

The joy of giving

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April 21, 2012

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Over the centuries, spiritual and moral thinkers have believed that charity to the needy will lead to greater happiness over the course of a lifetime. The therapeutic benefits of helping others have long been recognised by everyday people too. Shefali tripathi mehta attempts to find out why altruism and generosity make us happier.



The sight of their grimy bodies in tattered clothes approaching us at a traffic signal makes us squirm. We are glad for the glass between us and them, as they press their filthy noses against it, trying to catch a glimpse of our glitzy world inside — sleek cell phones, laptops, wallet, and perhaps food. Impatiently, we wait for the traffic to move as they tap incessantly on the glass. Sometimes, we toss a few coins towards them. Our conscience at ease, we move on.

Drop the coin and move on, this is our general attitude towards giving. This is how most of us would like to do something by way of charity. It has no before and after, no emotional dilemmas. The notion that giving to beggars is wrong, that begging scams abound, allows a huge population of educated Indians to sleep easy. We can walk past the countless outstretched palms on the street and into our thousand rupee buffet lunches without a pang of guilt. The millions who go hungry, live without a means to earn a livelihood, fight diseases without comfort of medical care are too far removed from our comfortable lives. We live in denial of that world. That which we cannot see, does not exist.

But if we look around and want to see, we will notice the emaciated man licking leftovers from discarded meals at the garbage dump; the little girl turned out of school for not wearing shoes; the poor patient's family agonising over the decision to sell their last piece of land to pay for the medical treatment.

Compassion is key

Only those that are moved by compassion will reach out to help others. An old man who waited outside a hospital everyday while his daughter fought for her life inside, kept coming back even after she died. He felt an affinity with the other patients' attendants.

He began to help some of the poor with milk and food. But the need that began to unfold before him seemed enormous and he found his calling. Today the charitable trust started by him feeds one nutritious meal a day to patients at a government tuberculosis hospital and distributes a warm, wholesome evening meal to about 200 attendants of patients at a

government hospital who are too poor to buy food for themselves. Each day there are stories of magnanimity of anonymous people who leave money, medicines, clothes or sacks full of food grains outside the humble quarters from where they operate.

Another shining example is Madurai's Narayanan Krishnan who gave up his career as chef at a five-star hotel when he saw a man so hungry that he was feeding on his own faeces. Each day Krishnan cooks and distributes meals to 400 destitute and homeless, many of them old and mentally ill. He also distributes love and care in the form of hugs, a listening ear, and even gives them haircuts and shaves.

For those of us who grew up in another age, in safe, small towns where we could answer the door without having to put a chain across it first, thoughtfulness may have come easy. We offered the postman, the electrician, the plumber, every odd-jobs person, a glass of water unasked. We saw them as one of us and not as mere service providers.

True, that was a time before this workforce began demanding cash for chai-pani as a right. We gave our bus seats to the elderly; carried grocery for pregnant women; and cooked meals for sick neighbours. We grew up with these values and the belief that what goes around, comes around.

Apathy and greed

A drowning man was offered help by several who shouted, "Give me your hand," but he hung back. Then a man called out, "Take my hand," and the drowning man reached for it.

In a world so riddled with greed and corruption, where every man seems to be out to get another, it is not easy to trust. I stopped in my step seeing a poor man holding a seemingly unconscious child in his arms, pleading for help on a busy road. The moment I handed him a hundred rupee note to take it to hospital, his eyes gleamed with greed, "Please give two hundred more for the medicines." Alarmed, I looked around, only to find other passersby shaking their heads at my naiveté. Once deceived, we steel ourselves against the feeling of compassion and are reluctant to reach out readily again.

The high-strung life of our over-crowded metros where a booster pump in the neighbour's water pipeline means less water for your home; where a wrongly parked vehicle in front of your door can leave you stranded for hours, where there is a constant tug of war over space and resources, we become over-cautious, self-absorbed and unduly distrustful of each other. The Japanese's quiet fortitude at the time of the recent tsunami surprised the world, which believed that this anxiety, this unbridled competition, this ruthless aggression is the way of modern life, without which one cannot survive.

Simple living, high thinking is a virtue of the past. High living is all we aspire for. There are fewer people who celebrate their significant days at orphanages and old age homes.

We are more materialistic today. We want more, better — bigger houses, fatter salaries, superior gadgets. Yes, we work hard for a good life for ourselves and are entitled to every comfort our money can buy. But to live with compassion, to not just indulge ourselves but

to also contribute, would add happiness to our lives.

One reason for this seeming apathy is our completely blinkered view of society. We live in denial of the distressing. In our comfortable homes, amid superfluous consumption, we would like to believe that the person on the street, dying of hunger, does not exist. In a country where 200 million people go hungry each day, where Mother Teresa walked among us not long ago, newspapers each day tell stories of insatiable greed of people, of unbelievable corruption and looting of the poor. In one instance, a civil servant couple were found in possession of 25 flats, 400 acres of land, and suitcases stuffed with gold.

