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It's good to give

Giving improves physical and mental health, enhances communal bonds, spreads wealth—and best of all, it's contagious. BY DIANA RICO

FIVE YEARS AGO, I WAS COMING out of Idiots, my favorite video store in Venice, California, when I spotted him sitting on the ground against the painted brick wall. He was dressed in rags and his skin had that dusky look of someone long homeless.

"A dollar so I can eat?" He said it by rote, without looking at me; underneath I heard no hope.

I tucked my videos under my arm, dug around in my wallet and bent down to hand him some money. As I pressed it into his palm, I made eye contact, said hello and smiled. His whole face lit up.

"Bless you! Thank you!" His watery blue eyes had that luminous, raw fragility one sometimes sees in the mentally ill. I squeezed his hand. He squeezed mine back, then fumbled through some plastic bags on the ground. Pulling out a plastic necklace, he held it out to me.

"You are a queen! You are beautiful! Thank you! Here." The necklace was of green beads with a fake jade pendant, Cleopatra-like. I hesitated; he had so very,

very little, and I knew I would never wear it. But he was insistent. "This is for you. You are a queen." I bowed my head, suddenly overwhelmed. This unexpected exchange was cracking my heart wide open.

"If you knew the power of generosity, you would not let a single meal go by without sharing it," the Buddha said. Indeed, generosity is so highly valued in Buddhism that "giving is the first of the Ten Perfections that the Buddha taught about," says James Baraz, a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in northern California and co-author of the new book *Awakening Joy: Ten Steps That Will Put You on the Road to Real Happiness*.

Giving—in Sanskrit, *dana*—was advocated by the Buddha because it "both acknowledges the interdependence we have for each other and is the active practice of letting go, which is where freedom from suffering lies," explains Baraz. "When we're giving without any sort of expectation, just because we've been moved, we're awakening the natural gladness that comes when the heart opens."

We've all felt the high that comes from giving, the "natural gladness" Baraz talks about. Recent science suggests there is a biological basis for it. In 2006, neuroscientist Jorge Moll and a team of National Institutes of Health researchers gave subjects some money and a list of causes to which they might contribute. They found that the mere thought of giving money to charity activates the primitive part of the brain associated with the pleasures of eating and having sex. Functional MRIs indicated that donating money stimulates the mesolimbic pathway, the reward center in the brain, which is responsible for dopamine-mediated euphoria.

A year later, a study by Ariel Knafo and other researchers from the psychology department at Hebrew University in Jerusalem discovered evidence for a genetic predisposition toward giving. Participants in a staged game were given money and told they could give all, part or none of it to an unidentified player. The subjects' DNA samples were analyzed and compared against their reactions. Those who had



PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/AREKMALANG

certain variants of a gene called "AVPR1a" gave an average of nearly 50 percent more money than those not displaying that variant. AVPR1a facilitates the production of a receptor that enables the social-bonding hormone arginine vasopressin to act on brain cells. "The experiment provided the first evidence, to my knowledge, for a relationship between DNA variability and real human altruism," wrote Knafo.

It is somehow heartening to discover we're hard wired for behavior that all the great spiritual traditions have urged for centuries. In 2 Corinthians 9:7, Paul exhorts, "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver." In the Qu'ran, the practice of *zakat*, or "alms giving," is one of the Five Pillars of Islam; it is intended not only to provide welfare for needy Muslims but to purify the spirit of the giver (who is cleansed of greediness and selfishness) and the receiver (who is saved from the humiliation of begging and envy). The

Torah orders, "If there is a needy person among you, don't harden your heart; don't shut your hand against your needy kin. For there will never cease to be people with need in your land, which is why I command you to open your heart to the poor and to the needy kin in your land."

