



Soul Matters

The Gift of Generosity



Small Group
November 2023

Welcome to the Gift of Generosity

It would be easy to see this as a month of niceness. After all, for many, the call of generosity is equated with the call to be kind.

But that's not the spiritual understanding, and certainly not the sort of gift our faith sees in generosity.

First of all, it's transformative. Generosity doesn't just brighten our days; it changes how we relate to life. Let's be honest, life can harden us. And before it does that, it often hurts us. So we can't be blamed for viewing it as a threat. Like some kind of dangerous obstacle course. Or a giant game of King of the Hill, where the winners take all and the rest of us are thrown to the bottom, bruised and empty-handed. No matter which metaphor fits, it's almost impossible to think our way out of it on our own. But then these seemingly small or sentimental gestures come our way. A person notices we forgot to bring our bus pass and pays for us before we have to ask. The neighbor shovels our part of the driveway while she does hers. The nurse takes a half hour to sit with us while we wait for the results. It wasn't her job, and she doesn't have the time, but she did it anyway. In those simple moments, the world suddenly feels less cold. A crack sets in. Our obstacle course, winner-take-all view of life gives way to something softer. We may still hurt, but it also feels as though life itself is trying to help. That's what generosity does. It transforms.

It also connects. Deep down we know the difference between giving and giving generously. The former is taken from our "extra." The latter is taken from what is essential. It's the difference between giving our loose change and giving of ourselves. And when you hand over a part of you to someone else, you're tethered. Your vulnerability meets their vulnerability. You haven't just helped; you've shown you care. Both of you feel seen. And less alone.

But make no mistake, generosity doesn't stop there, at care and connection. It also challenges. True generosity doesn't just ask us to care for people, it also asks us to call them out. When you look at life through the lens of generosity, charity loses its sheen and many of those who have much are exposed as hoarding what others need. It's sneaky that way. Generosity undermines our comfortable views and invites justice in. It doesn't just ask us to be kind to others, it also asks us to question why some have so much more than others.

Transform. Connect. Challenge. Not the usual words we pair with generosity. And maybe that's the point. Maybe the invitation this month is not just to be more generous, but to notice how generosity is bigger than we think.

Our Spiritual Exercises

It's one thing to analyze a theme; it's quite another to experience it. By pulling us out of the space of *thinking* and into the space of *doing*, these exercises invite us to figure out not just what we have to say about life, but also what life has to say *to us!*

Pick the exercise that speaks to you the most. Come to your group ready to share why you picked the exercise you did and what gift it gave you.

Option A

Life's Generosity on a Scale of 1-10

Sometimes we lose touch with how generously overflowing life is, even when parts of our life are hard. When this happens, we need something to help us step back and renew our perspective. This is what this exercise is all about.

Look over the list below and rate how abundant or scarce each of these are in your life, on a scale of 1 (scarce) to 10 (abundant). Place your rankings to the right of each item.

Then make time to reflect on the results. What surprised you? How did you feel after finishing it? What insights or feelings arose as you ranked and thought about each item?

1. *Friends*
2. *Long-time friends*
3. *Moments of beauty*
4. *Moments of [micro-aggression](#)*
5. *The ability to exercise*
6. *Financial comfort*
7. *Children who love you*
8. *An animal to love*
9. *People who have forgiven you*
10. *Sunsets*
11. *Financial worry*
12. *Freedom from pain*
13. *Reliable healthcare*
14. *Access to nutritious food*
15. *Regrets*
16. *Adventure*
17. *Laughter*
18. *A sense of purpose from your work*
19. *Consistent work*
20. *Physical pain*
21. *Time to volunteer*
22. *Access to food*
23. *Freedom from worry*
24. *Loneliness*
25. *Novels to read*
26. *Dinners where loved ones sit and talk*
27. *Play*
28. *Passion*
29. *Respect of your peers*
30. *People to talk to when tough times come*
31. *Rich memories*
32. *Time for meditation/prayer*
33. *Self-care*
34. *Self-love*

(note: this exercise is an adaptation of <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/call/workshop7/172948.shtml>)

Option B

Lend Life a Hand

Life doesn't just lavish generous gifts on us; it also often invites us to be part of the lavishing. It's sneaky that way. It likes to enlist us as its partner-in-crime. This exercise asks us to explore that more deeply— it asks us to notice how we are **both** givers and receivers of life's generosity.

