

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