindness weave us together and teach us how to live together. This has always been so.

We need ways to share our stories and understandings of generosity. In our conversations together, we found that the more we explored generosity and engaged in conversation, the more we understood and the more conscious we became about the ways we are and are not generous. We discovered that there are all sorts of ways to give—from Great Aunt Ethel's annual fruitcake, to monetary gifts to charities, to giving of time and energy to a special effort, to the foundational, institutional form of giving grants, to the time spent talking to an elderly neighbor or helping children with their homework. There is giving that is done within our circle—of family, friends, neighborhood, community, religious institution—and there is giving that is done anonymously. There is giving with strings attached and giving that seems to restrain rather than expand the gift and the lives of those involved.

We also discovered that we may have largely unexplored perceptions about giving and receiving. For instance, while it takes at least two to have a gift exchange, we tend to bestow and project all sorts of virtues onto the giver but are largely silent about the virtues of the receiver. We all have heard many times

“It is better to give than to receive.” At first blush, this makes great sense. We want to live in a culture of givers. But though we want to encourage people to give, do we mean to say it is wrong or “less good” to receive? Surely not. Yet it appears that, even though the receiver is an essential part of the equation, they may be considered “less than” the giver. Does this matter? Does having a different view of the giver and receiver affect the nature of the gift? If they are not considered equal, will the gift be tainted by an imbalance of relationship? If so, how do we ensure that gift giving is an exchange of the highest caliber?

What, then, is the nature of the gift and the nature of gift giving?

The chapters that follow open up such questions in an attempt to help reinvigorate and revitalize the spirit of giving throughout our society.

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Note: The longer quotes with name attributions are excerpted from interviews conducted as part of the Generosity of Spirit project. All other sources are footnoted.



## 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.”<sup>1</sup>

### Questions for Reflection

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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?

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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?

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

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

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

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What helps you feel more generous toward others?

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

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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](http://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*

## When People Engage in Acts of Generosity, What Have You Noticed or Experienced?

Two women shared the following memories of summers spent with their grandmothers. One grew up in a predominantly African American neighborhood, the other in a predominantly white neighborhood. The feelings inside the stories are so similar, they could easily have come from the same family.

My mother and grandmother were incredibly generous, giving, and loving people. I think that love and giving go hand in hand. I remember when I was a little girl there were children over playing at my house. We were out in the yard and there used to be ice cream trucks and their bell would be ringing, calling in the children everywhere, the ice cream man is here! I went running back in the house. I guess ice cream was probably about a nickel, and there were fifteen children on my front porch. There were always a lot of children around there. My grandmother would give everybody a nickel to go buy ice cream, and if she did not have

enough nickels for all the children, then I didn't get an ice cream either.

—Patricia Moore Harbour

I would spend my summers with my grandparents in South Jersey. My grandmother was a schoolteacher and my grandfather was a small-town banker. In the summer, every

day there would be fresh vegetables delivered by the Italian farmers. I remember

asking my grandmother why. She told me that during the 1930s, they had sponsored a lot of families who were being persecuted, and this was their way of saying thank you, and it went on forever. Often, their children would continue the giving.

Black people would also come to our door and ask, 'Is Mrs. Townsend in?'

I would say yes, and get my grandmother. Inevitably it would be someone thanking her, saying, 'You're the reason that I went to college.' My grandmother had taught in a township that was predominantly Black and she did more than teach. And other people, too, would come by and thank my grandfather. He had given loans to Black people in a time when they couldn't get loans. In those days it was called paying respect, calling on people to see how they were doing and to thank them even though they'd thanked them before. So those things really made an impact on me as a child, to see that kind of generosity coming back to my grandparents. —Anita Claney

**Growing up, we're taught small acts of responsibility and kindness like helping out around the house and sharing what we have with others. Our understanding of generosity begins with these experiences within our families, then expands to embrace our community and the world.**

*We should give as we would receive,  
cheerfully, quickly, and without hesitations  
for there is no grace in a gift that sticks to  
the fingers.* —SENECA



**Bread for the Journey** is a nonprofit organization, run mostly by volunteers, that seeks local people who, through their natural generosity, create projects that are simple, caring, and useful. It was started by ordinary people who simply wanted to offer something back to their community.

**Wayne Muller, founder of Bread for the Journey, describes his years as a volunteer.**

For the past thirty years, I have been privileged to work with all kinds of people—ordinary people, not just professionals. Each in their own way is trying to build a better world. And, while large amounts of money are necessary for certain things—like discovering a cure for cancer or AIDS—in more cases than we imagine, giving small amounts of money at the local level honors the fact that people are essentially strong and whole and wise and creative. They can be creators of good things in their community.

We always start with a strength assessment. We look first for the hidden wholeness, the spark of passion and creativity, the deep yearning to make the community a better place. Then we fan the spark of that wholeness into a flame. People who live in the community not only know what's wrong with the community; they also know where the strength is. They know who can get things done, and who's the person who knows the person who can make sure it happens.

This is not really about money. We are so trained to think of money as our wealth, or 'our capital.' But there are so many kinds of 'capital' besides money,

and some are more available and even more valuable. For example, whenever we gather to make something happen, we need someone who has wisdom capital, and another who has compassion capital; some bring 'knowledge-of-the-community' capital, some have time capital, and finally, some contribute financial capital. But it's only when you combine all that capital that you create true wealth. Then all of a sudden there's no giver and no receiver, it's just everybody bringing what they have to the table, and somehow taking away exactly what they need.

I have never met someone so broken they had nothing to offer. All of us are broken from time to time, and feel we can't give back very much. But then, in another season, we find we can once again come to the table, bring whatever we have to offer, and it is more than enough. This is true regardless of how much money we have. Our real capital is the fundamental wholeness of the human spirit.

**A group of young people in Sebastopol, California, approached Bread for the Journey for assistance. They were enthusiastically committed to promoting organic gardening and offered their time, labor, and knowledge to help others plant organic gardens.**

**Bread for the Journey provided seeds and tools. As they engaged their community, the young people asked only two things from the residents in return for their work. First they asked for a donation of a quarter of the seeds from each garden, so this could become a self-sustaining effort. They also asked**

that the garden be planted in people's front yards. This small but subtly ingenious request created a climate of curiosity; everyone in the neighborhood wanted to see what was being planted, how it was being done. Neighbors, newly engaged, began talking to one another, bringing the community together as they began sharing and working on this new project. Some neighbors became so interested in organic gardening that they asked the young people to help them plant

gardens, as well. As a result, there are now neighborhoods in Sebastopol where you can walk down the block and see yards blooming with organic flowers and vegetables, neighbors working together, sharing their harvest, swapping recipes, trading stories.