In my parents' families, which suffered hard times in the Great Depression in Puerto Rico, giving was valued as an outgrowth of their faith. My maternal grandmother, widowed as a young mother in her twenties, worked two teaching jobs to support not only her daughter but her own mother and the children of her mentally ill brother. "She was so generous," my mother recalls. "On Saturday the *campesinos* [peasant farmers] would come to ask for alms, and she would save food for them, give them coffee, give them a little money. She would also find medical care for people who needed it and arrange for them to go to the hospital without paying. She felt that God had given her so much that she had to help people who were in need." >>>



My father, the youngest of seven children, was lucky to get hand-me-down shoes to wear, but nonetheless my grandparents fed and housed an ever-evolving array of cousins, aunts, uncles, family friends and acquaintances; no one was ever turned away. “Mamá would share what she had with people whom she thought were in a more needy situation than her,” remembers my father. “She was very strapped for money, but her sense of compassion and charity were very high. Papá would go along with that; he was very generous too.”

FEEDING OTHERS IS A CLASSICALLY human way of bonding; it likely has its roots in that most basic of interactions, the mother feeding the child. James Baraz recalls being at a meditation retreat in Massachusetts, washing pots and pans in the kitchen: “Here comes the manager of the retreat center, and he has something wrapped in aluminum foil. ‘This is for your good work.’ It’s this really big piece of cheesecake with glaze and nuts—at this retreat, an extra piece of bread and tea were a big deal. I broke it into four pieces, kept one, and put three pieces in the bowls of some other yogis I felt connected with. At tea time, I watched and saw each person’s mouth drop. And then one person took her piece and broke it into another bowl to give

away. The interesting thing is that 30 years later, I still feel a connection with five other people through that sharing.”

Scientists would say Baraz’s feel-good sensations are biochemically rooted. “Your good chemicals like dopamine and serotonin are actually evoked by self-giving love,” Stephen Post explains, co-author of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People: How to Live a Longer, Healthier, Happier Life by the Simple Act of Giving* and the founder and director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics at Stony Brook University Medical Center. Post defines self-giving love as “compassionate care for others that is unconditional; it’s not dependent on reciprocation.”

So are we neurologically programmed (and biochemically rewarded) to give because we get an evolutionary advantage by strengthening social bonds, which helps ensure the survival of the group? Quite possibly, since the impulse can even be seen in one of our closest primate relatives. Duke University’s Brian Hare and Suzy Kwetuenda from Lola y Bonobo, a Congolese center for orphaned bonobos (a type of chimpanzee), gave hungry bonobos access to a room containing food one by one. The bonobo could see into two other rooms, one empty and one containing

another bonobo. “We found that the test subjects preferred to voluntarily open the recipient’s door to allow them to share the highly desirable food that they could have easily eaten alone,” Hare wrote when the study was published in the journal *Current Biology* earlier this year.

Giving doesn’t only strengthen social bonds and make you feel good—it can also measurably impact your health, both physical and mental. Writer Cami Walker experienced this firsthand. In her early thirties, newly married and working a high-powered advertising job, Walker was stricken with multiple sclerosis (MS). She lost the use of her hands, then vision in one eye; the fatigue and numbness that come with the incurable neurological disease debilitated her. Within two years, she had quit her job, developed an addiction to prescription drugs and become completely dependent on her husband.

One night, in a state of depression, she called her friend Mbali Creazzo, a South African medicine woman who draws from the Dagara African tradition and has also been a pioneer in integrative medicine in San Francisco. Creazzo prescribed a ritual: Give away 29 gifts in 29 days. Walker was resistant. “I couldn’t even get out of bed, so how was I going to give something to someone every day? And Mbali said, ‘It

doesn’t have to be material. It can be that you say something nice.’”

On Day One, Walker decided to give the gift of her time and attention to a friend who was in a more advanced stage of MS. Her friend was ecstatic to hear from her, and they made a plan to get together. “When I hung up the phone, I felt lighter and I was smiling,” she says. “And I thought, ‘Okay, it does feel good to give.’ I gave my gift, and then out of the blue I got this call to do a consulting project. And I took myself out to breakfast to celebrate, and there was a guy who just anonymously paid for my breakfast that day!”

