



Living a Life of Generosity

Small Groups: April 2015

When I was a young adult, my mother loaned me and my husband money for a down payment on our first house. We meticulously paid her back each month, but she didn't want any interest. She was glad to help us out. She was similarly generous with my siblings when she could be – sometimes with the expectation of repayment and sometimes not. This was a woman who, having grown up poor, managed to live on a pretty measly income and still feel good about giving.

When Gary and I married, our merger created a family with five kids. As they grew older and needed cars, college, weddings, and homes, we struggled with how to respond to requests for money from our young adult children, especially as our own incomes decreased with changes in our career paths. I remember trying to keep track of who owed what and when payments were made, and that whole process generated a lot of anxiety and sometimes resentment – for the kids and for me.

After some frustrations and hard lessons learned, Gary and I eventually made the decision to give our kids what we could when we could with no strings attached. Boy, did that feel great! And so far it seems to have panned out. All five of our children have become responsible adults. Regardless of what you may think about teaching fiscal responsibility or the dangers of enabling, there is such a thing as responsible generosity. It comes with good communication, a little bit of “due diligence,” and trust.

As I was thinking about this month's theme of generosity and reflecting on the topic, I realized what a scary subject generosity is. We are often afraid to be generous. It feels risky. Being generous means making a valuable commitment to someone or something. At the same time, generosity requires letting go of something else we value: our money, our time, our attention, our talents, our sense of security. We get touchy when our sense of ownership of any of these things is threatened.

The ethos of scarcity impacts our lives at nearly every turn. We want to hang onto what we've got in case there's no more to be had. If we are generous, we fear we may end up paying for our generosity in some negative way. We may be “hit up” again or pressured to give more than we are comfortable giving. Perhaps we'll be sorry we gave anything at all because we might decide we'll want or need it back for ourselves!

What would it feel like to conquer our fears about giving? What does it feel like to give without judgment or pressure, without a sense of superiority or entitlement, without implying a sense of dependence or debt in the recipient? What if we didn't care about the tax deduction, having our name in the donor column of the brochure, or the social pressure?

Author Piero Ferrucci says that “the true benefit of generosity, for the giver, is not a material advantage but an inner revolution.” In other words, true generosity helps us to relax in the knowledge that we value people more than things. True generosity increases our flexibility and our ability to take risks. It helps us connect and feel part of the whole rather than feeling isolated and separate.

Generous people are happier than miserly people. Generous people feel better about themselves and have greater peace of mind. They are generally kinder and more content. What's not to like about generosity?!

We all have something to give, something that's needed: time, resources, ideas, and more. To give whatever it is we have to give and to give it freely, no strings attached, is... well... freeing! Generosity does not mean giving all one has to give to the point of depletion. Self-awareness and healthy boundaries are important of course. But, according to Ferrucci: “Generosity is exactly this: to give that which is dearest to us. It is an act that transforms us. After it, we will be poorer, but we will feel richer. Perhaps we will feel less equipped and secure, but we will be freer. We will have made the world we live in a little kinder.”

May we all strive to give freely of our resources, to free ourselves from the fears and the “me-me” stinginess that permeates our culture. May our freely given gifts of time, talent, and treasure generate greater health and happiness for our families, our congregation and our world.

I am most grateful for the generosity I've experienced from so many of you over the past five years. May your generous spirit continue!

Yours in Love,

Rev. Linda Lawrence



Living the Theme: Generosity

Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience generosity and what you learned from the practice.

1. Help our children become more generous.

No one has yet to realize the wealth of sympathy, the kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure. -Emma Goldman

Imagine ways we can introduce children to ways of giving:

- Volunteering: older children can help at a soup kitchen, food pantry or shelter; even younger children can help pick up toys in the nursery or pick up litter during a walk
- Clothing and toy collection
- Recycling
- Adopt-A-Senior: providing companionship teaches children to give generously of their time and attention
- Tithing: children can give a portion of their allowance to the congregation or a charity close to their heart
- Mentoring: teens and older children can tutor other children or help them learn a skill
- Helping at home

2. Practice giving without expectation of reciprocity.

Do everything with a mind that lets go. Do not expect praise or reward. -Achaan Chah

Your challenge is to find a way to bring generosity to someone's life. That may seem simple, but there is one big, challenging rule you must follow:

They can't know you were involved! Your task is not to do a "good deed." It is to help someone experience life differently. The goal is to remind someone that life itself is generous, not stingy; open, not closed; full of surprises, not full of threats. If they know you are involved, it will only convince them that you are a good guy or gal. Your goal is convince them that "life is good!"