Like a faithful gardener, when we sow seeds of generosity, we help build connections among people and nurture beauty and growth in our communities.

#### Questions for Reflection

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Who are the generous people in your world? Why and how do you perceive them as generous?

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What changes in relationships when people are generous with one another?

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Have there been times in your life when you have felt more able to share than others? Why?

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Have there been people in your life who have made it easy for you to share with others? People who have made it more difficult?

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When you have been involved in an act of generosity—large or small—what have you noticed happening in your self?

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- *Lo-Sun, the Blind Boy*
- *Mullah in the Turkish Bath*
- *Where One Is Fed, a Hundred May Dine*
- *A Drum*
- *Halibu, the Hunter*

## What Makes It Easy to Be Generous?

## What Makes It Difficult to Be Generous?

The urgent call came in to Radio America, 1540 AM, a popular Spanish-language station in the Washington D.C. suburbs. The families of two of the Washington sniper's victims wanted to attend the funerals of loved ones, but they could not afford the airfare. Could the station help? Radio America quickly put together a fundraiser to collect money for the families in need. In twenty-five minutes the station raised \$7,000, in amounts from \$15 to \$300. 'September 11 opened

our eyes and hearts. We are more willing to help,' said Blanca King, the woman who approached Radio America about getting help for the families. One woman who called to pledge money said, 'I think people feel very vulnerable, and we want to make sure

there's some good that comes out of this. People are scared, but this is one way they can help.'<sup>2</sup>

Louise M. Davies was the principal donor for the building of the very beautiful symphony hall in San Francisco. It's named for her. A newspaper story, just after the building was inaugurated, quoted her response to an interviewer's question: 'Why did you give this gift of six million dollars?' She was said to have replied, 'Because I had it.'

*Everyone must do as they will, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* —2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

...Her answer was wonderful. It was so uncomplicated. It was stating the obvious. And although she could have offered an opinion ('San Francisco needs a symphony hall with modern acoustics') or a personal reflection ('I've always loved music. It's important to me'), she didn't do that either. She just said, 'I had it.' So simple.

...Not feeling needy is what allows generosity to happen, but it doesn't obligate it to happen. The impulse to do something has to be present. Recognizing the possibility of creating delight or of alleviating suffering are both sources of that impulse. Both are responses to people other than ourselves. Both provide pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

**These are two of countless examples of how people respond when called upon to help. From these stories it becomes clear that generosity does not require a certain amount of money. Instead, it seems to begin with some sense of having "enough." Whenever we feel we have enough of something, we can look to see how we can share what we have.**

**When we are rooted in a deep sense of sufficiency, often our impulse is to be useful, to be kind, to give something away. We may even feel that as we give, something is being simultaneously given back to us.**

If it is true that when people have what they need, they are more inclined to act in a generous way, then our task may simply be to liberate the natural generosity in one another. If we provide structures that enable people to give in ways that are simple and easy, many people will naturally provide for others. A radio station fundraiser, a volunteer sign-up sheet, or an announcement in a church bulletin can inform us of ways we can share our talents, time, and abundance.

Often our gifts arise easily and don't require sacrifice.

I think generosity at its best feels simple and easy. The traditional Christian model of the 'suffering servant' actually ignores our call to give freely and gladly. Our 'reluctant' giving can breed a kind of desperate need for something back or for immediate thanks or recognition. It can even lead to resentment that I'm giving all this—and what am I getting back? The kindness that has felt most enjoyable in my life—and what I have seen in the lives of others around me—involves a sense that everyone is winning here. It feels like everybody who comes to the table gets something from having been there. I think that's more honest and more accurate. The line between the giver and the receiver starts to disappear a little bit, because everybody is giving and receiving at the same time.

—Wayne Muller

Yet we all experience impediments to our generosity, some of which are clear and some of which are not. But this is why we need each other, to help us keep the heart open and clear.

If generosity is fundamentally relational, then the giving/receiving relationship is prey to all the challenges and obstacles inherent in any human relationship. Jealousy, dependency, power struggles, and deception can all infect the purity of an honest, easy kindness.

Any or all of these familiar human foibles can create a corrosive dilemma that impedes the authentic flow of generosity. Fear and dependency create scarcity in the giver, and lack of empowerment in the receiver. What kinds of giving challenge both giver and receiver to be more open, honest, and authentic as they strive together to grow a relationship that is beneficial to both?

It is useful to remember that the act of giving begins on the inside. The rhythm of honest kindness arises out of an honest heart. If we are to be truly kind, we must be truly awake to our motivations, our fears, our strengths, and our gifts. In other words, we must first become the gift that we would give.

### Questions for Reflection

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What are the opportunities—both big and small—for us to be generous?

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How do we balance our own needs with the needs of others?

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Describe a time when you felt that your giving was natural and spontaneous.

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What keeps us from giving?

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Have you ever hoarded, or held back, something you could have given to another? Why? How did it feel?

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Describe what is both hardest and easiest for you to share: Time? Money? Love? Possessions? Your company? Why?

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How have you discovered what gifts you have to offer?

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For some, generosity appears effortless, and for others it is much more difficult or even impossible. How can we understand the difference?

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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](http://www.learningtogive.org) and soon in the anthology *Tell These Secrets: Tales of Generosity from Around the World*.

- *Loosening the Stopper*
- *A Couple of Misers*
- *The Lady's Loaf-Field*
- *Soup of the Soup*

Can generosity be taught? What if some of us are fundamentally self-absorbed, greedy creatures who think primarily of our own wants and needs? What if we want to take more than our share, out of greed or fear for the future? Is it reasonable to expect us to ignore our fears and give more than we want to give?

We have been taught, and we have learned well, that to own, to have, is good. Acquiring is smart. Saving is good, not giving. Keeping is wise, until the value appreciates. What we get, we tend to keep. Or we invest to make more, which is not giving it up, but which is making it perform tricks for us. But it is curiously unsatisfying, all this having and keeping.

If something is freely given, there is no estimation of worth, no calculation of desired return. There is no weighing of responses, no *quid pro quo*, no you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Giving is the free exchange of what one has, because one wants to give to another. There can be something immensely freeing in that.

