

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

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

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?

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

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

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

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