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## GENEROSITY

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## Generosity

“You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you.” These are the powerful words of John Bunyan, and they deserve some consideration. Today’s culture promotes the idea of living to the fullest and making every moment count, but how many people are actually doing something for someone who can never repay them? What Bunyan is really getting at is the heart of generosity. But do modern Americans really know what it means to be generous and how that affects their lives going forward? Today, this question will be answered. Generosity can only stem from religion and is the best way to promote well-being. This thesis will be shown by first defining generosity, then looking at how religion is the foundation for generosity, and lastly seeing how generosity is ultimately the best path to well-being.

First and foremost, it is important to define generosity as this definition is the foundation for the discussion which will follow. The concept of generosity is often thought of as “giving something away.” While that is part of it, there is so much more to generosity than just giving. The Founder of Chick-fil-A, S. Truett Cathy, coauthored a book with Ken Blanchard, Ph. D., who plays an essential role in the Ken Blanchard Companies which trains other organizations on leadership. This book is titled *The Generosity Factor*, and is a fictional story that is inspired by true events about a Broker who is on the path to discover what true generosity is and looks

like. He finds this through the Executive, who demonstrates what generosity looks like in his company. The Executive teaches the Broker many things about generosity, and a few are worthy of mention at this time. One thing that the Executive says is, “Some people think of generosity as an event... But generosity is an attitude. It has to be cultivated daily,” (Blanchard and Cathy 52). The Executive also identifies four different mediums of generosity as time, talent, treasure, and touch (Blanchard and Cathy 42). These different forms of generosity point to the reality that generosity is not demonstrated solely through financial giving, though financial giving may be the most tangible manifestation of generosity. But financial giving only represents the “treasure” that the Executive identifies. The medium of time can be practically demonstrated through activities such as volunteering, or helping a neighbor out. Talent is using the gifts that have been given to one for the benefit of others. And touch pertains to what some researchers have categorized as relational generosity, which will be discussed in more detail further on. So, there are many more ways to be generous, other than just giving monetarily.

To be more specific, Christian Smith, a professor and researcher at the University of Notre Dame, and Hilary Davidson, Ph. D., who is also a researcher at Notre Dame, wrote a book titled *The Paradox of Generosity*. This book uses much data and many statistics to prove that generosity is directly correlated with well-being. For the purposes of their book, Smith and Davidson define generosity on page 4 as “the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly.” One of the expansions of this definition that Smith and Davidson give is, “Generosity is not a random idea or a haphazard behavior, but rather... a basic, personal, moral, orientation to life,” (Smith and Davidson 4). In other words, generosity is intentional. For the

remainder of this essay, generosity will be defined as follows: a mindset that intentionally seeks to edify and benefit others and can take many different shapes and forms.

Now that there is more clarity surrounding the idea of generosity, its foundation can be discussed next. Research supports the idea that there is a high correlation between religiosity and generosity. Some of this evidence will be presented in the following paragraphs and a few examples will be presented to demonstrate this correlation. Then there will be a brief discussion as to why religion is the foundation for generosity.

Of course, when trying to understand if religion really has an effect on generosity, what must happen is a comparison of the generosity of non-religious people to those that are religious. This task is what Mark D. Regnerus, Christian Smith, and David Sikkink set out to accomplish in 1998. Their findings are published in an article titled "Who Gives to the Poor? The Influence of Religious Tradition and Political Location on the Personal Generosity of Americans Toward the Poor," published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. In this entry, the authors attempt to debunk the assumptions of society that certain Christians or denominations of the Church are more generous to the poor than others. What they end up proving is that those assumptions are indeed false, but also that affiliation with religion increases the likelihood of being more generous to the poor. The authors say, "Indeed, the odds of nonreligious persons giving to such organizations is approximately 0.70 times that of religious persons," (Regnerus et al. 488). One way of interpreting this statistic is if a religious person gives \$100, then the non-religious counterpart is likely to only give \$70. This illustrates the fact that religiosity does indeed promote generosity.

Another interesting component of this study is that there seems to be a positive correlation between the degree to which religion is important to a person and how generous that person is: “The more frequent the church attendance and the greater the importance that religious faith holds in life, the more money respondents give to such poverty-relief organizations, regardless of their religious identity,” (Regnerus et al. 488). To put it another way, the data seem to show that the more pious a person is, the more likely they are to support the poor.

One more find from this report that is noteworthy: the specific religion in which a person partakes does not have a great influence on generosity. This finding has already been alluded to in the above quotation when the authors say, “regardless of their religious identity,” (Regnerus et al. 488). They also go on to say, “. . . which religious tradition a person professes and practices is less important than the fact that they practice one,” (Regnerus et al. 490). This is indicative of the fact that there is something about the spiritual that urges people to be more generous.