Walker continued her giving ritual and chronicled her experiences in the 2009 *New York Times* bestseller *29 Gifts: How a Month of Giving Can Change Your Life*. On Day 29, her gift was the launch of an online challenge site, 29Gifts.org, intended “to inspire a worldwide revival of the giving spirit.” Some 11,000 people in 48 countries signed up, shared online journals about their own 29-day giving rituals and raised thousands of dollars for charities. >>>



CAMI WALKER RECOVERED FROM A SERIOUS ILLNESS AFTER SHE DECIDED TO GIVE EVERY DAY.

Beyond novels and neckties

It takes self-awareness and creativity to give presents people truly want. Why not try an intangible gift instead? BY HANNY ROSKAMP

THERE’S A GIANT VASE IN MY LIVING room. It is made out of magazines that are rolled up together like bamboo stalks. This is a lovely idea, and it has even been done well. And I remember a very good friend giving it to me years ago, with the greatest love and affection.

Still, the vase vexes me. It’s too large to tuck onto a cabinet shelf. In fact, it’s too large to put anywhere. The style and color clash with the rest of my house. And so I move it from one exotic place to another, from the top of the mini-fridge to the corner of the study. I’d have given it away years

ago to someone who could love it, except... my friend still asks me regularly how I’m enjoying the vase. And I just can’t muster the courage to tell him what I really think of it, lovely as it is.

The story of my vase is the story of countless presents we give one another. Presents from long-forgotten birthdays inhabit the boxes full of useless junk that pile up in our homes. And so I think it’s time we started really thinking about the gifts we give each other.

Giving someone a really good present is a complicated affair for nearly everyone, and

sometimes it’s downright rocket science. Gift shops and other stores filled with knick-knacks prey upon this complexity. You can always find something bright and colorful there, something that makes you laugh or that seems useful, such as plaid pink storage boxes or rubber duckies that glow in the dark—made in the developing world, possibly by children, almost certainly with environmentally regrettable materials.

It takes a lot of time, dedication and creativity to give a fine gift. You have to put yourself in another’s place or even possibly engage in communication. You know, by

asking them what they’d really like. We usually skip that step. We buy something we really like, or something we think is “just like them.” Unfortunately, that may be something at right angles to what they think is just like them. Or we take the path of least resistance and buy that bestseller everyone must read. The way we give presents says a great deal about ourselves, I think.

When I receive a gift into which no affection or forethought has gone, it almost hurts. I feel invisible, unloved. Conversely, a present into which someone has clearly invested time thinking about me, listening to me, can touch me to the core.

But it takes courage, self-awareness and creativity to ask for something you really want. That’s an even harder task, if such a thing is possible—one at which I fail

miserably. I’m also terrible at saying I don’t like a gift I’ve received. And how many people say, “Oh, I don’t want anything.” Should we honor that wish? Actually, we should. We can always take them out to dinner or lend a hand in the yard. Or just bring along a splendid bouquet of flowers, if they are the kind of person who enjoys flowers. We can give so much more than novels and neckties.

For the past two years, I’ve asked my friends and family to give me intangible gifts or ones that get used up. Things that don’t stick around. I mean, I’m happy to receive presents; I still enjoy it, even though I’m no

longer a child. My loved ones listened and came up with the sweetest, most creative gifts. A certificate for the sauna, high-quality organic olive oil, a voucher for dinner out together, money I could donate to the charity of my choice. Fantastic! Best of all, it’s been contagious. More and more of my friends are saying, “Give me something intangible.” I hope we’ll infect even more people, because giving is good—and receiving is too. ■

HANNY ROSKAMP is learning to give the right gifts. The next step is learning to ask for the right ones.

PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/KAISPHOTO

PHOTOGRAPH: AMANDA MARSALIS



“The biggest change for me is I really did get my health back,” Walker says. “I’m not 100 percent good as new, but there’s been no further progression of my disease. Also, my creativity just exploded during that 29 days and I started writing again, and my business started to get back on track financially.” She also kicked her drug addiction, and her marriage bonds became stronger. She is such a believer in the power of giving that she’s continued to do so in 29-day cycles.

THE IDEA THAT GIVING MIGHT have beneficial health effects such as those Walker experienced was first raised by psychiatrist Hans Selye, a McGill University researcher, in his 1956 book *The Stress of Life*. Selye discovered the dangerous impact of stress on lab rats, and he posited that one way for humans to begin to lower their stress levels would be to help others.

