

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.⁴

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.⁵

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

Questions for Reflection

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

How were you taught about giving?

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

What stories of giving carry meaning in your family?

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

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

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

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