To demonstrate this idea that religion, in general, encourages generosity, one should turn her attention to the jungles of Uganda. In the heart of this terrain, there is a tribe known as the Ik. This tribe has been quite the object of public scorn and infamy over the past fifty years or so in the field of anthropology. In 1964, Colin Turnbull, an anthropologist, studied this tribe and published a book about his findings called *The Mountain People* in 1972. This book describes the Ik as a “loveless people,” and that they are “unfriendly, uncharitable, inhospitable.” This depiction gained much attention in the scientific community, and the Ik became the epitome of the uncivilized (Townsend). Later in 2016, a new anthropologist arrives

on site, Cathryn Townsend. Her mission was to investigate the claims made about this people and prove whether or not they were accurate. So, she picked up and moved to the mountains of Uganda and lived with the Ik for about a year. Over this period of time, Townsend discovered a tribe that was starkly different from the descriptions that had been published about the Ik. Townsend was astonished by the generosity of these people, and so she began to study them and even conducted social experiments among the members of the tribe. One of these experiments was a game that Townsend names The Dictator Game. A random person is selected to receive a prize, and they are given the opportunity to share that or keep it to themselves (Townsend). The fascinating part of all of this is that during these games, Townsend would redirect the attention of the participants to the spirits that the Ik worshipped. These spirits were believed to favor those who were generous with others and to curse those who were selfish. Townsend comments that, "When we reminded participants in our Dictator Game of the role of [the spirits] by asking them questions about the spirits at the start of the game, the participants tended to make more generous decisions in the game," (Townsend). This is an obvious demonstration of religion urging people to be more generous.

Of course, the religion of the Ik is not the only religion that promotes generosity. The Hindus have a proverb which says, "They who give have all things, they who withhold have nothing." Furthermore, Buddhists live under the maxim: "Giving brings happiness at every stage of its expression," (Smith and Davidson 1). Both Hinduism and Buddhism are very widespread religious beliefs. The fact that each of these religions exhorts followers to be religious shows how widespread the command to be generous is. Those are just a few more examples to illustrate how generosity is rooted in all religions.

Religion also gives individuals more awareness of others. For example, Christians are a part of the “body of Christ.” In many other religions, the concept of community and serving others is highly stressed. This others-oriented mindset is also a major contributing factor in generosity. Laura Truax and Amalya Campbell touch on this idea in their book *Love Let Go*. This book tells the story of LaSalle Street Church and how generosity has been a recurring theme throughout this church’s history. This church’s story begins in the 70s when its members decided to invest in low-cost housing with a few other churches. Thirty-five years later, the housing development was being sold and each of the investing churches would receive a check of \$1.5 million (Truax and Campbell 9). After much deliberation and debate, the church leaders of LaSalle Street Church decided to give the first 10% to the attendees of the church. The authors describe this event:

On a clear day in September 2014, more than three hundred people made their way to a downtown Chicago church for what they expected to be a typical Sunday service. Hours later they emerged from the doors of the church surprised, perplexed, excited, and nervous. Each gripping a \$500 check given with one short sentence of instruction: “Do good in the world.” (Truax and Campbell 8)

The authors reflect on this event and go on to describe the underlying principles that inspired the movement of generosity at LaSalle Street Church. Truax and Campbell say on page 24, “Generosity at LaSalle began the way it begins anywhere: with the recognition that we’re all in this *together*.” This philosophy of togetherness is a driving force behind generosity. After all, it is impossible to be generous without having others to be generous towards. Religion plays a massive role in helping people to see beyond themselves and to impact those around them.

Another observation from the story of LaSalle Street Church is that generosity is *contagious*. The generosity of the church with its windfall inspired those in the congregation to be generous as well. The stories displayed in *Love Let Go* are testaments of how generosity often breeds more generosity. From a neighbor using his money to hand out \$20 bills to those he came in contact with (Truax and Campbell 78), to a photographer buying an entire crew of inmates sports coats so that they could wear something other than their prison uniforms (Truax and Campbell 81). And the list goes on. The impact that resulted from these acts of generosity may never have occurred if it hadn't been for that first generous deed, performed by LaSalle Street Church, which started the chain reaction.

There is still the question of why religion influences generosity, though. As a possible answer to this question, here are two components of religion: command and example. First, religion moves its followers into greater action because all religions have commandments to love or pursue the deity or deities. These commands always come with consequences, too. Either a person is rewarded for following the command, or is punished for disobeying it. In this way, religion inspires its followers into greater obedience.