I think the biggest block to finding generosity of spirit in one's own life is never to have had it modeled for you, so you don't even know what it looks like and you've never known anybody whose own life is animated by that movement of the heart. I think once you've known somebody like that, it's a little harder to not be thinking on it, to not be touched by it, and to not realize how fulfilling it is for one's life. With generosity of spirit I experience a largeness of self; it doesn't matter whether or not I get something back from it. It is its own reward. —Parker J. Palmer

A recent survey of youth and service finds that people who become involved in service and giving as youth are more involved as adults. These experiences are formative and influence lifelong practices of generosity. In order to shape generous attitudes, it is important for us to model giving behavior for our children.<sup>4</sup>

Two women, one raised in New England, the other in Africa, recount similar lessons of generosity they learned within their families.

*What a child doesn't receive he can seldom later give.* —P.D. JAMES

We heard about our grandmothers, our grandfathers, our aunts and uncles, our cousins. The family lore was always service: who was politically serving, who was taking people in from the streets, who was feeding them, who was incorporating them into the family, who adopted kids from different places. . . . That was just a part of who we were as a family.

And the mottos were: 'to whom much is given, much is expected,' 'communities depend on people,' 'democracy doesn't exist unless you're a participant,' 'you can't expect things to happen if you're not willing to make them happen yourself.' There's a whole expectation that that is how someone should live in the world. It was a thread that ran through everything. —Ann Fullerton



When I was growing up in Sierra Leone, Sunday dinners were special. My mom would spend hours making delicious food for dinner and the mouth-watering aroma would fill the house. In between games, my siblings and I would anxiously check the kitchen to see if dinner was ready. When dinner was done, my mom filled several baskets of food for various families in the neighborhood. Of course, we wanted to eat first and then deliver the baskets. But my mom would gently insist that we first deliver the food and when we got back, we could all sit down and eat dinner. She pointed out that if we waited to deliver the food after we had dinner, the food we delivered would be cold. In a simple way, she taught us that giving is not just for when it's convenient. —Zelene Wilkins

Parents, at their best, have been found to be good role models. Youth who volunteer with their parents volunteer more and are more likely to engage in a life of service. In addition to these attitudes and behaviors being modeled and shaped within families, institutions such as schools, civic and religious organizations, and other nonprofits can play an important role in encouraging today's and tomorrow's adults to be generous citizens. The following are two, of many thousand, such examples.

**The Heifer Project International** helps impoverished families worldwide become self-reliant through the gift of livestock and training in their care. One of The Heifer Project's unique programs is called **Read to Feed**, a creative classroom teaching tool that motivates children to read books to help hungry people. Through this program, children pledge to read a certain number of books and have sponsors who "pay" for

each book read. The money raised from this effort is then sent to a village to purchase livestock.

The mission of **New York Cares** is to unite and enable caring New Yorkers to help people in need. The organization creates opportunities for volunteers to serve on projects that are coordinated in partnership with schools, social service agencies, and environmental groups. The volunteers tutor children, feed the hungry, assist people living with HIV/AIDS, revitalize gardens, and take homeless children on recreational outings.

But, as we know, organizations are only as generous as the people who bring them to life.

A parent shared with us one of the ways his family practices giving.

Once a year, I give my two children money. The only hitch is, they have to give it away. I give them each \$100. They know it is a lot of money, so they are careful how they use it. It is their job to find out who in our community is doing things that they feel good about, and then decide who will get the money, and why.

Giving away money, even if it is only ten or twenty dollars, is a tremendous way to learn about the positive work people are doing right in your own neighborhood. It makes us get out of our comfort zone, ask around, talk to people we wouldn't normally talk to, and ask questions about what the problems are and what people are doing to make them better. Everyone wins. My kids learn about

the community, about the power of giving; and people in the community, who are often volunteering their own time and money, feel that their efforts are seen and honored in some way.

Last year, they both chose to give their money to a shelter for runaway teens. They visited a few places that counseled young people, and felt this particular place was especially welcoming. When they handed the check to the director—who had no idea these children were ‘philanthropists’—everyone was a little surprised how good the day turned out to be.

This exercise may be repeated as often as possible. It cannot possibly fail. You do not need to wait for holidays, and you don’t need children. You can do it yourself, on any day you like.

**From such formative exercises in generosity, youth learn early on that that they have something to give and they can make a difference. They are exposed to issues facing their communities**

**and the organizations that exist to help. At its best, these interactions nurture altruism and a more engaged generation.**

**And finally, this story, about how one family helps their daughter learn about generosity through the Jewish concept of *tzedaka*, charitable acts.**

When we do our weekly grocery shopping, our daughter Sarah selects one item to purchase, which will then be put aside to give to the local food bank. We are teaching Sarah that not everyone is as fortunate as we are.

During our family’s Friday night observance of the Sabbath, we put coins into our box. Sarah takes a handful of coins and, after telling us something she is thankful for or has enjoyed that day, she places a coin in her homemade box. When the box is full, we donate the money to a local charity selected by Sarah.<sup>5</sup>

*When you realize there is nothing lacking,  
the whole world belongs to you. —LAO TZU*

### Questions for Reflection

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Is it true that to be generous, one must experience generosity? Why or why not?

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How were you taught about giving?

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Who was a role model of generosity in your life? Tell that person's story.

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What stories of giving carry meaning in your family?

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How would you pass on models of generosity to the next generation?

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How would you teach children to recognize opportunities—both big and small—in which to be generous?

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How do we promote a notion of success as measured by what one gives rather than what one has?

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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](http://www.learningtogive.org) and soon in the anthology *Tell These Secrets: Tales of Generosity from Around the World*.

- *The Banyan Deer*
- *The Trouble With Helping Out*
- *The Clever Sheikh of the Butana*



In 1971 a young man who grew up very poor was traveling across the country, trying to make a new start for himself. Along the way he had completely run out of money and was forced to spend the night in his car. This continued until one morning, after a week of sleeping in his car, he walked nervously into a diner and ordered a big breakfast. After eating his first good meal in weeks, he found himself lying to the waiter, telling him he had 'lost his wallet.' The waiter, who was also the owner, walked behind the stool where the young man had been sitting. He bent down, and came up with a \$20 bill that looked as if it had fallen on the floor. 'Son, you must have dropped this,' the owner said. The young man couldn't believe his luck! He quickly paid for the breakfast, left a tip, bought gas with the change, and headed West.

On the way out of town, it dawned on him. 'Maybe nobody dropped the money at all. Maybe that fella just knew I was in trouble and he helped me in a way that didn't embarrass me. I'd been praying for a few days before that, and right then I just made a little promise. I said, 'Lord, if ever you put me in a position to help other people, I will do it.'

