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OUR GENEROUS NATURE

WIRED TO BE GIVERS

All of us have a super-power capable of improving almost every aspect of our lives. This power is so potent that it virtually guarantees a better life. We *flourish* when we use this power. And not just us. All those around us flourish as well. It's strong enough to affect the behaviors of our friends . . . and even *the friends of our friends*.

When we use this power, studies show, we have increased energy, empathy, and happiness. Not only that, but this power is regenerative. The more we use it, the more we have. These results are as conclusive as the link between exercise and health, as indisputable as the relationship of sleep to mental alertness. It's amazing.

Equally amazing is that most of us simply don't believe it. Even with all the academic research, the steady stream of popular press, and the wisdom of the ages, for the vast majority of us this power is just lying there—impotent—all because we don't use it.

What is this super-power?

Generosity.

Generosity seems so old-school, so decidedly boring. It's easy to think that researchers have gotten it wrong—or at least have overstated the benefits of a humdrum virtue.

Sociologist Christian Smith describes generosity as “the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly.”¹ Sounds nice. But what's super-powerish about that?

Generosity may look simple on the surface, but it's fairly complex when we shift to deeper examination. Generosity is the belief that we have something of value to give to others *and* that we can give it freely and easily.

That's it. Sounds pretty straightforward. Yet the definition implies that we've done several key things:

- taken a personal inventory of our time, energy, relationships, financial resources, and professional talents
- clearly understood the resources we've cultivated
- assigned values to those resources
- decided that these resources have meaning and, through our sharing them, are important—not just for ourselves but for others
- become and remained self-aware and aware of others—to

the point that we are able to see what they lack, need, or appreciate

The relationship of giving to receiving is a paradoxical one because at least on the surface, doesn't it appear we lose something when we give it away? If I "spend" an hour with a friend discussing her life, doesn't that mean I have one less hour to "spend" on myself? Likewise, doesn't giving fifty dollars to a cause make our wallets lighter, not heavier? Are we just playing word games to say that "in giving we receive"? After all, who hasn't heard the common-sense wisdom of "Put your own oxygen mask on first!" and "You can't care for others if you haven't cared for yourself!" How can giving to others benefit us so directly?

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Given generosity's explosive potential, it's no surprise that it's one of the hottest research topics in social science right now. The University of Notre Dame (aka "The Fighting Irish") has an entire academic center on the science of generosity that is "fighting for a more generous world" by bringing a host of disciplines together to determine the causes, mechanisms, and consequences of generosity. It didn't take long for two researchers from the Center, Smith and Hilary Davidson, to

identify some desirable qualities to which generosity is positively linked:² Generous people are more likely to be happier and healthier. They are not only less likely to be depressed; they are also more likely to live with a deep sense of purpose.

When Smith and Davidson defined generosity, they examined all the ways we offer ourselves and our abilities to others. But Harvard Business School professor Michael Norton and University of British Columbia psychology professor Elizabeth Dunn narrowed their focus to just financial generosity. Their finding? Money can buy happiness . . . *just as long as we spend the money on others.*³ That may seem obvious if we're thinking about the pleasure we get when we purchase and give someone we love a gift that they love. But in their book *Happy Money*, Norton and Dunn explain that they discovered something far

..... more interesting—something
Money can buy happiness that might just change the
. . . just as long as we spend annual office party forever.
the money on others.

In a variety of experiments, their research team gave free money to sports clubs, sales teams, and randomly chosen individuals. Some of the recipients were given the freedom to spend the money on whatever they wanted. Others were given the freedom to spend the money however they chose *as long as they spent it on others*. Each group had to spend or give away the money within a specified window of time.

Repeatedly the salespeople *made more sales* when they

were told to give the money away rather than purchase something for themselves. The intramural sports teams *dominated their league*, winning 25 percent more games than those teams who kept the money. Consistently, individuals and groups said they were happier and felt closer to their friends and colleagues when they gave to others—even to people they didn’t know.

Furthermore, Norton and Dunn found these conclusions hold true all over the world, in country after country. Spending on others makes us happier than spending on ourselves. Generosity is a simple, compelling truth. It’s also a universal truth.

The Gallup World Poll, produced by the giant public polling agency, routinely surveys samples of people in 136 countries from around the world. Between 2006 and 2008, more than 200,000 respondents completed surveys on a range of issues relating to generosity and their satisfaction with life, and in 120 out of 136 countries, respondents who gave money away were happier. In fact, people felt as happy giving away money as they did about an increase in their
household income. As Norton and Dunn note, the relationship “held up even after controlling for individuals’ income. Across the 136 countries . . . *donating to charity had a similar relationship to happiness as doubling household income.*”⁴

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That’s crazy! Yes. And transformational! The benefits of a generous life are demonstrative, verifiable, and authentic. And

they're all right within our grasp—no matter how little or how much we have. At the end of the day, we seem to be hard-wired
..... to give. But what happens
The benefits of a generous when that hard-wiring is chal-
life are demonstrative, lenged? When doubts surface?
verifiable, and authentic. When we hold back, rather
And they're all right within than share? Just because we're
our grasp—no matter how hard-wired to give doesn't
little or how much we have. mean that generosity is easy.

The Challenge to Give

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.”

That urban church held to the principle that all of us are wired to give—and that intentional generosity can change a church's relationship with its community, the city, and the world. But even while holding to that principle, the church faced challenges.

