

Generosity And Generativity

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What is my gift to the family of earth?

This question, written about by Wayne Muller in his book, *How Then Shall We Live?* Is a central one to explore in the last third of life. We have a grand opportunity, as we retire and move through the last third of our lives to give back, to leave a positive legacy for those who follow. However, there was a time and place when we did not have such discretionary time. But now, I do have discretionary time and money a week's energy. For most, though not all, have time, finally, to decide what to do with our time and our dollars and the gifts we possess.

I recall an earlier time when I was complaining to a new acquaintance about money. I told him that, just about the time my wife and I saved several hundred dollars, something happened that ate away at the stash. He queried, "Do you have children?" I responded in the affirmative. He simply said, "Well? As long as you have children under your roof, you will have enough to feed, clothe, then and pay the bills, but that is it. You *will* have some discretionary money once they are gone." That turned out to be so true.

Joan Chittister in her empowering book, *The Gift of Years: Growing Old Gracefully*, says

Generatively - the act of giving ourselves to the needs of the rest of the world - is the single most important function of old age (page 199).

And then she gives reference to George Valiant's Harvard Study of Adult Development, which indicates that widening our social circle as life goes on is a key factor in the achievement of successful aging. Widening our social circle of life is even more important than money, education or even family.

How might we be generous? A man name Jose wanted to speak with Wayne Muller privately. His son was HI positive and he was frightened and confused about that disease so Wayne assumed that is what he wanted to talk about. "I want to talk to you about apples," Hose said. What did apple have to do with his son's illness? Jose said that a few of his apple growing farmer friends and he had seen clips of the starving children in Rwanda. They could organize the farmers and their children to pick up the apples from the ground - the good ones, and there were many - and crate them for the Rwandan children. He was wondering if Muller's group, Bread for the journey, could help with the shipping.

Mother Teresa put it very well:

There is a light in the world, a healing spirit more powerful than any darkness we may encounter. We sometimes lose sight of this force when there is suffering. Too much pain. Then suddenly, the spirit will emerge through the lives of ordinary people who hear a call and answer in extraordinary ways (Page 235, How Then Shall We Live?).

I recall the story of a young school teacher who had just buried the second of her parents. It was late spring, almost the end of school. Speaking with a seasoned teacher she barely knew, she offered how she dreaded the summer. "Why?" asked her acquaintance. "Because I have to go to my parent's home and sort out all their furniture and papers and personal things. They have lived there forever!" The older woman thought about this for a while and then said, "I would like to come and help you." And she did. As well, her husband came on week-ends with his truck to haul away many useless boxes and once-treasured items. The younger woman's life was altered. From then on, any time she was able to help another, she did.

Often, we do not even know we have a gift to give someone until we look back. I recall Bill Swing, recently retired Episcopal Bishop of San Francisco, telling this story to seminary students after his summer internship in a parish. Bill had become good friends with a slightly older couple who owned an ice cream stand. The man died from a sudden heart attack. Bill was devastated. He went to the funeral home having no idea what to say or do. He entered, went to the wife and gave her a hug, and sat down beside her. He stayed for about forty minutes, never saying a word, just listening, just being there. Several days later a number of people came to him to compliment him on his wonderful pastoral gifts to that widow.

Once, Sidney Poitier was given an award by a film institute. He was asked what advice he would give to young black film makers. His reply? "*Be true to ourselves,*" he said and then he added, "*And be useful on the journey.*" Muller said it will also: *Loving kindness, sympathetic joy, compassion, mercy. These are unmistakable footprints of our spiritual life (page 250).*

Arnaud Maitland in his *Living Without Regret: Growing Old in the Light of Tibetan Buddhism*, speaks of generosity in this way:

True generosity like that of the sun, does not judge, keep track, or send bills; it gives without expecting nothing in return...Generosity is rooted in concern and care for others and ourselves. A good starting point for the practice of generosity is to ask, "What can I offer?"...One offering that is always within our power to give is the gift of our presence (pages 297-298, Maitland)

When is giving not good? When we give with strings attached, expecting a gift in return and resenting the other who does not return the "favor." Also, giving to great excess which may overwhelm and be inappropriate to others is dangerous. A third not so good "giving" is when we do not "allow" others to give to us. There must be both generous giving and, as well, generous gracious receiving.

Charity seems to want to tinge of martyrdom attached to it: Give til it hurts. This is both dangerous and suicidal... We cannot live on earth and not give. We cannot live on earth and not give (page 256).

Compassion and generosity are closely linked in our spiritual journey, playing off of each other as the sun and moon create a beautiful world for us.

The extent of our compassion is expressed in our level of participation in the world. Do we play our part? Making a contribution need not involve complicated actions. Even such simple acts as leaving a space more beautiful than we found it, or respecting the traffic rules, or picking up a piece of litter express a sense of responsibility for the welfare of others. Of course we make many more substantial contributions to society's welfare through our family and our work (page 207, Maitland).

Early on in our adult lives, my parents taught me about giving. They stretch themselves toward the Biblical tithe (ten percent of your gross to be given to charity). They developed the practice of writing their church and charity checks as the first checks each month. Sally and I eventually adopted this posture. We learned that some months we could not pay all of our bills. But we also came to experience that the more we gave, the more we received. We were further encouraged by the scriptural teaching that follow is one of my favorites because I experience it as very true:

...give and it will be given to you; good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lab. (Luke 3:38)

I understand that the word "enthusiasm" comes from the Greek en these, in God. I think it is in the small acts of giving that we truly connect with God and have the opportunity for a moment to break through to a more spiritual side. Being nice to someone, being patient with your spouse, children or parents is a simple way to be generous. Give something you like to someone who needs it more than you do. Be cheerful even when you do not feel very good. Be slow to judge. Exert yourself for others, especially those in need. Avoid gossip. Control your anger. Difficult as it is, be steadfast in hard times. Forgive and let go of the hurt you have received.

Generosity and generatively speak to me in the following benediction:

Benediction

*Be careful as you go into God's creation,
For it belongs to everyone and everything.
Be find and gentle with yourself and one another
For each carries a burden and*

*Each is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit
Be alert, vigilant and silent,
For sometimes God is but a whisper.*

Adapted by Hal White

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Who have been models of generosity for you during your life? How were they generous to you? What did they teach you about generosity?
2. Are you more of a giver or taker? Where in your life and with whom can you “afford” to be generous with your time, talent and treasure? Where might you experience an enthusiasm of giving?
3. Do you value a theology of abundance or a theology of scarcity? Do you live as though there is not “enough” to go around or more than enough for everyone?
4. Having thoughtfully reflected on these questions, what are steps you will take to become a more generous person? What gift do you want to leave to this earth, our island home?