Now older, the man lives near Kansas City. Each year he gives away thousands of dollars, primarily in increments of \$100. He is known as the 'Secret Santa,' because at Christmas time each year, he personally hands money out to those on the street, at laundromats, and at diners. Last year, he gave more than \$50,000 away in Kansas City and New York City.

'I've lived the story, so I know it's definitely more blessed to give than receive, because it comes back to you many, many times over,' he says. He is grateful to be able to share the gift that blessed his life so many years ago. 'It's something that never happened to them before,' he says. 'It restores some faith in humanity.'<sup>6</sup>

**Generosity of spirit sometimes depends on a sense of sufficiency, a feeling that there really is enough to go around. In this case, sufficiency is related to having enough money and enough heart to perpetuate the generosity this man encountered when he really needed it. If I feel there is enough—enough food, time, kindness, money, heart—I can easily share what I have with you, and perhaps then you can share what you have enough of with another.**

Rev. Ann Pearson inherited \$1,000 from her uncle. Hoping to inspire caring in others, she decided to give each of her parishioners \$10 that they, in turn, would give away. Pearson soon discovered that the money continued to grow, as enthusiastic donors brought new opportunities and ideas for community service into the church and developed new ways to support additional giving.<sup>7</sup>

*The point is not to pay back kindness but to pass it on.* —JULIA ALVAREZ



### Another woman shared this story.

Taking a family of five out to breakfast can be a trying and expensive ordeal, especially when two of the family are under five years old, but there we were in the middle of the local family restaurant. Actually, the breakfast itself was nothing out of the ordinary, but that particular morning, just after the waitress had given us our bill, an elderly gentleman approached the table and took the bill off the table. 'I hope you don't object if I pay this for you,' he asked with a smile, 'You have such a lovely family.' My husband and I must have stammered something in the affirmative, because he simply smiled again and walked away with our bill in his hand. His example of generosity has stayed with me, and I find myself looking for some way that I can pass his kindness along.<sup>8</sup>

### Questions for Reflection

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Have you ever been inspired to give because of something you received?

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Have you ever kept something you intended to give as a gift? What happened? How did you feel?

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Is it true that to be generous, one must experience generosity? Why or why not?

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These people, each in their own way, were inspired to give by the generosity they experienced from others, some of whom were strangers to them. They incorporated generosity into the regular pace of their days; used it as a way to instruct and inspire others; and simply kept it in mind for when they might encounter a situation that allows them to pass the gift along. The more we realize what we have been given, the more it motivates us to give something back and keep the gift flowing.

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- *A Drum*
- *How the Kangaroo Got Her Pouch*
- *An Ox for a Persimmon*
- *Soup of the Soup*

## How Does the Flow of the Gift Affect the Gift, the Giver, and the Receiver?

Although more humane business models appear, we find ourselves still in the age-old struggles between the haves and have-nots. How does the notion of generosity, of giving and receiving, at the deepest level, influence how we think about these things?

*... A cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead... as it is passed along, the gift may be given back to the original donor, but this is not essential. In fact it is better if the gift is not returned but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: the gift must always move. —LEWIS HYDE*

A gift 'economy' is not an oxymoron, but the fundamental transactional model of living systems. We are brought up—in the Western, 'enlightened' tradition—

One of our most cherished cultural archetypes may be termed the zero-sum paradigm: the idea that you can't get something for nothing, expressed in the homily of 'there's no free lunch' as well as the hard science of 'matter/energy can be neither created nor destroyed.' The laws of the land agree with the laws of physics on this point. And indeed these laws appear to be unassailable, except for one tiny detail, the punch line: 'in a closed system.' Which makes it all rather academic, since, in the real world, human-scale, that we inhabit, there isn't any such thing—we don't even know if the universe as a whole is a closed system....

to think quite differently about nature and society, that it is composed of individuals engaged in a mutual contest of each against all over scarce resources which must be hoarded, guarded, and relinquished only for specific advantage, or else pried from one's cold dead fingers....

But life isn't like that, not in the 'natural world' nor even in our supremely acquisitive and competitive society—any one of us, at any given moment on any given day, is much more likely to be engaged in cooperative than competitive activities.

...and our mechanistic civilization could not survive a single day without the 'labors of love,' favors, mutual aid, and unpaid labors of child-rearing, housework, food preparation, etc. Add to this the ferocious rate at which industrialism is engaging in 'resource extraction,' which is a simple matter of taking something which was created by no one and converting it to something which can be privately owned, and our dependence on the gift becomes even more apparent.<sup>9</sup>

Gift economies tend to be largely tribal in nature and emphasize the good of the community over the individual. One's value is not based on what one owns, but on what one gives to the community. One example can be found among the Chinook of the Pacific Northwest; there, during the ceremony of *potlatch*, a chief's reputation is based on how much he is able to give away.<sup>10</sup>

The great natural resources of the Pacific Northwest helped to create the sense of abundance at the heart of the Chinook's gift economy. Gifts could be freely shared because there was an

underlying sense that there was enough for all and that the health and well-being of each was linked to and supported by the tribe. In gift economies, the gift itself is not as important as how its exchange or flow from one person to another helps to build and maintain relationships and the health of the community. As gifts move from one person to another through the circle, the gift increases its worth, and the blessings of each gift seem to multiply again and again.

After World War II, my parents spent the first year of their marriage in Europe on the G.I. Bill. My father went to get his master's degree in Geneva while my mother worked as a secretary. After the school year was over, they spent three months hitchhiking across Europe. As hitchhikers they were continually in relationship with strangers, asking for rides in exchange for smiles, thanks, and conversations (long or short, depending on the language). At times, the drivers 'went the extra mile,' taking them farther than requested, helping them to find a place for the night, or offering to share a meal. Though my parents knew they would never be able to directly repay any of these people, they accepted these gifts as they were given (freely) and have spent their lives passing these gifts on by helping others that they meet.

Being raised with this sense of giving and receiving was in itself an expansive gift for me. It gave me the permission to receive with thanks what was given, knowing that I would be able to pass it on to someone else farther down the line. —Megan Scribner

While market economies tend to view gifts as commodities and tend to think of gift exchanges as transactions between two people, in gift economies, gifts often travel in a circle. In India, there is a proverb that describes this flow of the gift. "If money goes, money comes. If money stays, death comes." In a gift economy, the gift must always flow; when it stops flowing, something essential to the community seems to die or disappear.

