

Peace: The Virtue of GENEROSITY

by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD

“How can I live on Earth today so that my life and the well-being of all life is served well?”

This may be one of the most important questions asked today, for it is based on a belief that all life on Earth has significance and purpose. As such, our relationship to other humans and this planet is better served through sharing and cooperating rather than competing, conquering, and over-achieving.

Thinking and caring about our interrelationship with others is one of the surest ways to change our old patterns of seeing today’s world as a place of conflict, tension, insensitivity, or one of boundless resources to exploit. Kind and clear-hearted caring can help us find our unique way of being of loving service.

The Christian Bible speaks to the virtue of generosity in that “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Without generosity we fall victim to comedian Bob Hope’s poignant insight: “Those who lack charity of the heart suffer from the worst form of heart disease.”

Generosity is our refuge from self-centeredness. Unconditional giving may give us an oasis of peace of mind because we have reached out beyond our self to recognize and help others. As a result of our generosity we may also give others a physical or mental sanctuary of peace, comfort, safety, or healing.

The Reciprocal Gift of Life

One of the easiest ways to understand the necessity of generosity is to appreciate the gift of life. Your life is a perfect starting place. Consider that you are not a burden but rather a precious gift to Earth. In fact, it is impossible to appreciate your self as a gift without acknowledging that you are only one of many gifts of creation: air, water, soil, sunlight; people, animals, insects, vegetation; mountains, rivers, forests, deserts. If you value your life in a heartfelt way then you will find a way to generously value others.

All life is engaged in a reciprocal dance. There is a constant exchange of gifts and resources. Nature is perhaps our best teacher about generosity, asking nothing in return but our good stewardship: to use the gifts of our intelligence, curiosity, creativity and compassion in replenishing ways that restore, sustain, and regenerate life.

To be a good steward is to practice generosity. The Russian novelist and philosopher, Leo Tolstoy underscores this point: “Joy can be real only if people look upon their life as a service, and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness.” This observation is supported by Buddha’s wisdom: “Teach this triple truth to all: a generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things which renew humanity.”

Replenishing Roles

To replenish means to refresh, renew or make full again. When Saint Francis of Assisi promotes in his famous prayer that “it is in giving that we receive,” it is to suggest that by helping others we replenish ourselves anew: we feel ever new joy, satisfaction, pleasure, if not redoubled faith in good intentions. Our glass never feels half empty.

There are three replenishing relationships in which we can extend our generosity and gratitude for being alive: our relationship to Earth/nature, our relationship to culture/society, and our relationship to our soul/spirit. Within each relationship we are bound to find practical ways we can be of service.

Giving Back to Earth & Nature

Within our solar system Earth is a blessed sanctuary for life. Our food and water, homes and clothes, tools and inventions are invaluable sources for our comfort on this planet. However, Earth’s resources are finite and we cannot keep taking without giving anything back. Therefore, restorative, regenerative and sustainable ecology, agriculture, science and technology must be part of our thoughtfulness to replenish nature, not only for human needs but also for the needs of all species.

You can “return the favor” to your planet by striving to live more lightly, simply, and thoughtfully. You can plant an organic garden; reduce your purchasing of packaged items, recycle, or plant a tree. You can decrease your dependency on gas-guzzling vehicles and be more conservative with water, electricity or other energy sources. You can give of your time to causes that clean up the environment and reforest bare lands.

In truth, the opportunities to give back to Earth are practically endless. The poet Kahlil Gibran is reassuring in your task: “Generosity is giving more than you can, and pride is taking less than you need.”

Giving Back to Culture & Society

Consider that from the moment of your birth you are taking sustenance from your parents, relatives, friends, neighbors and teachers. You receive the gifts of both human contact and creative endeavor: the fruits of others’ work and the history of your culture or society — cities, roads, schools, hospitals, places of worship, parks; literature, art, music, religion, inventions.

During his effort to liberate India from British rule, Mahatma Gandhi once received a letter urging world leaders to draw up a charter of human rights. “In my experience,” Gandhi wrote back, “it is far more important to have a charter of human duties.” The foundation of the “human duties” Gandhi sought is expressed in the ancient Pali word *dana* which translates as *generosity of spirit*. Many centuries before Gandhi, Buddha saw *dana* as being the necessary duty of *giving and receiving from the heart*. He saw it as the generous act of giving *and* the gift itself.

In a gesture of reciprocal service, *dana* can inspire you to share of your time, skills, resources, and energy within your family, community, village, or country. You can help those in need. You can beautify your surroundings. You can help uplift others' spirits. You can protect humans and animals from abuse. You can use your talents to introduce others to nature, art, music, dance or gardening. You can even donate money to a worthy cause: relief aid to victims of natural disasters and war, services for the elderly, children, the disabled; medical research, textbooks or musical instruments for schools.

When you give back to society, the quality of your work and involvements will continue to grow. Take inspiration from Luther Standing Bear of the American Oglala Sioux Indian tribe who said: "Civilization has been thrust upon me . . . and it has not added one whit to my love for truth, honesty, and generosity."

It is worth considering these words when you feel helpless amidst society's constant change. Turn your quest for peace, security and comfort around at such times of despair. Consider what refuge for hope you can give to others. A simple yet generous act of kindness or encouraging word is all that may be necessary to turn another's life around.

Giving Back to Your Soul & Spirit

The energy you give out is an expression of your intellectual, creative, emotional and spiritual sides. However, it is also important to regenerate and sustain your inner vitality.

It is the natural inclination of our soul to fall in love with life through all that humans and nature offer us. As the psychologist Abraham Maslow said: "Give a child a hammer and the whole world becomes a nail." Thus is our inclination to experiment with life.

So it is that many people, on their journey through life, may come to suffer from a wounded spirit, having been abused, dishonored, forgotten, disabled, exploited; others may have simply "burned out" trying to live the "good life" or "keeping up with the Jones's."

To serve and know oneself in a loving way is very replenishing. Meditation, prayer, sitting calmly, walking in nature, exercising or fasting; journal writing, going on a pilgrimage, reading something inspirational, listening to beautiful music; volunteering, learning a new skill, gardening — these types of experiences are generous gifts to our self. In turn, our renewed vitality can help us give back to the world a part of our self that never feels diminished: our caring heart.

Mystics and philosophers have often seen generosity as a virtue — a behavior one should strive for. Philosopher George Bernard Shaw paints a more practical picture: "This is the true joy in life: the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one, the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." Follow Shaw's passion and you *will* find peace and happiness!

Remember:

Generosity is not a measure of your worth, but a measure of your heart's capacity and desire to give. By practicing generosity every day — to yourself, others, animals, nature — you are increasing the worth and beauty of life on Earth, and making it a peaceful sanctuary for all.

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Excerpted from forthcoming book, *Peace of Heart, Peace of Mind*