Subsequent studies have substantiated Selye’s theory. In 1983, Larry Scherwitz and his researchers at the University of California at San Francisco found that the incidence of heart attacks and other stress-related illnesses was closely correlated with self-preoccupation, and they suggested giving could result in healthier hearts. Indeed, “just thinking about giving seems to have a physiological impact,” says Stony Brook University Medical Center’s Post.

He cites a 1988 study in which Harvard

behavioral psychologist David McClelland found that students who watched a film about Mother Teresa’s work with the orphans of Calcutta experienced a boost to their immune systems. And in 2007, University of Michigan psychologist Stephanie Brown studied 423 older couples and found that those who gave substantial support to others were more than twice as likely to remain alive in a five-year period.

The popularity of Walker’s 29Gifts.org website exemplifies something else researchers have found: Giving is contagious. In March of 2010, James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis, who study the effects of social networks, published a paper showing that when one participant gave away money to help someone, those recipients became more likely to give money away, leading to a cascade of generosity. The online 93 Dollar Club was formed as an immediate result of this exponential type of giving.

In August of 2009, Jenni Ware was stranded at a grocery checkout stand without her wallet. Carolee Hazard, a complete stranger, paid her \$207 bill. When Ware paid Hazard back, she included an extra \$93 as a thank-you gift. Hazard donated the extra money to a local food bank, matched it with another \$93, and posted about the events on Facebook—thereby setting off an avalanche of \$93 donations to food banks. A single random act of kindness has led to the raising of more than \$82,000 to

fight hunger. (For more on how to make generosity contagious, see “Reflections on the generous life” on page 34.)

Considering all the benefits of giving, it makes sense to teach it to kids. Christine Carter, executive director of the University of California’s Greater Good Science Center—a Berkeley hub for research on gratitude, compassion, altruism, awe and positive parenting—says, “I’ve found that parents who start consciously cultivating gratitude and generosity in their children quickly see how much happier and more resilient their children become.”

Giving also empowers children, as Jeanie Bernard discovered when she was the director of special education for the St. Tammany Parish public schools, near New Orleans, Louisiana. Bernard became concerned about the system’s 4,000 special needs children because, she says, “so much was given to them, they saw themselves as helpless.” She began to seek opportunities for the kids to give back to their school community. “I would meet with teachers, janitors, coaches, parent groups and ask what they needed help with.” The children accompanied her to the meetings and chose what services they wanted to give.

She particularly remembers a severely autistic boy whose behavior was so aggressive “people were afraid of him. He would



PHOTOGRAPH: WEE KBEE/DREAMTIME.COM

evolutionary benefits of helping in their book *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*. According to the authors, when helping benefits the group, it will be associated with pleasure and happiness. In particular, Neimark and Post comment that feelings of compassion, benevolence and kindness leave less room for negative emotions. Experimental evidence also suggests that helping others is related to many positive mental and physical health outcomes, including weight control, lower blood pressure and

make all these sounds, and people would slam their doors in the hall. But every day his job was to go door to door and get the absentee notices for the principal. And when he did that, he acted differently; he talked differently. It was amazing! People came out of their best place and met him in his best place.” The whole giving project “changed behaviors,” Bernard says. “It changed the ways the adults saw the kids, because they began to see them as responsible. And instead of being these kids who took from the system, they became part of the holistic needs of the system.”

ONE TEENAGER’S CHALLENGE TO her family to give more resulted in a complete life change for them all. In the book *The Power of Half: One Family’s Decision to Stop Taking and Start Giving Back*, the Atlanta father-daughter team of Kevin and Hannah Salwen describe how, in 2006, they had seen a homeless man begging for food by the side of the road. “Dad, if that man had a less nice car”—Hannah pointed at a black Mercedes coupe—“that man there could have a meal.” The light changed and they drove home, but the idealistic teen did not let go of the image.