We can contrast this with traditional Western proverbs such as "A penny saved is a penny earned," and "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." These tend to emphasize holding on to what we have, and never letting it go. Here, wealth may accumulate in great heaps, but fewer people can enjoy it.

Many have proposed that there are areas in Western culture, such as scientific research and the Internet, where the gift economy still reigns. Gifford Pinchot, like many others, has drawn upon Lewis Hyde's description of how the field of scientific research can, at times, function like a gift economy.

The scientists with highest status are not those who possess the most knowledge; they are the ones who have contributed the most to their fields. A scientist of great knowledge but only minor contributions is almost pitied—his or her career is seen as a waste of talent. At a symposium...each scientist hopes his or her paper will provide a large and lasting value...because that is precisely how one wins in science.

Knowledge and information are no different than food.  
What matters must be shared and given freely, as is evidenced  
in some hunting and gathering cultures.

Antelope meat called for a gift economy because it was perishable and there was too much for any one person to eat. Information also loses value over time and has the capacity to satisfy more than one. In many cases information gains rather than loses value through sharing. While the exchange economy may have been appropriate for the industrial age, the gift economy is coming back as we enter the information age.<sup>11</sup>

### Questions for Reflection

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What are our cultural messages and sayings, and how do they affect our views on giving?

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Describe a time when you have misperceived the meaning and intent of another's actions.

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Describe a time when you felt confused about the right thing to give in a particular situation.

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How do we receive the generosity of others?

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What's required of the one who receives the gift?

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How do we receive freely, trusting that we can pass the gift along to another?

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How do we see our success as a gift to the larger whole?

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- *The Lord of the Cranes*
- *Nail Soup*
- *A Drum*

We have all experienced giving that does not feel generous. Sometimes gifts come with strings attached. Sometimes we give because we feel guilty; other times, we give to impress others, making us feel superior, proud.

Buddhists describe these sentiments as “near enemies” of giving. These are actions that “look” like giving, but because of attitude, assumptions, or tone, they distort authentic moments of generosity.

The near enemy of loving-kindness is attachment. . . . At first, attachment may feel like love, but as it grows it becomes more clearly the opposite, characterized by clinging, controlling, and fear.

The near enemy of compassion is pity, and this also separates us. Pity feels sorry for “that poor person over there,” as if he were somehow different from us.

If we do not recognize and understand the near enemies, they will surely stifle the joy and open connectedness of true relationships.

—Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*

Giving and receiving pose the same challenges and obstacles inherent in any human relationship. Jealousy, dependency, power, and deception can infect the purity of kindness. What sometimes appears to be a generous act can actually be a manifestation of control, domination, or subjection. Likewise, what appears to be receiving can sometimes be manipulation, coercion, or dependency.

What does it mean to give with strings attached? Perhaps the gift becomes entangled in our heart strings, so that as the giver and receiver move this way and that, we are always reminded of who gave the gift and why they may have given it. It is generally understood that a gift with strings attached is not much of a gift at all, that it flies in the face of the basic tenet that a gift should be freely given, freely received.

Sometimes strings can be woven with the best of intentions. Yet we seldom look at how these strings actually change the nature of the gift. Still, are there times when strings are appropriate, when they actually add to the meaning of the gift?

*It is because of our love—and only because of our love—that the poor forgive us the bread we offer them.* —ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

One woman said that she had for many years given her niece birthday gifts, but as they grew apart, she gave her only checks and gift certificates. She noticed over time that her niece barely acknowledged the gifts. She saw that her niece put as much heart into the thanks as she had put into the gifts themselves. The poor level of the gift exchange reflected how much the relationship had diminished. When she realized this, she vowed that she would re-establish what she saw as the positive strings of commitment and love.

The quality of the gift can be affected by the giver’s attitude and style. If the giver expects certain things in return, the gift



is less a gift than the first half of an exchange. If the giver is giving out of a sense of obligation, the gift is diminished.

We assumed that the givers we interviewed for this project would be modest—that they would not even see themselves as givers. This notion often proved to be true. We consider it unbecoming to see ourselves or present ourselves as generous. But why? Does having a sense of self as a giver take away from the quality of our generosity? Obviously, too much pride or sense of importance would run contrary to generosity of spirit. Or giving with too many strings attached, visible or not, would work against the spirit of generosity. But do we require a sense of selflessness for the giving to be genuine? Does awareness of one's gifts make the giving somehow less valuable?

Often, the deepest giving has nothing to do with objects or goods. Our offering is not necessarily some tangible gift or helpful act, but rather simply a peaceful manner. If we are clear and present, if we are quiet and centered, then others may be nourished simply by our lack of agitation. Many kindnesses thus begin small and quiet. Offering our deepest presence is one of the simplest and kindest things we can do for another.

When we can view giving and receiving as a function of resources and gifts moving through us and between us, then generosity is more a matter of circulation within the global body and less a single transaction between someone who is well off and someone in need.

## Questions for Reflection

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Why do we give? What motivates us to give?

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Describe a time when you felt that a gift you were given was actually an attempt to control you. How was the gift misused?

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Describe a time when you found it difficult to accept a gift, feeling more comfortable giving, and being more in control. What made receiving so difficult?

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Can you think of times when you've been given or have given something with "strings attached"?

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Can you imagine a time when strings can be seen as good or appropriate?

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Do you have "relationships of giving" that have little relationship or gift giving involved? What can you do to change these?

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When does giving become a source of pride?

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How do we give without placing ourselves in control or above those we seek to help?

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Describe a time when your actions appeared giving but were actually something quite different. What values were at work?

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Are there stories of generosity that seem too extreme? Why? How are they different from stories you find inspiring?

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- *An Ox for a Persimmon*
- *Mullah in the Turkish Bath*
- *The Trouble with Helping Out*

## Is It Always Better to Give Than Receive?

### Can It Be Foolish or Harmful to Be Overly Generous?

If we believe that gifts must flow, we can see giving and receiving as naturally equal elements of generosity. The acts of giving and receiving, and giving again, keep the gift flowing. Like breathing in and out, giving and receiving are integral to the lifeblood of generosity. Each of us, with every breath, is engaged in a life-giving dance of giving and receiving. The trees release oxygen for us to breathe and we exhale carbon dioxide, essential for photosynthesis. Life depends on this natural exchange in which all parties give and receive life-affirming gifts.

Still, though both giving and receiving are fundamental parts of the cycle of generosity, it may be difficult to imagine that our ability to receive, with humility and grace, can be as essential as our capacity to give.