Simply put, your challenge is **to find a way to bring life's generosity to someone's life.** That may seem simple, but there is one big, challenging rule you must follow:

They can't know you were involved!

In other words, your task is not to do a "good deed. It is to help someone experience life differently. The goal is to remind someone that *life itself* is generous, not stingy. Open, not closed. Full of surprises, not threats. If they know you are involved, it will only convince them that *you* are generous. (But this doesn't mean you can't find a place to hide and watch!)

Here is some inspiration to help you. (Notice that some of these ideas involve you bringing life's goodness to a stranger or many people at once. That's not cheating at all. Do whatever inspires you.) :

- Check out this post: http://www.oddee.com/item_98410.aspx
- Watch this movie: *Amélie* - <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/amelie/>

Come to your group prepared not only to tell the story of how you gave life a hand, but also to share your answers to these questions:

1. Was remaining anonymous harder than you thought? Did the difficulty have more to do with you wanting credit or with you wanting to vicariously experience the recipient's joy?
2. Why did you choose the recipient(s) you did?
3. How was this spiritual for you? Did it just make you feel happy? Or something more?

Option C

Give Generosity to Receive it!

When we are feeling the poorest, that's the time to give a gift. - Dhyani Ywahoo

It's a great spiritual truth: We experience what we long for, when we generously give it away. Jesus put this insight at the heart of his ministry: "You must lose your life to find it." We lift it up every time we say, "To give is to receive."

So, if you are struggling with a lack of something in your life right now, turn this truth into your spiritual exercise this month. Don't try to find encouragement; give it to others. Don't tackle your problem head on; look for others with the same struggle and find a way to offer them help. If you are feeling "poor," figure out a gift you can give. Hungering for someone to listen to you, generously listen to others. Long to belong, create community for others. Looking for affirmation, double down on giving positive comments to others.

The key to this exercise is to do it more than once. We suggest doing it for a week, starting each morning of that week with an intention to keep an eye out for opportunities to generously give others what you long for.

Here's a great article to focus and inspire you: <https://www.andrewquagliata.com/post/the-power-of-reciprocity-how-giving-leads-to-receiving>

Come to your group ready to share if this old formula worked.

Option D

Ask Them About Generosity

One of the best ways to explore our monthly themes is to have conversations about them with people who are close to you. It not only deepens our conversations but also our relationships.

Below is a list of “generosity questions” to help you on your way. Be sure to let your conversation partner know in advance that this won’t be a typical conversation. Telling them a bit about Soul Matters will help set the stage.

Come to your group ready to share what surprised you about the conversation and what gift or insight it gave you. As always, keep a lookout for how your inner voice is trying to send you a word of comfort or challenge through these conversions with others.

Generosity Questions:

- How has your definition of generosity changed since you were younger?
- How has *your enjoyment* of generosity changed since you were younger?
- Who taught you the most about being a generous person?
- What’s been your *greatest* act of generosity?
- What’s been your *hardest* act of generosity?
- Have you ever wished your parent(s) had been more generous in some way?
- How easy is it for you to receive the generosity or help of others?
- [Some say](#) that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. Tell me about a time when someone’s gift of attention came to you when you needed it most?
- French author Andre Gide wrote, “All you are unable to give possesses you.” Has that ever been true for you?
- How good are you at being generous with yourself?

Option E

Which Generosity Quote Calls to You?