Here is some inspiration to help you:

<https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/kindness-ideas>

1. Was remaining anonymous harder than you thought? Did the difficulty have more to do with you wanting credit or with you wanting to vicariously experience the recipient's joy?
2. Why did you choose the recipient you did? Does this say anything about what kinds of people you think "deserve generosity"?
3. How was this spiritual for you? Did it just make you feel happy? Or part of something larger than yourself?
4. Have you become more attuned to acts of generosity that you notice around you?

3. Take time to check in on what you have.

Take a week to make a list of how you spend your time and how you spend your money. We often feel there is not enough time or enough money. But take a week to pay attention to how you spend these resources. Maybe there is more than you thought?



Some Questions to Live With

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. **Where do you experience a feeling of abundance?** Are there places in your life where you think life or other people have been generous to you? How does thinking of those things make you feel?
2. Have you ever experienced **generosity as coming with a price?**
3. **How do you balance self-care and generosity toward others?**
4. Many people believe that time is the most precious resource we have. **Where do you spend your time generously?**
5. **How have you learned to be generous? Who or what taught you generosity?**
6. What does it look like to have **generosity of spirit?**
7. In what ways do you/we **model generosity to our children?**
8. **Who is the most generous person you know?** In what ways are they generous?
9. How do you utilize your **talents and skills to give** to others?
10. **Do you have a powerful experience of receiving generosity from others?**
11. **What is the most generous you have felt?** Was it a gift of time? Money? Talent? Emotion?
12. How do you feel about **selfless giving?**
13. When was the last time you **stopped yourself** from being generous? Why?
14. **In what ways are you not generous? Which areas of your life do you feel the most scarcity?**
Like you don't have enough to give? Why?
15. **Have you ever had to stop giving in some way?** How did you feel about the experience?
16. Do you think **generosity is "contagious?"**



Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

First Thoughts and Wise Words

Generosity: readiness or liberality in giving; freedom from meanness or smallness of mind and character; largeness or fullness; amplitude

Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present.

Albert Camus

A man has made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he will never sit.

D. Elton Trueblood

Teach this triple truth to all: a generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things which renew humanity.

Buddha

One of the ways I try to be generous is in my interpretation of others' behaviors. It is easy to be judgmental and write them off when others are acting in irritating ways, but I try to imagine what they might be going through to cause this, and try to be generous in my thoughts.

Small Group Facilitator

A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle.

Father James Keller

When we don't ask, we don't let others give. When we fear rejection, we don't let generosity arise.

Roshi Bernie Glassman

Every man goes to his death bearing in his hands only that which he has given away.

Persian proverb

It is more blessed to give than to receive.

Acts 20:35

Generosity of spirit to me is the upstream movement against all the logic of economics and institutional life and power relationships. It's this upstream movement that simply says "I'll give it away and I don't need anything in return"—it's not a quid pro quo. And what I'll give away is sometimes material, but often it's time, energy, personal presence, or some sort of blessing to another person.

Parker Palmer

A wise woman who was traveling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveler who was hungry, and the wise woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him. She did so without hesitation. The traveler left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime. But a few days later he came back to return the stone to the wise woman.

"I've been thinking," he said, "I know how valuable the stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something even more precious. Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone."

Author Unknown

Generosity is giving freely, without condition, without judgment and without explanation. Generosity is determined by intention, not by amount.

Small Group Facilitator

When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed.

Maya Angelou

Generosity is not giving me that which I need more than you do, but is giving me that which you need more than I do.

Kahlil Gibran



It has always seemed strange to me...The things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling, are the concomitants of failure in our system. And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest, are the traits of success. And while men admire the quality of the first they love the produce of the second.

John Steinbeck

It takes generosity to discover the whole through others. If you realize you are only a violin, you can open yourself up to the world by playing your role in the concert."

Jacques-Yves Cousteau

The word that comes to my mind when I think of generosity is "sharing". We talk about sharing our joys and sorrows, sharing the plate, sharing our stories, etc. etc. There are some lines from our hymnal (hymn #402) that seem to speak to this:

*From you I receive,
To you I give,
Together we share,
And from this we live.*

I also think the "Loaves and Fishes" story from the Bible speaks to generosity and sharing (rather than a miracle). Once the people felt connected, they opened their hearts and their lunch baskets and suddenly everyone had enough. (Or maybe the miracle was that so many people were inspired to become generous!)

