

In 2001 the Fetzer Institute funded a project to inquire into the nature of generosity of spirit and its history as it appears throughout the stories of the world's various traditions. After four years of cross-cultural research, the project team has uncovered an amazing field of over 230 stories from more than twenty-four of the world's wisdom traditions, an unprecedented gathering of fables, myths, and stories that all focus on what liberates our innate generosity of spirit and what blocks it. Working with this material closely, the team has developed both an anthology of selected stories and this reflection guide, which bring the perennial issues surrounding generosity and the mysteries of giving and receiving to the surface as practical relational issues to be discovered in our lives today.

During the life of this project, we have sought to learn about the ways generosity moves and grows among people in communities throughout the world. We have listened to their stories, scoured the news of the world for acts of kindness, and interviewed a host of quiet "saints" who live, often invisibly, in nearly every community. We met regularly to share what we found; and we were invariably astonished to discover how rich, how varied, and how universal the stories of human kindness are around the globe.

We observed a wide array of philanthropy practiced by those blessed by material abundance and have been humbled by the astonishing kindness of those who live with poverty and hunger at the door. We have been inspired by acts of kindness in times of danger and personal devastation and witnessed how quiet acts of generosity during the course of an ordinary day can positively affect individuals, families, and communities.

During this time, we have come to see that generosity is an impulse that invokes deep and vital healing in the human family. With every story we heard, we came to realize that sharing our gifts with each other, whether they be gifts of love, time, attention, skills, or money, releases a powerful force for positive change in both the giver and the receiver.

As a result of this work, we have crafted a Story Circle Curriculum that comprises three tools that we hope will help you explore the countless ways acts of generosity can plant seeds of love, courage, and strength in our lives:

A Cross-Cultural Anthology of Stories: When we first consulted prominent anthropologists in search of a collection of cross-cultural stories, myths, or fables about human generosity, we learned that no such collection existed. After three years of research, interviews, and conversations with anthropologists and storytellers, we are happy to say that we now have such a collection. Compiled and edited by Margo McLoughlin and Ian Simmons, this resource reveals the myriad ways that generosity has served as a lifeblood for the human family. In addition to a broad range of these stories housed on the *Learning to Give* Web site (www.learningtogive.org), a smaller anthology, *Tell These Secrets: Tales of Generosity from Around the World*, will soon be available from your local bookseller. This publication will be a delightful tool to begin an exploration of who we are and who we can be, offering the wisdom of many traditions about the gifts and challenges of giving and receiving.

A Reflection Guide: The reflection guide you have in your hands introduces the topic of the generosity of the human spirit by offering a series of questions as a starting point for reflection and discussion. The age-old questions raised within this guide draw on the wisdom of world cultures to reflect on how we can best live together.

The *Learning to Give* Web site: In partnership with *Learning to Give* (an organization dedicated to promoting philanthropy and providing curricula for K–12 teachers), we have made all these materials available to you at no cost. At www.learningtogive.org you will find practical tools, with stories and questions, lesson plans, and suggestions for group activities.

It is our hope that the opportunities for reflection offered here will enable you to have ongoing conversations about the role of generosity of spirit in our life. By awakening and liberating our natural kindness and generosity, we believe it is possible to close the divides between us and seed the world with the strength of true community.

Mark Nepo Program Officer, Fetzer Institute

Our thanks to the team of generous people who contributed to this inquiry: Angeles Arrien, Jomie Goerge, Deborah Higgins, Margo McLoughlin, Wayne Muller, Peggy Quinn, Ian Simmons, Megan Scribner, and Zelene Wilkins. We are also indebted to the good, kind work of Kathy Agard and Rita Higgins, who created a home for the Reflection Guide and much more with the *Learning to Give* Web site. Finally, we want to thank the many people, from all walks of life, whom we have been privileged to meet and interview, for sharing so much of their heart and experience.

Generosity—our ability to offer the best of who we are and what we have for the benefit of one another—is perhaps our most valuable human attribute. In fact, it may be the singular quality we possess that has the capacity to transform the world.

Our generous love for one another is what we call on when we are most deeply challenged. It is what propels us through crisis, what we call forth from within us when pressed against disaster or despair. It can transform danger into opportunity, and tragedy into hope. It is our finest quality, our shining nature as human beings. Along with our courage and our wisdom, our hope and our faith, our generosity is, simply, the best of who we are.