“When we got home, I talked to my parents about it,” remembers Hannah. “They were explaining to me, ‘We’re really generous at the end of the year, and we give a lot.’ But I was feeling like it was quite



HANNAH SALWEN CONVINCED HER FATHER KEVIN AND MOTHER JOAN TO SELL THEIR HOUSE, BUY A SMALLER ONE AND GIVE HALF OF THE PROFITS TO CHARITY.

lame. It sounded pathetic compared to how much we had.”

Indeed it was, admits Kevin. “I think you could have easily looked at our lives and said the most important relationships we had were with our house and with our

other stuff. And when Hannah brought up her anger over what she had seen in the car, she challenged us to be a family to make a difference in the world.”

Kevin, Hannah, wife Joan and younger brother Joseph took up the gauntlet

The helper’s high

Why it feels so good to give. BY SANDER VAN DER LINDEN

FOR A SIGNIFICANT PART OF HUMAN history, giving to those less fortunate has been regarded as a desirable behavior. One obvious reason, of course, is that even a small sacrifice may make a world of difference to someone else. Thus charitable giving seems to be associated with potentially rewarding consequences.

What’s particularly interesting, however, is that those consequences do not only pertain to the receiver. In fact, recent research has shed light on the psychological rewards

that people experience when they have given. For example, individuals who engage in charitable giving are often reported to be significantly happier and healthier than those who do not. An analysis performed in 2007 by Arthur Brooks of Syracuse University pointed out that givers were 42 percent more likely than non-givers to say they were “very happy” and 25 percent more likely to report they were “in excellent health.”

So how can giving make us happier? Stephen Post and Jill Neimark highlight the

relief from depression and chronic pain. Following these findings, an obvious next step has been to look at people’s brains when they engage in—or even think about—charitable giving.

A research team led by neuroscientist Jorge Moll at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) found that when individuals donate money, the brain’s mesolimbic system is activated. The mesolimbic system is part of the reward reinforcement system, known for modulating behavioral responses to stimuli (food, sex, drugs, money) that activate feelings of reward and reinforcement. In particular, the decision to donate is associated with a part of the brain involved in social bonding and releases “feel-good” neurotransmitters such as oxytocin and vasopressin. When doing good makes people feel good, these

neurotransmitters can be addictive. Psychologists refer to this virtuous cycle as “the helper’s high.”

My own research points to the fact that someone’s moral norm—an internal code of conduct or moral conviction—is the strongest psychological predictor of charitable intentions. While social psychologists support the notion that cultural pressure drives donating, I found no significant effect related to the influence of explicit social factors. This suggests that when people give, it is unlikely that their good intentions are guided by beliefs about what others expect. Instead, I found that people’s giving intentions are strongly guided by their moral convictions. This finding also makes sense in light of the evidence that when people give, they experience feelings of sympathy and compassion,

emotions strongly linked to moral behavior. And given the potential benefits to individual health and happiness, this inner feeling of goodness associated with charitable giving may well originate from a conscious or unconscious awareness of its rewarding consequences.

The comedian Bob Hope once said, “If you haven’t got any charity in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble.” This is not just a joke. In our heart of hearts, we know charitable giving is the right thing to do. ■

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and spent the following year researching and discussing worthy causes. Then they sold their luxurious home and pledged \$800,000—half the proceeds of the sale—to sponsor food, health, microfinancing and other programs for 40 villages in Ghana, through the New York City-based Hunger Project.

Now, with their book, they travel around encouraging people to examine where in their lives they might be able to “pick a half,” as Hannah says—to take half of one’s TV-watching time and give it away by volunteering, for example. Interestingly, the Salwens vow that they are the biggest beneficiaries of their giving, which has deepened both their roots in community and their closeness.

“The American dream always seems to be about stuff,” says Kevin. “And what we should be dreaming about is, *Can we really*

receiving weave a fabric of interdependence that benefits all. Potlucks, fundraisers and volunteering abound; when I’m in need of any sort of help, I’ll send out an email and get multiple responses.

