

When People Engage in Acts of Generosity, What Have You Noticed or Experienced?

Two women shared the following memories of summers spent with their grandmothers. One grew up in a predominantly African American neighborhood, the other in a predominantly white neighborhood. The feelings inside the stories are so similar, they could easily have come from the same family.

My mother and grandmother were incredibly generous, giving, and loving people. I think that love and giving go hand in hand. I remember when I was a little girl there were children over playing at my house. We were out in the yard and there used to be ice cream trucks and their bell would be ringing, calling in the children everywhere, the ice cream man is here! I went running back in the house. I guess ice cream was probably about a nickel, and there were fifteen children on my front porch. There were always a lot of children around there. My grandmother would give everybody a nickel to go buy ice cream, and if she did not have

enough nickels for all the children, then I didn't get an ice cream either.

—Patricia Moore Harbour

I would spend my summers with my grandparents in South Jersey. My grandmother was a schoolteacher and my grandfather was a small-town banker. In the summer, every

day there would be fresh vegetables delivered by the Italian farmers. I remember

asking my grandmother why. She told me that during the 1930s, they had sponsored a lot of families who were being persecuted, and this was their way of saying thank you, and it went on forever. Often, their children would continue the giving.

Black people would also come to our door and ask, 'Is Mrs. Townsend in?'

I would say yes, and get my grandmother. Inevitably it would be someone thanking her, saying, 'You're the reason that I went to college.' My grandmother had taught in a township that was predominantly Black and she did more than teach. And other people, too, would come by and thank my grandfather. He had given loans to Black people in a time when they couldn't get loans. In those days it was called paying respect, calling on people to see how they were doing and to thank them even though they'd thanked them before. So those things really made an impact on me as a child, to see that kind of generosity coming back to my grandparents. —Anita Claney

Growing up, we're taught small acts of responsibility and kindness like helping out around the house and sharing what we have with others. Our understanding of generosity begins with these experiences within our families, then expands to embrace our community and the world.

*We should give as we would receive,
cheerfully, quickly, and without hesitations;
for there is no grace in a gift that sticks to
the fingers.* —SENECA



Bread for the Journey is a nonprofit organization, run mostly by volunteers, that seeks local people who, through their natural generosity, create projects that are simple, caring, and useful. It was started by ordinary people who simply wanted to offer something back to their community.

Wayne Muller, founder of Bread for the Journey, describes his years as a volunteer.

For the past thirty years, I have been privileged to work with all kinds of people—ordinary people, not just professionals. Each in their own way is trying to build a better world. And, while large amounts of money are necessary for certain things—like discovering a cure for cancer or AIDS—in more cases than we imagine, giving small amounts of money at the local level honors the fact that people are essentially strong and whole and wise and creative. They can be creators of good things in their community.

We always start with a strength assessment. We look first for the hidden wholeness, the spark of passion and creativity, the deep yearning to make the community a better place. Then we fan the spark of that wholeness into a flame. People who live in the community not only know what's wrong with the community; they also know where the strength is. They know who can get things done, and who's the person who knows the person who can make sure it happens.

This is not really about money. We are so trained to think of money as our wealth, or 'our capital.' But there are so many kinds of 'capital' besides money,

and some are more available and even more valuable. For example, whenever we gather to make something happen, we need someone who has wisdom capital, and another who has compassion capital; some bring 'knowledge-of-the-community' capital, some have time capital, and finally, some contribute financial capital. But it's only when you combine all that capital that you create true wealth. Then all of a sudden there's no giver and no receiver, it's just everybody bringing what they have to the table, and somehow taking away exactly what they need.

I have never met someone so broken they had nothing to offer. All of us are broken from time to time, and feel we can't give back very much. But then, in another season, we find we can once again come to the table, bring whatever we have to offer, and it is more than enough. This is true regardless of how much money we have. Our real capital is the fundamental wholeness of the human spirit.

A group of young people in Sebastopol, California, approached Bread for the Journey for assistance. They were enthusiastically committed to promoting organic gardening and offered their time, labor, and knowledge to help others plant organic gardens.

Bread for the Journey provided seeds and tools. As they engaged their community, the young people asked only two things from the residents in return for their work. First they asked for a donation of a quarter of the seeds from each garden, so this could become a self-sustaining effort. They also asked

that the garden be planted in people's front yards. This small but subtly ingenious request created a climate of curiosity; everyone in the neighborhood wanted to see what was being planted, how it was being done. Neighbors, newly engaged, began talking to one another, bringing the community together as they began sharing and working on this new project. Some neighbors became so interested in organic gardening that they asked the young people to help them plant

gardens, as well. As a result, there are now neighborhoods in Sebastopol where you can walk down the block and see yards blooming with organic flowers and vegetables, neighbors working together, sharing their harvest, swapping recipes, trading stories.

Like a faithful gardener, when we sow seeds of generosity, we help build connections among people and nurture beauty and growth in our communities.

Questions for Reflection

Who are the generous people in your world? Why and how do you perceive them as generous?

What changes in relationships when people are generous with one another?

Have there been times in your life when you have felt more able to share than others? Why?

Have there been people in your life who have made it easy for you to share with others? People who have made it more difficult?

When you have been involved in an act of generosity—large or small—what have you noticed happening in your self?

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*.

- *Lo-Sun, the Blind Boy*
- *Mullah in the Turkish Bath*
- *Where One Is Fed, a Hundred May Dine*
- *A Drum*
- *Halibu, the Hunter*