The other way that religion exhorts its followers to action is by example. Pretty much every religion has its stories of "heroes of the faith." These stories inspire the followers to become more like the heroes that they read about. Seeing the proximity of one person to the god-figure(s) gives others the idea that they, too, can have such proximity. This, of course, encourages them to continue down the path that they started out on.

In this way, religion is the foundation for generosity. Not only are there statistics that show this principle, but there are also real-life examples of how this has played out in both

mainstream religions and also small tribal religions. This principle becomes possible when the motivating factors of a religion are understood. When one understands that religions encourage by command and example, it makes sense as to why religion would encourage generosity, especially when most religions place a call on their followers to be more generous.

Of course, this leaves the question: what about non-religious people? Can they still be generous, too? The argument here is that it is quite difficult to find a non-religious person who is being generous for the right reasons. It is very easy to fall into the mindset of being generous for one's own personal gain, not for the edification of others. It would be rare to find someone who is purely non-religious and is being truly generous. Now, people like the humanitarians might seem like an exception to this as humanitarians work for the betterment of humanity and not necessarily themselves. Because humanitarianism is a set of beliefs and morals, it could be argued that, in reality, it is another religion. These beliefs and morals that humanitarians adopt are the guiding authority in their lives. In this way, humanitarians do not prove as an exception to the above idea.

To switch gears, one very common perception is that generosity is also contingent on material wealth. However, this is a very dangerous belief and only keeps people from being generous. True generosity is demonstrated through thick and thin and is not contingent the amount of a person's income. A story that illustrates this concept very well is the story of David Green, Founder and CEO of Hobby Lobby. Green tells his story in his book *Giving It All Away... and Getting It All Back Again*. His story begins during his childhood with the example that his parents set for him. Green grew up in a house of ten people living off a very meager salary. Oftentimes, the Green family had to depend on the generosity of others as a source for their

food (Green and High 32). Even still, David Green's parents demonstrated great generosity, not just in how they tithed to the local church, but also how they were quick to help neighbors or other families in the community (Green and High 34). The Green family lived generously, even out of poverty. Fast forward to present day, David Green is now the CEO of Hobby Lobby, which gives away 50% of its profit to various organizations and ministries (Green and High 91). Not to mention the fact that Hobby Lobby's base hourly rate is \$17/hour, which is almost \$10 higher than the federal minimum wage. But even before Hobby Lobby was raking in millions of dollars as a large-scale corporation, Green made it a priority to give the company over to the Lord and fulfil God's calling of generosity on a Christian's life. Green describes the heart behind the commitment to generosity on page 89 of his book when he says, "It doesn't matter whether we give out of wealth or humble circumstances. God can't wait for us to step into the joy of generosity. We just need to trust him and take that first step." The story of David Green and Hobby Lobby excellently demonstrates the concept presented in Luke 10:16, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much," (English Standard Version). Generosity is not dependent on how much money one has or is willing to give away, but rather how faithful he is to steward what God has bestowed on him and trust that the Lord will provide.

While it is important to talk about how to be more generous and what influences generosity, it is even more imperative that the reasons why humans are to be generous is discussed. After all, what is a telephone to a user who doesn't understand the benefits of the technology? What follows is a brief analysis of the effects of generosity on well-being, both mentally and physically.

To quickly preface this analysis, studies show that the following benefits are only experienced when generosity is a practice and not a random event. In the previously mentioned *Paradox of Generosity*, the assertion is made that, “Our emphasis here . . . is on *practices* of generosity, not single generous acts. What matters about practices, compared to one-time acts, is that they are *repeated behaviors that involve recurrent intention and attention*. Those are the kinds of generosity that actually enhance people’s well-being,” (Smith and Davidson 13). In order to experience the benefits generosity has on oneself, it must become a practice.

Smith and Davidson continue on in *The Paradox of Generosity* to show empirical evidence that generosity promotes five different areas of well-being. Four of those will be examined now, and those are happiness, sense of purpose of life, avoidance of depression, and an interest in personal growth (Smith and Davidson 12). These are the areas of well-being that have to do more with the mental side of health. The authors present information based on eight different measures of generosity. These measures are voluntary financial giving, volunteering, relational generosity, neighborly generosity, self-evaluated financial generosity, self-evaluated volunteering generosity, self-evaluated relational generosity, and the personal importance of generosity to the individual. In every single one of these measures, there is a common trend. Those who are considered more generous (based on intense research into the individual or self-evaluation) are more likely to experience a deeper effect of the four different types of well-being mentioned above. Smith and Davidson give graphs just to show how obvious this trend is and in every one, as generosity goes down, mental well-being decreases

and mental illness increases (Smith and Davidson 15-26, 37-44). This is proof of the direct relationship between many different forms of generosity and mental well-being.

