

# The Paradox of Generosity

Robert Keim, adapted from Rev. Meredith Garmon of UU Congregation, White Plains, NY  
4 February 2018

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A news item from the Associated Press:

*"A mysterious woman paid off a struggling father's Christmas gifts at an Indianapolis Kmart. And this was only the beginning. Over the next few days, Kmart shoppers across the Midwest received calls telling them someone had paid off their layaway balances, which meant they were able to take their purchases home before the holidays. "It was like an angel fell out of the sky and appeared in our store," said a Kmart employee. A nurse whose child's Christmas presents were anonymously paid for said, "It made me believe in Christmas again."*

*Best of all, one recipient said she planned to pay it forward by taking care of someone else's layaway balance – keeping the cycle of giving alive. That, as Santa Claus would attest, is the true spirit of the season."*

Give it away. Just give it away. What is life for except giving it away? You know, you only get a few years, so spend them joyfully, which is to say lovingly. The deepest meaning of life is in giving ourselves to others.

Social scientists Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson, authors of *The Paradox of Generosity*, extensively studied this idea, surveying two thousand, five hundred randomly selected Americans, in addition to four-hour interviews in two hundred pre-selected households. Their data revealed interesting truths. Allow me to recognize one or two notions they uncovered.

First, it isn't how much you have - it's how much you think you deserve. Poor or rich, you can be generous to a fault or feel entitled bordering on utter greed. And the, perhaps, non-intuitive truth is that whether we believe we deserve what we have, or that we should have more, such focus is spiritually toxic. Indeed, gratitude, well exercised, is the antidote. Giving thanks, rather than mourning perceived deprivation, teases us out of destructive entitlement, overcoming a focus on deservedness.

How? Well, let me tell you a second story.

*I spent nearly 30 years working for Hillsborough County, in the process developing a number of friendships, one of whom was Randy Frosh, a colorful, funny, Key West native, mid-level technician who, along with his four-foot tall blow-up SpongeBob doll, sat across the aisle from me. Well, in the summer of 1994, Hurricane Charley, instead of coming to Tampa as projected, turned inland overnight and ravaged Arcadia, a small, lower income town. Randy personally responded to this disaster by raising a pot of money from his co-workers and friends, and obtaining donations of food from Publix. Then, he and six other friends loaded up groceries, barbecue grills, chainsaws, the funds collected, and healthy senses of humor in several pickup trucks – and Randy left SpongeBob sitting at his desk (hands*

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*on the computer keyboard) – and the group drove the 90 miles to Arcadia. They spent the following week providing barbecue meals, landscape clean-up, rest areas for others working to help restore the town, and trips back and forth to Doctors and medical resources for those unable to get around. When he returned, he brought photographs, cards and stories about the people down there – and thanks and blessings from so many, letting us know that every penny or ounce of muscle sent their way was worth far more than we could add up.*

Now, spiritual traditions have recognized this effect of generosity. In Luke 17:33, Jesus says:

*"Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it."*

Losing your life – in the most profound manner, giving it away – is **the** path to a full life. And this notion runs through Judaism, in Proverbs 11:24:

*"Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want."*

And there is an ancient Hindu proverb, which says:

*"They who give have all things, they who withhold have nothing."*

Such wisdom even runs through our language: the word "miserable" has its roots in "miser" – because we know that hoarding, protecting, and not giving renders us woeful.

Other findings from *The Paradox of Generosity* by Smith and Davidson tell us that generosity also leads to self-reported happiness, improved bodily health, deeper purpose in living, better avoidance of depression, and interest in personal growth.

Statistics do not tell us whether generosity actually awakens well-being, or well-being leads to generosity, or some third factor renders both. But researchers have found that grounding in a positive attitude guides one to be more generous and **healthier**. As Smith and Davidson note:

*"Practicing generosity requires and reinforces one's perception of living in a world of abundance and blessing, expanding the number and density of social-network relationships. It tends to promote increased learning about the world, bringing us closer together."*

Consumed by the everyday issues we face, minds circling our "stuff," we grow suspicious and cynical, a deeply embedded perception of scarcity rendering us miserly. But the art of generosity can re-orient our lives: *"I may not have a lot, but I've got plenty."* As Smith and Davidson conclude:

*"In multiple, complex, and interacting ways, bodies, brains, spirits, minds, and social relationships are stimulated, connected and energized by generous practices in ways good for people."*

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So, yes, give it away – giving we receive; grasping we lose.