Acting from the heart

Charity is an important tenet in every religion because compassion is essential for spiritual life. Daan in Hinduism and Buddhism, tithes and offerings in Christianity; zakat in Islam, all major religions uphold the philosophy of giving. In fact, 'tithing' (10 per cent) which encourages one to give away 10 per cent of their earnings, is considered by new age spiritual gurus as a law that accrues boundless benefits for the giver.

Donations are given as duty and for tax benefits. Some people give to uphold their image and prestige in society. Fundraising events and charity auctions raise a large amount of money. People donate generously to temples, mosques and gurdwaras seeking personal salvation. There are those that heap ostentatious gifts of gold and jewels to temples and idols of gods, preferring this over food and comfort to the millions that sleep under the open sky, hungry, sick and vulnerable to abuse.

We do not give only due to our concern for others, but also to feel virtuous and good. The feel-good factor in giving is most important for the giver. When faced with the choice of either paying for fuel for an orphanage pick-up or for the school fee of a child, we choose the latter. There is greater satisfaction from thinking that we made a difference to a life.

People most often give to causes that they feel close to. If someone close to you suffered from cancer, you are more likely to help a cancer patient because of the empathy you feel, because of that journey you have seen closely. It is seen that people give more readily for food. Perhaps, it is because hunger is personally experienced by each of us to a certain extent.

Some give to specific causes or organisations — children's education, food for the hungry, care for elders or people with disability, to orphanages, hospitals or hospices.

Some donate a fixed amount each year. Others give away things that they can do without or specific things others need. Many like to mark their special days by celebrating them at orphanages and old-age homes or by donating to charities and hospitals. Since Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved into an organised function in most companies, many people prefer to give through it.

Giving versus need

Christmas joy was in the air at an office. As has become customary, most parents were planning what to gift their kids on Christmas. The company's CSR team was busy organising an event at a local orphanage. The plan was to buy a big Christmas tree, a fancy cake and toys as individual gifts. It sounded perfect and in keeping with the Christmas spirit of sharing, until they spoke with the warden of the orphanage. "Teddy bears and Barbie dolls?" she seemed taken aback. Hesitatingly, she requested, "What the girls need is pencils and notebooks. Also, in this cold, we could really do with cold cream and hair oil." It was an eye-opener for the CSR team. Such can be the gap between the need and its fulfillment. Sometimes the enthusiasm of giving can make us overlook the receiver's need.

In times of accidents or natural calamities, when people feel obliged to give, it is not uncommon to see them dumping away all their unwanted stuff in the name of charity — expired medicines, unusable clothes, single shoes and broken utensils.

Emotional dilemmas

There is a world out there waiting, wanting. One can never do enough. But to avoid moral, emotional dilemmas, we must decide when and how much we are prepared to give; when to say 'no' to a request; and how to insulate ourselves from fraud sob stories. If you wish to pay for the house help's child's school fee, instead of giving cash, you can offer to pay by cheque to the school account directly or ask for a receipt.

When it comes to giving, we are gripped by the middlemen phobia. Accountability and transparency of NGOs is a big concern with the donors. Being cheated is one of the biggest deterrents in giving. When giving directly for a cause is not feasible, one has to go through organisations working towards the cause. Because the voluntary sector is largely unorganised, donors are livid and apprehensive of giving.

When giving to a voluntary organisation or a charity, one can ensure better utilisation by asking a few questions about it like, does the charity practice full disclosure? Does it provide a copy of its audited financial statements to donors on request? Is information provided to donors about any programme that the donors have supported?

True giving

Dalai Lama says, "Giving material goods is one form of generosity, but one can extend an attitude of generosity into all one's behaviour. Being kind, attentive and honest in dealing with others, offering praise where it is due, giving comfort and advice where they are needed, and simply sharing one's time with someone — all these are forms of generosity, and they do not require any particular level of material wealth."

Giving is not just donating money or stuff. It means giving a little bit of yourself to help another in need. Vijay Ladha of Make a Wish Foundation that fulfils wishes of children with life threatening illnesses, says that people pick up wishes readily but cannot find time to attend the wish fulfilment event. They are generous with money, not so with time.

Apart from donations, we can 'give' time by volunteering for social causes. It can be as simple as spending an hour in the morning at a hospital helping illiterate patients fill forms and find their way about; or helping at an old age home reading out to the inmates, feeding or walking them; reading and writing for blind students; escorting those with physical disabilities to banks, libraries or parks; donating blood; teaching poor kids; sharing some skills like making paper bags, stitching, embroidery, knitting with unemployed women who might be able to make a livelihood out of it.

In giving we receive

Rumi, the mystic-poet, narrated this incident of a man who, walking past a beggar, asked, "Why, God, do you not do something for these people?" God replied, "I did do something. I made you."

In a country of a 100 million homeless, of which 12 million are children, and the largest number of hungry people in the world, the statistics are grim. Mother Teresa believed, "If you can't feed a hundred people, feed just one." Philanthropy in India is an age-old social tradition. Ours is the land of fakirs and mystics who have proclaimed that nothing 'belongs' to us. According to research, altruistic behaviour has innumerable emotional and physical benefits — it makes our lives happier, fulfilled and more meaningful.

Compassion, it is rightly believed, is a two-way street. For all the sadness, poverty and distress in this world, each one of us possesses unlimited ways of helping, of making a positive difference.