Focusing specifically on relational generosity, which is how well a person can encourage and interact with another person, the contrasts are stark. Thirty-nine percent of those who were ranked highest in relational generosity reported being “very happy,” as opposed to a 13% who reported being “very or somewhat unhappy.” Comparing that to those who were ranked least relationally generous, only 21% reported being “very happy,” whereas 36% reported being “very or somewhat unhappy,” (Smith and Davidson 19). These statistics point towards the most drastic improvements of mental health being caused by generosity in relationships. This also refers back to one of the four mediums of generosity identified earlier: Touch.

It is clear that generosity has a positive correlation with mental well-being, but the next question is *how* does generosity affect a person’s mental condition? Smith and Davidson identify many different explanations for this relationship, one of these is grounded in a study of hormones. Generosity is known to increase production of certain hormones and neurotransmitters, like oxytocin, dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin. These have a variety of effects on a human, some of which include producing prosocial relations, alleviating stress, lifting a person’s mood, and promoting overall happiness (Smith and Davidson 57-58). This is why generosity benefits mental well-being. When people are generous, studies report that they are likely to experience a boost in the production of these chemicals, which will overall boost their mood and outlook on life.

The practical application of all of this is how generosity affects those who are struggling with mental illness. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America reports that anxiety

disorders affect around 18.1% of American adults every year. To put that in perspective, that is 40 million adults suffering from anxiety. Furthermore, around 16 million adults (6.7% of the American population) are suffering from Major Depressive Disorder (“Facts and Statistics”). But it is also important to consider those who experience stress or anxiety just because of the daily bumps of life. Here is a question to consider based on all that has just been said about the effects of generosity on the mind: could it be that generosity is the cure for the widespread anxiety and depression that plagues Americans? If generosity is directly correlated with mental well-being, and anxiety and depression are not signs of mental well-being, then wouldn't generosity improve the condition of someone who is struggling with these issues? The data seem to imply this assertion.

There is also something to be said of the physical side of things. The fifth area of well-being that Smith and Davidson identify is, put simply, bodily health (Smith and Davidson 12). This, like the other four, was examined in terms of the eight different measures of generosity, and the findings are extraordinary. The statistics follow the exact same trend as they did when looking at the four other types of generosity (Smith and Davidson 29-36). Once again, when it comes to relational generosity, Smith and Davidson report that of those who were highly relationally generous 48% reported “excellent or very good health,” and only 17% reported “poor or fair health.” Of those who were the least relationally generous, only 31% reported “excellent or very good health,” and 36% reported “poor or fair health.” These are just a few statistics to illustrate the effects that generosity can have on physical health.

Stephen Post, PhD, and Jill Neimark give much information about the physical health benefits in their book *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*. One of the studies that they

examine shows that volunteering decreases mortality. “[T]hose who volunteered regularly had a 44% reduction in mortality- and those who volunteered for two or more organizations have an astonishing 63% lower mortality than non-volunteers,” (Post and Neimark 68). Another study that is examined in this book looks at how relational generosity affects those who are battling with Multiple Sclerosis: “The surprise finding in the study turned out to be the five MS sufferers were trained by [Carolyn] Schwartz to offer compassionate listening and support over the phone. . . . When Schwartz applied scientifically rigorous data analysis to the total group of 137, she found that giving support improved health more than receiving it,” (Post and Neimark 55). These are just a few of the studies that show how generosity can dramatically affect a person’s physical health condition.

It is clear how generosity has such a great effect on a person’s health. Just as a side note- what if encouraging patients to be generous became a part of treatment for illnesses? Would there be an increase in improved patients? Of course, the answers to these questions cannot be known under current health policies, but it is an interesting idea to briefly consider.

After looking at the definition of generosity, the relationship between generosity and religion, and the relationship between generosity and well-being, the conclusion is that generosity can only stem from religion and is the best path to well-being. When David Green wrote the ending to *Giving It All Away . . . And Getting It All Back Again*, his closing words are, “Perhaps it is in such a time as this that God is calling men, women, and children to live this way- to live for ideas bigger than themselves and to invest in things bigger than themselves. And if we do, we will bring lasting change and hope to our world,” (Green and High 158). Generosity is that something that is bigger than just one person. Generosity not only affects the

recipients, but it also affects generations that are to come after. So, how does one “bring lasting change and hope,” especially to an ever-dying world? Generosity.

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