One day my friend Pat McCabe, a poet and activist of Native American Diné ancestry, called to invite me to a Thanksgiving dinner—in February. When I arrived at her house, I discovered that it was Pat’s birthday, and she had laid out an opulent feast for two dozen friends. Before we dug in, she had us stand in a circle, and she blessed the food and thanked us as a community for having made a difference in her life in the past year. The feeling of connection as we stood holding hands was palpable, strong and sweet.

Later, she explained that “the giveaway” is vital in many Native American traditions. “It’s about repaying the sacred debts that

for many,” Vaughan says. “Precapitalist economies had a much better way of living. Many of the indigenous societies were and are gift-giving societies, based on mothering values, egalitarian and non-hierarchical.” She cites the Iroquois, the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, the Sami of northern Scandinavia and the KhoSan of southern Africa as examples of societies grounded in gift-giving economies. In contemporary Western society, such practices as community gardens, freeware, Creative Commons licensing, couch surfing and bartering are all forms of gift-giving economics.

Many gift-giving economies are matriarchal, says Vaughn, which makes sense because the mothering impulse represents “unilateral gift giving without expectation of exchange or return. Humans are all formed according to gift giving. As mothered children, we all have the gift paradigm deep within us.”

Vaughan believes that in mainstream Western culture, the natural gift-giving impulse has been educated out of people—particularly out of male children—and that “if we stopped educating our boys not to be like their gift-giving mothers, we could recreate humanity on the basis of the gift paradigm. Direct gift giving is the human way of doing things. We are in alignment with our humanity when we participate in gift-giving economics.”

BACK ON THE STREET IN VENICE, I open my hands to receive the necklace from the homeless man. My heart is full of astonished tenderness at this gift he has given me back—not only the plastic jewels, but the honor of being seen as a queen.

I feel humbled. I thank him and ask his name. “My mother named me Michael,” he tells me. “Like the Archangel. That’s how you can remember me. Michael the Archangel.” I walk to my car, get inside and burst into tears. That simple act of giving him a little money for food opened such a huge, unexpected door between our hearts. I feel unspeakably grateful. As a result of my giving, I have indeed been touched by an angel. ■

DIANA RICO, who finds the act of giving almost as satisfying as eating chocolate, wrote about the International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers in the Jan./Feb. 2010 issue.

“If we stopped educating our boys not to be like their gift-giving mothers, we could recreate humanity on the basis of the gift paradigm. Direct gift giving is the human way of doing things”

GENEVIEVE VAUGHAN, AUTHOR OF *HOMO DONANS* AND *FOR-GIVING: A FEMINIST CRITICISM OF EXCHANGE*

be happy? I certainly feel in my gut that the only thing that makes people happy is a deep community.” Adds Hannah, “The main thing I’ve experienced is the change within my family and how much I can share with them and how comfortable with them I am now.”

The Salwens could be poster children for “Mental Capital and Wellbeing,” a 2008 report issued by Foresight, a British government think tank. In the report, “giving to neighbors and communities” was cited as one of the five critical elements of wellbeing and mental illness prevention. Tellingly, the word “community” comes from the Latin *communis*, which means “bound together”—and that word, in turn, has as part of its root the word *munus*, meaning “gift.” So giving is glue that binds us as a group, creating a system of exchange and acknowledging our interdependence as humans.

My own community of Taos, a small rural town in New Mexico, has been a remarkable example of how giving and

were fulfilled by others for me,” she said, “the moms I know helping each other out to raise our kids, the spiritual community that calls on me to do ceremony and strengthens me because it reminds me of who I am. All of these can be happily repaid because they deepen the sense of family. It’s also a way of recognizing that I lead an incredibly blessed life, and I feel the need to keep this river of goodness moving and flowing.” This giveaway not only fortified our ties as members of her community, it also fed and strengthened her spirit.

Author Genevieve Vaughan believes giving is so powerful that a giving paradigm could save the world. In books like *Homo Donans* and *For-Giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange*, Vaughan has proposed a shift from the exchange system of economics—capitalism—to a gift-giving economy. Exchange is ego-centered, competition-based and profits from the gifts of others, whereas gift giving is other-oriented, non-hierarchical and noncompetitive.

“The exchange system creates scarcity