

What Makes It Easy to Be Generous?

What Makes It Difficult to Be Generous?

The urgent call came in to Radio America, 1540 AM, a popular Spanish-language station in the Washington D.C. suburbs. The families of two of the Washington sniper's victims wanted to attend the funerals of loved ones, but they could not afford the airfare. Could the station help? Radio America quickly put together a fundraiser to collect money for the families in need. In twenty-five minutes the station raised \$7,000, in amounts from \$15 to \$300. 'September 11 opened

our eyes and hearts. We are more willing to help,' said Blanca King, the woman who approached Radio America about getting help for the families. One woman who called to pledge money said, 'I think people feel very vulnerable, and we want to make sure

there's some good that comes out of this. People are scared, but this is one way they can help.'²

Louise M. Davies was the principal donor for the building of the very beautiful symphony hall in San Francisco. It's named for her. A newspaper story, just after the building was inaugurated, quoted her response to an interviewer's question: 'Why did you give this gift of six million dollars?' She was said to have replied, 'Because I had it.'

Everyone must do as they will, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. —2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

...Her answer was wonderful. It was so uncomplicated. It was stating the obvious. And although she could have offered an opinion ('San Francisco needs a symphony hall with modern acoustics') or a personal reflection ('I've always loved music. It's important to me'), she didn't do that either. She just said, 'I had it.' So simple.

...Not feeling needy is what allows generosity to happen, but it doesn't obligate it to happen. The impulse to do something has to be present. Recognizing the possibility of creating delight or of alleviating suffering are both sources of that impulse. Both are responses to people other than ourselves. Both provide pleasure.³

These are two of countless examples of how people respond when called upon to help. From these stories it becomes clear that generosity does not require a certain amount of money. Instead, it seems to begin with some sense of having "enough." Whenever we feel we have enough of something, we can look to see how we can share what we have.

When we are rooted in a deep sense of sufficiency, often our impulse is to be useful, to be kind, to give something away. We may even feel that as we give, something is being simultaneously given back to us.

If it is true that when people have what they need, they are more inclined to act in a generous way, then our task may simply be to liberate the natural generosity in one another. If we provide structures that enable people to give in ways that are simple and easy, many people will naturally provide for others. A radio station fundraiser, a volunteer sign-up sheet, or an announcement in a church bulletin can inform us of ways we can share our talents, time, and abundance.

Often our gifts arise easily and don't require sacrifice.

I think generosity at its best feels simple and easy. The traditional Christian model of the 'suffering servant' actually ignores our call to give freely and gladly. Our 'reluctant' giving can breed a kind of desperate need for something back or for immediate thanks or recognition. It can even lead to resentment that I'm giving all this—and what am I getting back? The kindness that has felt most enjoyable in my life—and what I have seen in the lives of others around me—involves a sense that everyone is winning here. It feels like everybody who comes to the table gets something from having been there. I think that's more honest and more accurate. The line between the giver and the receiver starts to disappear a little bit, because everybody is giving and receiving at the same time.

—Wayne Muller

Yet we all experience impediments to our generosity, some of which are clear and some of which are not. But this is why we need each other, to help us keep the heart open and clear.

If generosity is fundamentally relational, then the giving/receiving relationship is prey to all the challenges and obstacles inherent in any human relationship. Jealousy, dependency, power struggles, and deception can all infect the purity of an honest, easy kindness.

Any or all of these familiar human foibles can create a corrosive dilemma that impedes the authentic flow of generosity. Fear and dependency create scarcity in the giver, and lack of empowerment in the receiver. What kinds of giving challenge both giver and receiver to be more open, honest, and authentic as they strive together to grow a relationship that is beneficial to both?

It is useful to remember that the act of giving begins on the inside. The rhythm of honest kindness arises out of an honest heart. If we are to be truly kind, we must be truly awake to our motivations, our fears, our strengths, and our gifts. In other words, we must first become the gift that we would give.

Questions for Reflection

What are the opportunities—both big and small—for us to be generous?

How do we balance our own needs with the needs of others?

Describe a time when you felt that your giving was natural and spontaneous.

What keeps us from giving?

Have you ever hoarded, or held back, something you could have given to another? Why? How did it feel?

Describe what is both hardest and easiest for you to share: Time? Money? Love? Possessions? Your company? Why?

How have you discovered what gifts you have to offer?

For some, generosity appears effortless, and for others it is much more difficult or even impossible. How can we understand the difference?

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*.

- *Loosening the Stopper*
- *A Couple of Misers*
- *The Lady's Loaf-Field*
- *Soup of the Soup*