Think of what I'm saying this way: the most valuable relationships in our lives – our spouses, parents, children, and closest friends – depend on a form of generosity called *inexact scorekeeping*. Crucial to the nature of such important relationships is that any scorekeeping be inexact, rough and impressionistic.

Being married, for example, you and your spouse might occasionally make joking references to husband or wife "points." This sort of banter allows a couple to remember the important role of reciprocity while keeping a sense of humor about it. Too much emphasis on precise fairness in a relationship chokes out tenderness and closeness. Scorekeeping must be inexact, leaving space for love.

*When our son Patrick was quite young and he and I were doing something "competitive," we would hear Irene, seeking a degree of peace, call out a name for chastisement. She did not separate her "boys" from one another, so it was the last name called that mattered. He was "Bob-Patrick" and I was "Pat-Bob." Whichever one she used, the other would point, say "Ha, ha, ha ha hah! Its you-uu-uu-uu!" We never kept score, just a smile and a teasing laugh.*

Yet there are some areas of life where we **do** want precise scorekeeping – most involving money. The market sets prices for goods and services, as well as salaries, each functioning as a points chart. You do things for your employer, customers, or clients and you earn points, which entitle you to market goods and services. What complicates this is that social justice also requires making sure people have fair opportunities to earn points, are paid fairly, and charged reasonably in a market system equally accessible to all. On these matters, I would say that I think that our national scorekeeping system is, perhaps, compromised in ways that need attention and fixing – but that's a conversation for another Sunday.

Beyond all financial considerations, our hearts and spirits – our well-being – need grounding in a vague and approximate scoring, where there is considerable play in what counts as equitable. We need relationships free of ruthless demand of exactness, about more than trade, and more than the matter of buying and selling ourselves to each other. Such inexactness creates room to give just for the joy of giving to the other.

And that's so important for a full and good human life. It is the blessing and grace we were made for. The practice of generosity transforms relationships, rendering scorekeeping inexact. It brings to our

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relationship with the world a space of liberation from marketplace precision – a space of blessing and grace otherwise crowded out by the exactness of scorekeeping.

The world gives us things we didn't pay for: air, blue skies, daffodils, spring days, stunning thunderstorms, and sunsets – none on a score chart, none priced. Each comes free. And then there are those who, with us, share the world – songbirds, deer, salmon, geese, and rabbits – none, we believe, keeping score. And when we give money, time or energy away – which is to say, we transfer value without getting or expecting anything in return – we, too, step off the scorekeeping team.

I want you to consider one last tale:

*Ellen McClaran, a member of Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth's Board, and her husband Ed, have, since they moved to Portland, Oregon, walked their dog three times a day, generally regardless of the weather. In addition, they took to volunteering at the Humane Society once a week. As part of that cause, they housed, for almost a year, a dog facing an unknown ending. He had been taken from a woman charged with animal abuse. The justice process lasted months, with what was truly an unknowable outcome. No scores were kept, the future was always unclear – but Ellen and Ed gave from their hearts. Ultimately, the ending was to their delight, and now they happily walk two dogs each day.*

Generosity practice says:

*"My relationship to my world isn't going to be by scorekeeping. I want to give to the world freely, as the world in so many ways gives to me. The world and I shall be as lovers, giving the gift of each other, not counting the costs." For our hearts know and our spirits long to realize that, indeed, "they who give have all things; they who withhold have nothing."*

Smith and Davidson conclude that those more generous:

*"Tend to be more in control of their time and though very busy, have less stress. They face life with contentment and a sense of gratitude in what they do have. They help others flourish. Not holding on to what they have, they face challenges with fortitude, knowing that true happiness lies not in mere possessions, but in meaningful relationships, and in appreciating the beauty and abundance of the world."*

So may we live the paradox of generosity, giving away our time, talents and treasures, for in doing so we shall indeed live fuller, more joyous lives.

Amen and blessed be.