

Sometimes it is easier to be kind and generous when we consider the well-being of future generations.

Harun al-Rashid was once walking through a plantation when he saw a hunched man with a long, gray beard, putting in sapling date palms. He greeted him, saying, 'Take it easy, father!'

'Thank you, my son,' the old man replied.

'What are you doing, father?' he asked the old man.

'As you see, I am planting sapling date palms.'

'How many years does it take a date palm to bear fruit?'

'Ten, twenty, thirty years. Some take as long as a hundred years.'

'Will you be able to eat the fruit of these palms you are planting?'

'I may not live to see the day,' said the old man, 'but we eat from those our forebears planted. So let us plant, that those who follow us may eat in turn!'<sup>13</sup>

One way to discover our deepest gifts is by paying attention to what we love and what we do best. Our knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm make us "experts," and we can easily share the gifts of our expertise with others. The gardener who brings extra produce to the local food pantry and the health-care provider who volunteers at the free community clinic demon-

strate this. Other gifts come from who we are. We are playful, we are musical, we are intuitive, we are gentle, we are wise. We offer these qualities almost as easily as we breathe, for they carry the essence of our being. Our laughter, our song, our touch, our presence, our hope arise from this essential identity and, when coupled with specific talents, make giving seem effortless.

Beyond who we are and what we do best, consider the myriad benefits of giving. Allan Luks has studied the lives of more than 3,000 volunteers serving in a wide variety of settings, from urban neighborhoods to remote rural areas. He found that 95 percent of those who had regular, personal contact with those they served experience an increased sense of well-being. He calls this sensation the "helper's high." Not only does the helper feel good while volunteering, but the initial helper's high is often followed by an even longer period of feeling increased self-worth, calm, and relaxation.

In addition to a sense of well-being on the part of the volunteer, there appears to be a larger benefit on the societal level that can come from personal-contact volunteering. Social scientists have developed the "contact hypothesis," based on research showing that people of different backgrounds will

*...The three things we crave most in life—  
happiness, freedom, and peace of mind—  
are always attained by giving them to  
someone else.* —PEYTON CONWAY MARCH

mistrust each other less if they gather for prolonged periods for a common goal. Bringing together people of different ethnic, economic, social, and religious backgrounds for a shared, common purpose can build trust among people who may otherwise be distrustful of one another. In a country where we are sometimes divided geographically by many of these differences, we can learn to stretch our boundaries and come to know the other as ourselves. With an aim toward improving personal health and strengthening “the nation’s social unity,” Luks recommends at least one hour a week of

personal contact helping someone unrelated to you.<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes it is easier for us to be generous when we feel we are offering a contribution, especially if we feel a part of something

larger than ourselves. The word “contributor” may, in a way, be more fitting than the word “giver.” It implies more of

a mutual relationship, a clearer sense of many useful threads being woven together into a greater fabric. It also takes away some of the distance between the giver and receiver. With the word contributor, those who give become part of what they’re giving to.

Many of the stories gathered here demonstrate that generosity is a reflection of our attitude toward life and toward the people we encounter. When we step out of our own habits and viewpoints and enter a larger realm, the gift of space and time allows us to take interest in others.

As I get older I realize that a sense of gratitude not only goes a long way in helping my own personal growth, but it also helps pull people together. If we slow down and recognize what we have and all that we’ve been given, when we give thanks for those who helped us along the way, it sustains us and lets us give more freely, easily, and with more joy. —Juan Lopez

*Be the change that you want to see in the world.*

—MOHANDAS GANDHI

## Questions for Reflection

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What gifts have been easiest for you to give? The most fun? The most difficult? Why?

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What is our gift to the family of the Earth? How do we discern what flows through us gently and easily, and what we are able to offer that will endure?

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Has fear ever stopped you from being generous? How?

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How do you choose what to give (money, time, etc.) and to whom to give it?

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Have you ever taken for granted the gifts you have been given? In what ways? How has this affected your own ability to give?

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What people or relationships are always there to nurture us? What makes these people or relationships so vital and strong?

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How do we nurture the loved ones in our lives? What kind of generosity is this?

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How might we begin to value our contributions to others as thoroughly as we value our possessions?

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The following stories are particularly relevant to conversations on the themes covered in this section. We encourage you to read them aloud to each other and let the conversations flow! They can be found on [www.learningtogive.org](http://www.learningtogive.org) and soon in the anthology *Tell These Secrets: Tales of Generosity from Around the World*.

- *People of the Corn*
- *Tiggak*
- *Loosening the Stopper*