

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.'⁶

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.⁷

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.⁸

Questions for Reflection

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

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

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

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.

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*.

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