Sometimes we read a quote, and it perfectly captures what’s going on for us right now. Or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light. With this in mind, spend some time this month reading through the quotes in the *Companion Pieces* section below to find the one that best illuminates or resonates with what is going on in your life.

We encourage you to use the same discernment practice with these quotes as you do with the packet’s list of questions:

- **Read through the list of quotes** a few times, noting which ones “shimmer” (i.e. call to you or have an emotional gravitational pull for you). It often helps to circle or star these quotes that stand out.
- With each reading, **narrow your focus** in on those that stick out, until you finally **settle on the one quote** that pulls at you the most.
- Then make space to **reflect** on the gift, challenge or insight your chosen quote is offering you.
- Some of us may want to **go further** and capture your reflections with journaling or creative expression.

Come to your group ready to share your quote and the journey it took you on.

Your Question

This list of questions is an aid for deep reflection. They are meant not so much to be answered as to take you somewhere.

Read through the list 2-3 times until one question sticks out for you and captures your attention, or as some faith traditions say, until one of the questions "shimmers."

Then reflect on that question by asking yourself:

- *What is going on in my life right now that makes this question so pronounced for me?*
- *How might my inner voice be trying to speak to me through it?*
- *How might Life or your inner voice be trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge through this question?*

Writing out your thoughts often enables you to go deeper. It also sometimes helps to read the list of questions to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with.

A note about self-care: *Often these questions take us to a vulnerable space. It is OKAY to ignore the questions that may be triggering – or lean in if that feels safe.*

1. How has your definition of generosity changed since you were younger?
2. How has *your enjoyment* of generosity changed since you were younger?
3. Who taught you the most about being a generous person?
4. Has being generous ever led to you becoming "richer"?
5. Has generosity ever healed you?
6. What's been your hardest act of generosity?
7. Have you ever wished your parent(s) had been more generous in some way?
8. How might Life be calling you to be generous in a new way in your closest relationships?
9. Without knowing it, we all put boundaries and limits around our generosity. How might the storylines and beliefs passed on to you by your family or society be hemming in what you have to give to the world?
10. Do you have trouble giving yourself permission to receive the generosity or help of others? What storyline might be hemming in your ability to *receive* that generosity?
11. Some say that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. Who needs the gift of your attention?
12. Some say that giving liberates and frees the giver. How might Life be trying to free you by asking you to give?
13. What if the secret is giving to others what we wish to receive ourselves?
14. How good are you at being generous with yourself?
15. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

*The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining **the gift of generosity**.*

Wise Words

I have lived with passion and in a hurry... until my 28-year-old daughter Paula fell ill. She was in a coma for a year, and I took care of her at home, until she died in my arms. Paralyzed and silent in her bed, my daughter Paula taught me a lesson that is now my mantra: You only have what you give... The pain of losing my child was a cleansing experience. I had to throw overboard all excess baggage and keep only what is essential. Because of Paula, I don't cling to anything anymore. Now I like to give much more than to receive... what is the point of having experience, knowledge or talent if I don't give it away? ...I don't intend to be cremated with any of it! It is in giving that I connect with others, with the world and with the divine. It is in giving that I feel the spirit of my daughter inside me, like a soft presence.

[Isabel Allende](#)

We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is, knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out.

Ray Bradbury

We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.

Author unknown

A student went to his master and said, "I am very discouraged. What should I do?" The Zen Master replied, "Encourage others."

Nakagawa Roshi

When we are feeling the poorest, that's the time to give a gift.

Dhyani Ywahoo

Until we can receive with an open heart, we're never really giving with an open heart. When we attach judgment to receiving help, we knowingly or unknowingly attach judgment to giving help.

[Brene Brown](#)

Gracious acceptance is an art – an art which most never bother to cultivate. We think that we have to learn how to give, but we forget about accepting things, which can be much harder than giving.... Accepting another person's gift is allowing them to express their feelings for you.

Alexander McCall Smith

Generosity is not a down-payment on love.

