

What inner resources do we have that would carry us through trials beyond belief and enable our generosity to shine through?

Having survived the inhumanity of the Holocaust and the death of her husband, Dr. Elkhanan Elkes, the revered elder of the Kovno Ghetto in Lithuania, Miriam Elkes told her son, years later, of two objects that sustained her.

One was a piece of bread, which she always hid about her person, the other a broken piece of comb. She kept the bread in case someone needed it more than she, and no matter what, morning and night, she would comb her hair to affirm her person.¹⁵

You are forgiven for your happiness and your successes only if you generously consent to share them. —ALBERT CAMUS

What Miriam Elkes carried, and how she used what she carried, is a profound example of how the spirit can turn ordinary objects into living symbols that can help us live. For what she carried—the bit of bread and her broken comb—and why she carried them, speak to the wisdom of love itself, and make us ask, What small thing does each of us carry that we can give to others more in need than we, and what constant gesture do we carry by which we can affirm our person?

To carry these questions alone is life-sustaining. For to carry the smallest crust of bread or truth that we can offer others always reminds us of two essential facts: that we do not live this life alone, and that no matter the severity of our own circumstances, we have something to give to others. These facts do not invalidate our pain, but affirm our worth, that even in pain we can be of value. We all live somewhere between nothing and everything, and to re-enact, along the way, the smallest gesture of valuing our life is to carry out the work of being human. Only by affirming our person can the human stalk of spirit break ground and grow into something free.

Often the unexpected ability to give, when there seems nothing left to draw from, is the sacred thing that rescues us.

The problems of the world sometimes seem so overwhelming that we feel a small contribution cannot possibly make a difference. A simple generous act may seem far too feeble—can something so small and quiet heal anything? Generosity is sometimes born of struggle and strain to achieve a tremendous spiritual shift or accomplishment. But, as the caregivers among us also know, some of our most potent interventions are in the small things—the wiped nose, the sweater hastily fastened before that little one runs out into the cold, helping a neighbor unload groceries.



Real healing between people often arises from a good word, a kind touch, an understanding glance. Generosity need not be dramatic, grandiose, or even visible.

When I think about Generosity of Spirit, to me it goes way beyond money. It's about your presence in the world and it's about your ability to create time to be generous and to be connected to people. —Jade Netanya Ullmann

Consider what is small and authentic. Every kindness helps us all find hope and balance.

I was waiting at the doctor's office with my infant son. A little girl came up several times to talk to me. I looked down and saw that the girl had three bright and shiny bracelets on her. I said, 'Oh, what lovely bracelets.' The girl grinned from ear to ear and said they were a birthday present from her mother. She then took one of them off and handed it to me.

Questions for Reflection

What is the smallest thing anyone ever gave to you, or did for you, that brought you delight, healing, or comfort? When did it happen?

Tell the story of that gift. How did it make you feel?

Sometimes the greatest gift we can give one another is our honest, undivided attention. Who are the people you trust to listen, and really hear, the story of who (and how) you are? What makes them trustworthy?

Who comes to you to be listened to? How does that feel? When is it easy? When is it hard? Why?

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 Friendship Orchard*
- *The Bird Who Was Ashamed of Its Feet*
- *A Boy and His Donkey*
- *Where Love Is, God Is*

At first I thought, "Oh, I can't accept this from such a little girl." But what would I be saying to the little girl if I refused her generosity? So I took the bracelet, thanking the little girl profusely. The child skipped off, obviously thrilled that her gift had been received with such pleasure.

For weeks afterward, I always made sure I had the bracelet on as I left the house, to remind me of the little girl's generous spirit. Soon I met another young girl who was drawn to the bracelet and admired it very much. In that moment, I suddenly realized that the bracelet was meant to be passed on. So I took it off and gave it to the little girl, whose eyes lit up as she accepted the gift with delight, and who ran off to show it to her mom. I was so touched by the remarkable joy that this little gift brought to this precious young girl.

—Zelene Wilkins