*To receive everything, one must open one's hands and give.* —TAISEN DESHIMARU

During my cancer journey, everyone near me was loving, trying to help me—and I sorely needed all the help they could give. But over a three-year period of struggling with illness and treatment and hospitals, even those who

loved me most would get burned out. As much as they loved me, it was hurting them to care so much for me. But when they talked openly to me about their weariness and their pain, I suddenly felt I was needed. I could give to them. It went both ways. Over time, there were many moments when we weren't sure who was sick and who was well, because as they were doing all kinds of things for me, I could give something back to them. That became powerful medicine for me. —Mark Nepo

Giving and receiving flow most easily when they are in balance with one another. Balanced giving and receiving, at their most honorable, serve both giver and receiver and, happily, blur the distinctions between the two.

Living from a generous heart means respecting others and regarding their needs as highly as we regard our own. To “love our neighbor as our self” is crucial to our understanding of love, because it presumes that through kindness and generosity, both parties feel fully and completely loved.

But can we ever give too much? Too much giving can create an imbalance. Have you ever been in a situation when kindness and generosity turned out to be more harmful than helpful?

Many people are familiar with the Shel Silverstein book *The Giving Tree*, a fable about a tree that, year after year, provides shade, leaves, branches, and finally, its very life, to satisfy a boy's needs and desires.

When considering the model of giving in this story, it's easy to find opposing interpretations. Some people feel *The Giving Tree* is a beautiful tale about completely selfless kindness, while others consider it a frustrating, cautionary tale. “The tree gives everything, and the boy—as he grows into an old man—seems to learn absolutely nothing except take, take, take.”

The model of the “suffering servant” can, at times, cause more suffering than it heals. This is clearly evident in situations where a loved one, for example, is struggling with some kind

of addiction or other self-destructive behavior. In this case, by supporting and encouraging them in their behavior—by giving them whatever they want, when their behavior is, in fact, placing them and others in danger—our support can actually accelerate the dangerous harm being done.

When alcoholics promise to stop drinking and we keep buying them alcohol—or allowing them to drink in our company, or keep forgiving them every time they get drunk, arrested, or worse—then we are actually enabling them to continue risking their lives and the lives of those around them.

Here, the line between “compassion” and “codependency” is thin, indeed. Sometimes the most generous gift is, in fact, a tough love that sets clear boundaries, expects real change from

both participants, and lays out real and reliable consequences for those times when the dangerous behavior doesn’t change.

There are times that certain acts, such as care giving or parenting, may look like sacrifice, but in these situations, there is rarely any thought of doing anything else. Giving of ourselves for the safety, health, happiness, and well-being of others rarely feels like sacrifice at all. It just feels like love.

However, even in parenting, there are times when the gift is, in fact, too much. When children are engaged in self-destructive behavior, acting spoiled or entitled, giving can be an out-of-balance response. Over time, this kind of approach can turn from love to exhaustion, disappointment, even anger and resentment.

### Questions for Reflection

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Is an act of kindness that makes both parties happy still generosity? Explain.

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Describe a time when you gave something to someone that actually brought you as much joy as the person to whom you gave the gift. What happened?

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Has there been a time in your life that giving felt foolish or dangerous? Why?

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Must we always be kind to everyone? Is it important to set limits on our generosity? Why or why not? What limits are healthy?

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When is sacrifice an act of love? When is it not?

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- *The Collared Crow*
- *Wend’Yamba*
- *The Last Camel of Emir Hamid*
- *The Origin of Different Water Animals*



Citizens of the United States volunteer more hours and give more money to charitable causes than do citizens of any other country.<sup>12</sup> This is, arguably, the best of who we can be as a people. But sometimes our commitment seems to wane because of time constraints or lack of support. Our society is speeding up so fast that even kindness is being infected by a terrible, frantic busyness. Emphasizing the importance of balance, quiet, and time as conditions necessary for generosity, giving, and volunteering, Wayne Muller notes:

Our work is fruitful only when we are quiet enough to hear the miraculous resilience and strength present among those who suffer, patient enough to see the light that shines in the midst of darkness. Generosity requires time: time to listen, time to reflect, time to know what the right thing to do is. However, our culture is always rushing us, even rushing our kindness, so that even in our most generous moments we may end up doing good badly.

We need to support one another's need for time, rest, and nourishment; rested and refreshed, we more generously serve all those who need our care. If, in fact, the human spirit is naturally generous, then the instant we are filled, our first impulse will be to be useful and kind, to give something away.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, adds inner wisdom and discernment as necessary conditions to giving, offering this caution and a call for balance:

There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by nonviolent methods most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his/her work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his/her own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful.

*Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong.*

—ELLA FITZGERALD

In our first interview with a Native American from the Seattle area, Martina Whelsula shared how as a young adult she was handed a bundle in which sacred objects were wrapped. She was then charged to be kind and gentle in her life. This offers a metaphor for our relationship to generosity as a family or community. It is as if we are being asked “What is in that

bundle and how do we pass it on?” If opened, would the sacred bundle contain stories and a mirror, ready to reveal what is already within us? We are all being invited to open our own sacred bundle of giving, and to share our own stories and learning, our own responses and questions, to offer our own sense of generosity to each other and the world.

### Questions for Reflection

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Is our society as generous as it used to be? Why do you think so?

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Does our current society make it easier or more difficult to be generous with one another? How? Where does generosity continue to grow and flourish?

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How can we avoid what Merton calls a “form of modern violence”?

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How do we balance the needs of our work and of the world around us with our own needs for space and time?

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How do your family and your culture understand and practice generosity?

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What does the world need most?

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- *The Bell of Justice*
- *The Clever Sheik of the Butana*

Sometimes it is easier to be kind and generous when we consider the well-being of future generations.

Harun al-Rashid was once walking through a plantation when he saw a hunched man with a long, gray beard, putting in sapling date palms. He greeted him, saying, 'Take it easy, father!'

'Thank you, my son,' the old man replied.

'What are you doing, father?' he asked the old man.

'As you see, I am planting sapling date palms.'

'How many years does it take a date palm to bear fruit?'

'Ten, twenty, thirty years. Some take as long as a hundred years.'

'Will you be able to eat the fruit of these palms you are planting?'