Yet if you get your information about human nature from the nightly news or the daily paper, you might think that we, individually and collectively, are not very generous at all. Acts of generosity seem to be in short supply. Our generous impulses seem overshadowed by our violence and our cruelty, and by our mad rush to satisfy our thirst for acquiring more of everything—more money, possessions, thrills, status, and power.

The media are relentless in their warnings: murders and muggings, corporate scandals and impending dangers, war and economic despair, and political corruption and ecological disaster. We are repeatedly reminded that we are a people deeply and critically divided. As a result, many of us—at work, in our communities, even in the company of our friends and family—feel we are under siege. Despite our blessed position as one of the richest and most privileged nations in the world, we often feel driven by dread, scarcity, and deprivation. For when we are bombarded with only news of division, mistrust, and fear, it grows hard for us to dream together of a better future for ourselves and our children.

As we talked to professionals in a wide variety of fields—from medicine to education, from business to law, from governance to philanthropy, and many others—we heard a similar refrain: If basic human generosity is not fostered, a lack of generosity will quickly and deeply infect the workplace, family, and community. Fear, mistrust, isolation, and conflict grow quickly without the essential enzyme of generosity. And when we operate out of fear, we make bad choices. When we lose our inner compass, we forget how strong we are, or how wise. In this mood of alienation, we often misjudge the obstacles in our way and lose track of the resources we have to overcome them. The world soon becomes a place where people isolate, dig in, and fight to get their share.

Yet don't we all—Democrat and Republican, rich and poor, black and white—dream of a better world? We believe in strong bonds of family and friendship, and in raising healthy, happy children. We want everyone to have health care, live in safe neighborhoods, and have meaningful employment. We all, in our own way, have something we want to give, to offer to the family of the Earth, to care for those less fortunate in our country and the world. We may disagree—even passionately—about the means to get there, but in the end far more unites us than divides us.

Abraham Lincoln, in the dark days of war, called on our deepest capacities of love and generosity to bring peace and healing to an aching, divided people. He called these qualities “The better angels of our nature,” and he knew that without them, we would surely perish.

Each and every day, new stories are being inspired by the better angels of our nature—stories of ordinary people who, every day, try to embrace and fix what is in front of them. They give what is needed. They offer what they have. They pick up what has fallen down. They build what needs to be built. They have more good days than bad—though they surely have both. They make friends, they make mistakes, and they make the world a little better whenever they can.

When we share the best of who we are, we become wiser together. When we share what we have with one another, we make our community a richer place. When we bring our wisdom and our courage and our generosity to the common

table, we become infinitely better at solving our common problems. When we help one another, when we put the needs of others before our own, when we offer our best to serve those around us, we create a circle of support where everyone gets what they need. This is why we need stories of generosity. Stories of such kindness weave us together and teach us how to live together. This has always been so.

We need ways to share our stories and understandings of generosity. In our conversations together, we found that the more we explored generosity and engaged in conversation, the more we understood and the more conscious we became about the ways we are and are not generous. We discovered that there are all sorts of ways to give—from Great Aunt Ethel's annual fruitcake, to monetary gifts to charities, to giving of time and energy to a special effort, to the foundational, institutional form of giving grants, to the time spent talking to an elderly neighbor or helping children with their homework. There is giving that is done within our circle—of family, friends, neighborhood, community, religious institution—and there is giving that is done anonymously. There is giving with strings attached and giving that seems to restrain rather than expand the gift and the lives of those involved.

We also discovered that we may have largely unexplored perceptions about giving and receiving. For instance, while it takes at least two to have a gift exchange, we tend to bestow and project all sorts of virtues onto the giver but are largely silent about the virtues of the receiver. We all have heard many times

“It is better to give than to receive.” At first blush, this makes great sense. We want to live in a culture of givers. But though we want to encourage people to give, do we mean to say it is wrong or “less good” to receive? Surely not. Yet it appears that, even though the receiver is an essential part of the equation, they may be considered “less than” the giver. Does this matter? Does having a different view of the giver and receiver affect the nature of the gift? If they are not considered equal, will the gift be tainted by an imbalance of relationship? If so, how do we ensure that gift giving is an exchange of the highest caliber?

What, then, is the nature of the gift and the nature of gift giving?

The chapters that follow open up such questions in an attempt to help reinvigorate and revitalize the spirit of giving throughout our society.

Note: The longer quotes with name attributions are excerpted from interviews conducted as part of the Generosity of Spirit project. All other sources are footnoted.

