

Citizens of the United States volunteer more hours and give more money to charitable causes than do citizens of any other country.¹² 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

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

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?

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

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

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

What does the world need most?

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