'I may not live to see the day,' said the old man, 'but we eat from those our forebears planted. So let us plant, that those who follow us may eat in turn!'<sup>13</sup>

One way to discover our deepest gifts is by paying attention to what we love and what we do best. Our knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm make us "experts," and we can easily share the gifts of our expertise with others. The gardener who brings extra produce to the local food pantry and the health-care provider who volunteers at the free community clinic demon-

strate this. Other gifts come from who we are. We are playful, we are musical, we are intuitive, we are gentle, we are wise. We offer these qualities almost as easily as we breathe, for they carry the essence of our being. Our laughter, our song, our touch, our presence, our hope arise from this essential identity and, when coupled with specific talents, make giving seem effortless.

Beyond who we are and what we do best, consider the myriad benefits of giving. Allan Luks has studied the lives of more than 3,000 volunteers serving in a wide variety of settings, from urban neighborhoods to remote rural areas. He found that 95 percent of those who had regular, personal contact with those they served experience an increased sense of well-being. He calls this sensation the "helper's high." Not only does the helper feel good while volunteering, but the initial helper's high is often followed by an even longer period of feeling increased self-worth, calm, and relaxation.

In addition to a sense of well-being on the part of the volunteer, there appears to be a larger benefit on the societal level that can come from personal-contact volunteering. Social scientists have developed the "contact hypothesis," based on research showing that people of different backgrounds will

*...The three things we crave most in life—  
happiness, freedom, and peace of mind—  
are always attained by giving them to  
someone else.* —PEYTON CONWAY MARCH

mistrust each other less if they gather for prolonged periods for a common goal. Bringing together people of different ethnic, economic, social, and religious backgrounds for a shared, common purpose can build trust among people who may otherwise be distrustful of one another. In a country where we are sometimes divided geographically by many of these differences, we can learn to stretch our boundaries and come to know the other as ourselves. With an aim toward improving personal health and strengthening “the nation’s social unity,” Luks recommends at least one hour a week of

personal contact helping someone unrelated to you.<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes it is easier for us to be generous when we feel we are offering a contribution, especially if we feel a part of something

larger than ourselves. The word “contributor” may, in a way, be more fitting than the word “giver.” It implies more of

a mutual relationship, a clearer sense of many useful threads being woven together into a greater fabric. It also takes away some of the distance between the giver and receiver. With the word contributor, those who give become part of what they’re giving to.

Many of the stories gathered here demonstrate that generosity is a reflection of our attitude toward life and toward the people we encounter. When we step out of our own habits and viewpoints and enter a larger realm, the gift of space and time allows us to take interest in others.

As I get older I realize that a sense of gratitude not only goes a long way in helping my own personal growth, but it also helps pull people together. If we slow down and recognize what we have and all that we’ve been given, when we give thanks for those who helped us along the way, it sustains us and lets us give more freely, easily, and with more joy. —Juan Lopez

*Be the change that you want to see in the world.*

—MOHANDAS GANDHI

## Questions for Reflection

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What gifts have been easiest for you to give? The most fun? The most difficult? Why?

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What is our gift to the family of the Earth? How do we discern what flows through us gently and easily, and what we are able to offer that will endure?

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Has fear ever stopped you from being generous? How?

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How do you choose what to give (money, time, etc.) and to whom to give it?

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Have you ever taken for granted the gifts you have been given? In what ways? How has this affected your own ability to give?

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What people or relationships are always there to nurture us? What makes these people or relationships so vital and strong?

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How do we nurture the loved ones in our lives? What kind of generosity is this?

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How might we begin to value our contributions to others as thoroughly as we value our possessions?

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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](http://www.learningtogive.org) and soon in the anthology *Tell These Secrets: Tales of Generosity from Around the World*.

- *People of the Corn*
- *Tiggak*
- *Loosening the Stopper*

What inner resources do we have that would carry us through trials beyond belief and enable our generosity to shine through?

Having survived the inhumanity of the Holocaust and the death of her husband, Dr. Elkhanan Elkes, the revered elder of the Kovno Ghetto in Lithuania, Miriam Elkes told her son, years later, of two objects that sustained her.

One was a piece of bread, which she always hid about her person, the other a broken piece of comb. She kept the bread in case someone needed it more than she, and no matter what, morning and night, she would comb her hair to affirm her person.<sup>15</sup>

*You are forgiven for your happiness and your successes only if you generously consent to share them.* —ALBERT CAMUS

What Miriam Elkes carried, and how she used what she carried, is a profound example of how the spirit can turn ordinary objects into living symbols that can help us live. For what she carried—the bit of bread and her broken comb—and why she carried them, speak to the wisdom of love itself, and make us ask, What small thing does each of us carry that we can give to others more in need than we, and what constant gesture do we carry by which we can affirm our person?

To carry these questions alone is life-sustaining. For to carry the smallest crust of bread or truth that we can offer others always reminds us of two essential facts: that we do not live this life alone, and that no matter the severity of our own circumstances, we have something to give to others. These facts do not invalidate our pain, but affirm our worth, that even in pain we can be of value. We all live somewhere between nothing and everything, and to re-enact, along the way, the smallest gesture of valuing our life is to carry out the work of being human. Only by affirming our person can the human stalk of spirit break ground and grow into something free.

Often the unexpected ability to give, when there seems nothing left to draw from, is the sacred thing that rescues us.

The problems of the world sometimes seem so overwhelming that we feel a small contribution cannot possibly make a difference. A simple generous act may seem far too feeble—can something so small and quiet heal anything? Generosity is sometimes born of struggle and strain to achieve a tremendous spiritual shift or accomplishment. But, as the caregivers among us also know, some of our most potent interventions are in the small things—the wiped nose, the sweater hastily fastened before that little one runs out into the cold, helping a neighbor unload groceries.



**Real healing between people often arises from a good word, a kind touch, an understanding glance. Generosity need not be dramatic, grandiose, or even visible.**

When I think about Generosity of Spirit, to me it goes way beyond money. It's about your presence in the world and it's about your ability to create time to be generous and to be connected to people. —Jade Netanya Ullmann

**Consider what is small and authentic. Every kindness helps us all find hope and balance.**

I was waiting at the doctor's office with my infant son. A little girl came up several times to talk to me. I looked down and saw that the girl had three bright and shiny bracelets on her. I said, 'Oh, what lovely bracelets.' The girl grinned from ear to ear and said they were a birthday present from her mother. She then took one of them off and handed it to me.

### Questions for Reflection

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What is the smallest thing anyone ever gave to you, or did for you, that brought you delight, healing, or comfort? When did it happen?

Tell the story of that gift. How did it make you feel?

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Sometimes the greatest gift we can give one another is our honest, undivided attention. Who are the people you trust to listen, and really hear, the story of who (and how) you are? What makes them trustworthy?

