

The Gift of Giving Back

"I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver."

Maya Angelou



In his now famous poem and book *All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum points out that as children, we are all taught to share. We are taught to be generous and helpful toward others. Somewhere along the road to getting older and perhaps wiser, many of us forget this simple idea. We hoard our time, our money, our love, our talents as if what we spend of them can never be replaced or there isn't enough of them to go around. We act as if the only really important gifts we have to give to others must be store bought or the latest gadgets or expensive. Yet if we look back to kindergarten, we all remember a time when the best gifts came from within ourselves and were free. If I have learned nothing else from teaching in the jail, I have learned that the greatest gifts of all cannot be bought in stores; they are our time, our love, our freedom and our talents!

The true test of a great gift is that it lasts forever. It is the gift of giving of yourself. It is easy to talk about giving of yourself in a loving way, but people often find it difficult to do. They close themselves off from others by getting involved with computer games, watching TV or engaging in other solo activities, or they work 12 and 15 hour days, or they run around trying to cram one more thing into a busy day. Perhaps they allow bad moods within themselves to take over their thinking or they pass their frustrations on to others.

When we are experiencing stress, it becomes all too easy to overlook the simple acts of kindness that can help other people move along their way. We forget that the best thing about giving from within is that the more we give, the more we get. When my son Wesley was young, he reminded me of this late one night. I had arrived home around 11 p.m. from a late night board meeting, and I had started the day with an early meeting at 7 a.m. I was tired, cranky and exhausted. What ensued was a twenty minute battle between Wesley and me over his going to bed. Finally, after much back and forth discussion, with me using a not so pleasant tone of voice, I lay on my bed for a moment and realized I wasn't practicing what I preached. I wasn't being the kind of mother I

wanted to be. So I got up, walked across the hall, and knocked on his door. Just as I reached to turn the door knob, he opened the door. I looked at him and said, "You know for the past twenty minutes, I haven't been the kind of mother I want to be." He looked at me with childlike wonderment and said, "You know what? I was just coming to tell you the same thing." Opps! Then he said, "I wasn't being the kind of son I want to be either." It was one of those moments that I will never forget and that all parents live for. I proceeded to say, "I feel like I've damaged our relationship. What can I do that will help repair it?" He said, "Could you just sit on my bed and read me a story for 10 minutes until I fall asleep?" There it was, the perfect gift, all my love wrapped up in a 10 minute story at bedtime. A quiet moment shared.

A true gift is not demanded or needed. Often, it is not even expected. It doesn't come with attachments or conditions. Sharing yourself, your feelings and your affections is what a gift is all about. You give because you want to give, freely, without expectations. You don't give so that you can get. True giving is not part of a trading session. It is unconditional. Giving a gift is not a duty. It is a choice.

For many Christians, the birth of Christ is seen as one of the greatest gifts of all. As did Buddha, Mohammad, Gandhi and many others, Jesus taught about giving the gift of self to others and led by example. The great teachers did not demand that others embrace their experiences and lessons. These teachings would be honored only by those who chose to accept them. These great teachers expressed ideas that challenged much of the accepted wisdom of their times. Their ideas about love, caring, and acceptance still challenge us today; we often choose violence over peace as a way of solving conflicts, in our homes, on the streets and among the nations of the world.

Every relationship in life, whether in marriage, in a family, at work, or in the community requires giving in order for the relationship to grow and remain healthy. But when we give out of a sense of obligation rather than a sense of opportunity, we take away the deep pleasure giving can bring. There are many ways to say "thank you," or to give back, but the best ways are those that have some thought behind them. The next time you make a big pot of soup, take some to the neighbor who lives alone. Mow your neighbor's yard the next time you do yours. Surprise your children with a trip to the movies or the local ice cream store. Give your spouse time to do whatever she enjoys most, or create an unexpected romantic evening. Take some time to pretend you are on *While You Were Out* and clean a loved one's apartment while he or she is out for the day. Buy the person behind you a cup of coffee the next time you're at the coffee shop. This isn't a new idea; it has been written about in *Random Acts of Kindness* and broadcast on radio and TV stations around the U.S. One man featured on NBC news put

it this way “In a sense, you can think of this as self-centered, but in a good way.” It has been said that when you give to others they may smile, and your soul smiles in return.

Everyone hits rough spots, and some people seem to be able to dig themselves out from under a pile of rocks, but often other people are sent our way to rekindle our faith and keep us from despair. Who are the people in your life who deserve gratitude for supporting you when you needed it most? Those who listened to you in the middle of the night when you most needed it? How can you return the favor by giving that same gift to others? Giving back is about helping someone else overcome life’s challenges just as someone helped you.

The research contains many explanations and examples of the importance of mentors. You may be aware of some of these stories; now it’s your turn to practice what you’ve learned. Helping other helps you stay on track. When I am trying to remember that life is what I make it, and a friend calls me and talks to me about her struggles, by encouraging her, I encourage myself. One of the greatest pleasures is to be a part of a life transformation. Random acts of consciousness are perhaps even more contagious than random acts of kindness. When we consciously decide that we want to give of ourselves to help someone else become free from the prison of his thinking, we are helping to create a better world.

We all need to ask ourselves what legacies we want to leave behind. I’m not talking about the possessions that we enumerate in our wills, I’m talking about something much greater. I’m talking about what we want those around us to remember about how we lived our lives. There is an ancient custom called a legacy statement. The earliest legacy statements are found in the Bible. Jacob gathers his children around his bedside and tries to tell them how they should live after he is gone. Moses makes a farewell address, chastising, prophesying, and instructing his people before he dies. David’s legacy to Solomon is a warning of whom to be wary of when he becomes king and a request that Solomon complete the task he had begun and was unable to complete. Christ spoke to his disciples before he was crucified about their roles in furthering his message. During their lives, these men offered guidance and wisdom about life. They taught others how to handle life’s difficulties by providing personal counsel, and, to guide those they cared about most, when they died, they each left a legacy statement. Others have left their legacies in their writings, in poetry, in song, in story and legend, or in film. We are surrounded with the wisdom of past generations.

To reach out and help others, you will first have to reach deep inside yourself. Think about the legacy you want to leave, think about your beliefs, the important events in your life, how you acted on your values, what you learned from your elders, what you

have learned from your personal experience, what you are grateful for. Then plant the seeds today to grow your legacy by helping those around you. I found that the more I thought about this, the more I realized how much I had learned throughout my life, and I began writing a book: *Lessons from Growing-up Fat, Sassy and Scandinavian*. It is my legacy to my children and grandchildren as well as my way to honor the generations that have come before me. The book is a long term project, but each and every day I try to watch for opportunities to give the greater gifts in life. Some days it means shutting off the TV, putting down what I'm working on and really listening to someone when they call or stop over. After all, each day I am given the gift of 1,440 minutes, and I need to spend them wisely.