[Netta](#)

Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.

[Simone Weil](#)

All you are unable to give possesses you.

Andre Gide

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

Maya Angelou

If we cultivate generosity, the mind will stop sticking to things. It's as if we've made a tight fist that is slowly opening... Our world opens up because we can let go.

[Sharon Salzberg](#)

The religious person is the grateful person. The grateful person is the generous person.

Rev. Don Wheat

Daily I am astonished at how readily I believe that something I need is in short supply. If I hoard possessions, it is because I believe that there are not enough to go around. If I struggle with others over power, it is because I believe that power is limited. If I become jealous in a relationship, it is because I believe that when you get too much love, I will be shortchanged... The irony, often tragic, is that by embracing the scarcity assumption, we create the very scarcities we fear. If I hoard material goods, others will have too little, and I will never have enough... If I get jealous of someone I love, I am likely to drive that person away.

[Parker Palmer](#)

Too many have dispensed with generosity in order to practice charity.

Albert Camus

If we are prepared to interrogate our privilege, we will conclude that philanthropy is not only about giving back, but it may be also giving up something, so that we can have an America where opportunity does exist for all.

[Darren Walker](#)

Charity is about helping people survive. Justice is about helping people thrive.

[Laura Arrillaga-Andreessen](#)

If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning

Martin Luther King

I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game.'

Toni Morrison

Meanwhile the day is beautiful
for everyone, no matter how broken... our hearts...
It gathers us all
in a grand blue embrace.
Part of me resists calling it a miracle.
The other part calls it what it is

and strolls through the miracle
of Friday morning surrounded by arugula
and strawberries, muffins, lilies,
and all these other fragile hearts...

[Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer](#)

If the landscape reveals one certainty, it is that the extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation. After the one extravagant gesture of creation in the first place, the universe has continued to deal exclusively in extravagances, flinging intricacies and colossi down eons of emptiness.

[Annie Dillard](#)

And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye
clear. What we need is here.

[Wendell Berry](#)

Music

Two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. They are organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlists as musical meditations.

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Generosity](#)

Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [Generosity](#)

Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

Articles

People Are More Generous Than You May Think,
David Brooks

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/31/opinion/human-nature-good-bad-generous.html>

How Giving Leads to Receiving, Andrew Quagliata

<https://www.andrewquagliata.com/post/the-power-of-reciprocity-how-giving-leads-to-receiving>

Videos & Podcasts

Decolonizing Wealth

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKHmU95w_Q8

Related [book](#)

Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKC6qxZNsSk>

Related [book](#)

The Art of Asking (for generosity)

Amanda Palmer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMj_P_6H69g

Are You a Giver or a Taker? TED Talk

Adam Grant

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyXRYgjQXX0>

[&t=274s](#)

Will AI be a generous gift to humanity or a trojan horse?

<https://munkdebates.com/podcast/munk-debate-on-artificial-intelligence>

Books

[Why Good Things Happen to Good People:](#)

How to Live a Longer, Healthier, Happier Life by the Simple Act of Giving

Jill Neimark, Stephen Post

Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better

Rob Reich

Extended excerpt:

<https://press.princeton.edu/ideas/a-look-inside-just-giving>

Movies

[Somebody, Somewhere](#)

A moving series about being held and transformed by the generosity of friendship.

[Millions](#)

[The Blue Umbrella](#) *(short film)*

On how life generously helps us on our way and picks us up when we are down.

[I, Daniel Blake](#)

[The Way We Get By](#)

[Please Give](#)

Packet Introduction Credit Note: Unless explicitly noted otherwise, the introductions of these packets are written by our Team Lead, Rev. Scott Taylor. Rev. Scott gives permission for his pieces to be used in any way that is helpful, including in newsletters, worship and in online service/recordings.



© 2023-24 Soul Matters ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Packets are for use only by member congregations of the Soul Matters Sharing Circle.

Learn how to join at <https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com>