Small Group Facilitator

As we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fears, our presence automatically liberates others.

Nelson Mandela

The fragrance always remains in the hand that gives the rose.

Mahatma Gandhi

Since you get more joy out of giving to others, you should put a good deal of thought into the happiness you are able to give.

Eleanor Roosevelt

It used to be common for businesses to do quality work, even if it cost them a little more, out of a generous spirit and a pride in doing the right thing, but as competition has increased, companies have been forced to cut corners, compete on price, and be less generous. I think it's worth spending time thinking about where we've felt forced to cut corners and be less generous, in our own work and our own lives, and check whether those situations are still true, and whether we can be more generous.

Worship Associate

Sustainability, ensuring the future of life on Earth, is an infinite game, the endless expression of generosity on behalf of all.

Paul Hawkes

I am reminded of the Cherokee story about two wolves warring inside us. There is a bad wolf of ego, anger, jealousy and greed. The other is a good wolf of love, compassion, kindness and humility. The wolf that wins the war is the one you feed. My reflection is that the feelings inspired by sharing and being generous feed the good wolf!

Small Group Facilitator

Every minute of every hour of every day you are making the world, just as you are making yourself, and you might as well do it with generosity and kindness and style.

Rebecca Solnit

That's what I consider true generosity: You give your all, and yet you always feel as if it costs you nothing.

Simone de Beauvoir

True generosity is an offering, given freely and out of pure love. No strings attached. No expectations. Time and Love are the most valuable possessions you can share.

Suze Orman

I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands. You need to be able to throw something back.

Maya Angelou



Years ago someone visiting UUCP accidentally left a gorgeous blue/green/turquoise hand-knit scarf in the Sanctuary. But even after weeks had gone by, no one called about it or came back to pick it up. I had found it, put it in the Lost & Found box, and decided I would claim it for myself after the customary 90 days. The colors of the scarf were my favorites, and I could just picture it thrown around the shoulders of my new white dress. In the meantime, a dear friend spotted it and, before I could say anything, announced her intention to claim it for herself. At the time I felt a little annoyed at her immediate assumption that it should be hers, and decided that, after the 90 days were up, I would just make sure I got there first! Well, I did, and the scarf went home with me and into my closet. Every time I wore the white dress I thought of adding the scarf, but somehow it just didn't feel right. Months went by, then years, and I still had never once worn it. It hung in my closet as a sort of silent witness to my lack of generosity. Then I would argue with myself, well I was the one who found it, wasn't I? I had as much right to it as she did, didn't I? But nothing convinced me I had acted rightly. So I decided to give the scarf to my friend as a gift for her birthday. I was sure she would be amazed and delighted -- and very surprised to see it after so much time had gone by. I took it out of the closet, folded it carefully in tissue and laid it in a lovely gift box, all ready for the big day. But the day never came, because before her next birthday my friend suddenly died.

I gave the scarf to Goodwill.

Small Group Facilitator

Additional Resources

Articles:

Examples of generosity:

<http://justsomething.co/25-random-acts-of-kindness-that-will-restore-your-faith-in-humanity/>

A comprehensive list of folktales to teach generosity to children:

<http://learningtogive.org/resources/folktales/>

Small Groups: April 2015

Videos and Films:

A heartwarming Thai commercial showcasing selfless generosity:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=632CHpeHYZE>

French film "Amelie" tells the story of a shy waitress, played by Audrey Tautou, who decides to change the lives of those around her for the better, while struggling with her own isolation.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amélie>

Film "It Could Happen to You" is based on a true story of a police officer who shares lottery winnings with a waitress.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It_Could_Happen_to_You_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It_Could_Happen_to_You_(film))

Books:

"Contributing to the well-being of others is a fundamental need, even for children. When parents recognize and receive the gifts children have to give, they inspire the child's natural desire to give. Children are always giving of themselves- their liveliness, their laughter, and their love. Parents are invited to receive this precious gift and learn from it."

Respectful Parents, Respectful Kids: 7 Keys to Turn Family Conflict Into Co-operation by Sura Hart & Victoria Kindle Hodson

"Financial giving can be its own spiritual path. We have a deep potential for meaning-making and life satisfaction when we look to grow from being occasional, haphazard donors to deliberate, ambitious ones--the life-changing transition from donor to philanthropist."

The Generosity Path: Finding the Richness in Giving by Mark V. Ewert