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Who comes to you to be listened to? How does that feel? When is it easy? When is it hard? Why?

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- *The Friendship Orchard*
- *The Bird Who Was Ashamed of Its Feet*
- *A Boy and His Donkey*
- *Where Love Is, God Is*

At first I thought, "Oh, I can't accept this from such a little girl." But what would I be saying to the little girl if I refused her generosity? So I took the bracelet, thanking the little girl profusely. The child skipped off, obviously thrilled that her gift had been received with such pleasure.

For weeks afterward, I always made sure I had the bracelet on as I left the house, to remind me of the little girl's generous spirit. Soon I met another young girl who was drawn to the bracelet and admired it very much. In that moment, I suddenly realized that the bracelet was meant to be passed on. So I took it off and gave it to the little girl, whose eyes lit up as she accepted the gift with delight, and who ran off to show it to her mom. I was so touched by the remarkable joy that this little gift brought to this precious young girl.

—Zelene Wilkins

Juan, now a junior high school teacher, recounted this lesson he learned as a boy.

One afternoon, he discovered that if he tossed stones over his neighbor's fence, he could create a crashing sound, the sound of breaking glass. So he would heave a stone and wait for the crash. Heave, crash. It was great fun and felt a little dangerous. He might get caught, after all, but that, to a small boy, was part of the excitement.

As it happened, he did get caught. The man who lived next door came to his house and told his parents about the boy and the stones. 'I would like Juan to come to my home so I can show him a few things,' the man said, in a tone Juan found rather ominous. His parents, ashamed of and disappointed by their son's behavior, readily sent their son to the neighbor's house.

Juan sheepishly followed the man into his house, through the back door, and out into the yard. There, next to the fence, was a greenhouse. The neighbor led Juan into the greenhouse, and Juan, imagining all manner of punishments, felt he was going straight to hell. What was the man going to do to him?

As he led Juan down the rows of plants, the man began talking about flowers. He took Juan slowly, showing him each one and explaining what he loved about them. These, he said, are my gladiolas. They can get quite large and bloom in

many colors. These are violets; they were my wife's favorite. When I see them, I remember her, and I miss her. In the deep purple, she lives in my eyes. And these orchids, right here, are very difficult to grow. But when they bloom, they create the most exquisite shape and texture. You cannot believe until you see with your own eyes how a flower can be so beautiful.

Juan was amazed. There was no lecture, no beating, no punishment. After about an hour of showing Juan everything he loved about his flowers, and the greenhouse that helped him to grow them, he thanked Juan for coming, and told him he was free to go. As he walked home, Juan strangely felt as if he had been in heaven.

'At that moment,' Juan said, 'I knew I would grow up to be a teacher. This man had done a very small thing; he showed me what he loved. He could have yelled about the glass, punished me for being cruel, but instead he took a few thoughtful minutes to share with me the fragrances and colors that meant so much to him. In a single hour, that man changed the course of my entire life.'

*In the human world, abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common story. Whether the 'scarce resource' is money or love or power or words, the true law of life is that we generate more of whatever seems scarce by trusting its supply and passing it around.* —PARKER J. PALMER

Some of the most beautiful, life-giving acts are those that bring rich and fruitful blessings to both giver and receiver. In this way generosity is reciprocal, though not quid pro quo. It is kindness without condition; we give and we get back, but rarely from the same person, or the way we expect, or in the time we most want it. The return of the gift is often a surprise, a moment of grace.

What if the healing of the world depends on the invisible kindnesses we offer simply and quietly? If we come to the table as equals, bringing what we have, we can, together, create true abundance. We invite all participants to the table; we seek out all voices and presume that in the rich diversity of opinion, geography, and ethnicity lies the potential for a great consensus. Through stories of kindness, hope, courage, faith, and love, we listen together for the hidden wholeness; we seek the wisdom and grace in every person.

A few years ago, David became seriously ill. After three hospital stays, including two surgeries, he had used up all of his vacation and sick leave. He and his family were running out of money, and their situation worsened as Christmas neared.

It was the end of the year and my last paycheck at the first of December was for approximately 10 percent of its usual amount. I was worried. It was fast approaching Christmas and I wouldn't be going back to work until mid-January at the earliest. I am married and have two daughters who at that time were 8 and 5. My wife, who is a schoolteacher, was just barely keeping things together. I really didn't think there would be much, if any, Christmas that year. So I was very surprised when, on the 15th of December, I received a paycheck. When I opened it, there was not only a full pay period but also the pay I was missing from the previous check. I immediately called our comptroller for an explanation. It seems that all the employees had gotten together and donated any vacation that they had left for the year so I could get paid. I cried. It was truly a good deed.<sup>16</sup>



Being generous sometimes requires a leap of faith. In letting go of something by giving, you trust that you will somehow receive what you need in return. Love, energy, money, and kindness are intended to flow, and when you obstruct the outgoing flow, there can be no incoming flow.

When you hold tightly to what you treasure (perhaps out of fear or a sense of scarcity), your hand cannot receive even greater gifts that may come your way. But when you open your hand and your heart, freely sharing what you have as well as what you don't, you become ready and able to receive, and you may often find that your needs are met in unexpected ways.

### Questions for Reflection

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Have you ever given or received an anonymous gift? What happened? How did that affect you?

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Have you ever given or received an unplanned, spontaneous gift? What happened and how did it affect you?

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Has someone been willing to take a risk in believing in you? What happened and how did that belief affect you?

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What steps can you take to liberate your natural generosity and the generosity of those around you?

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- *The Lord of the Cranes*
- *A Drum*
- *How the Kangaroo Got Its Pouch*
- *The Emerald Lizard*



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- <sup>12</sup> Independent Sector, *Giving and Volunteering Signature Series* (1999).
- <sup>13</sup> Fadiman, James and Robert Frager, eds. *Essential Sufism* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1998), 190–191.
- <sup>14</sup> Luks, Allen, "How Alive Is the Helping Connection?" *Spirituality & Health*, May/June 2003, 34.
- <sup>15</sup> Elkes, Joel. *Values, Belief and Survival: Dr. Elkhanen Elkes and the Kovno Ghetto* (London: Vale Publishing, 1997), 87.
- <sup>16</sup> "Stories of Good Deeds: NPR Listeners Share Tales of Kind Strangers, Acts of Generosity," NPR, January 27, 2003.

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*Blessed are those who can give without  
remembering and take without forgetting.*

—ELIZABETH ASQUITH BIBESCO

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