

We have all experienced giving that does not feel generous. Sometimes gifts come with strings attached. Sometimes we give because we feel guilty; other times, we give to impress others, making us feel superior, proud.

Buddhists describe these sentiments as “near enemies” of giving. These are actions that “look” like giving, but because of attitude, assumptions, or tone, they distort authentic moments of generosity.

The near enemy of loving-kindness is attachment. . . . At first, attachment may feel like love, but as it grows it becomes more clearly the opposite, characterized by clinging, controlling, and fear.

The near enemy of compassion is pity, and this also separates us. Pity feels sorry for “that poor person over there,” as if he were somehow different from us.

If we do not recognize and understand the near enemies, they will surely stifle the joy and open connectedness of true relationships.

—Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*

Giving and receiving pose the same challenges and obstacles inherent in any human relationship. Jealousy, dependency, power, and deception can infect the purity of kindness. What sometimes appears to be a generous act can actually be a manifestation of control, domination, or subjection. Likewise, what appears to be receiving can sometimes be manipulation, coercion, or dependency.


What does it mean to give with strings attached? Perhaps the gift becomes entangled in our heart strings, so that as the giver and receiver move this way and that, we are always reminded of who gave the gift and why they may have given it. It is generally understood that a gift with strings attached is not much of a gift at all, that it flies in the face of the basic tenet that a gift should be freely given, freely received.

Sometimes strings can be woven with the best of intentions. Yet we seldom look at how these strings actually change the nature of the gift. Still, are there times when strings are appropriate, when they actually add to the meaning of the gift?

It is because of our love—and only because of our love—that the poor forgive us the bread we offer them. —ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

One woman said that she had for many years given her niece birthday gifts, but as they grew apart, she gave her only checks and gift certificates. She noticed over time that her niece barely acknowledged the gifts. She saw that her niece put as much heart into the thanks as she had put into the gifts themselves. The poor level of the gift exchange reflected how much the relationship had diminished. When she realized this, she vowed that she would re-establish what she saw as the positive strings of commitment and love.

The quality of the gift can be affected by the giver’s attitude and style. If the giver expects certain things in return, the gift



is less a gift than the first half of an exchange. If the giver is giving out of a sense of obligation, the gift is diminished.

We assumed that the givers we interviewed for this project would be modest—that they would not even see themselves as givers. This notion often proved to be true. We consider it unbecoming to see ourselves or present ourselves as generous. But why? Does having a sense of self as a giver take away from the quality of our generosity? Obviously, too much pride or sense of importance would run contrary to generosity of spirit. Or giving with too many strings attached, visible or not, would work against the spirit of generosity. But do we require a sense of selflessness for the giving to be genuine? Does awareness of one's gifts make the giving somehow less valuable?

Often, the deepest giving has nothing to do with objects or goods. Our offering is not necessarily some tangible gift or helpful act, but rather simply a peaceful manner. If we are clear and present, if we are quiet and centered, then others may be nourished simply by our lack of agitation. Many kindnesses thus begin small and quiet. Offering our deepest presence is one of the simplest and kindest things we can do for another.

When we can view giving and receiving as a function of resources and gifts moving through us and between us, then generosity is more a matter of circulation within the global body and less a single transaction between someone who is well off and someone in need.

Questions for Reflection

Why do we give? What motivates us to give?

Describe a time when you felt that a gift you were given was actually an attempt to control you. How was the gift misused?

Describe a time when you found it difficult to accept a gift, feeling more comfortable giving, and being more in control. What made receiving so difficult?

Can you think of times when you've been given or have given something with "strings attached"?

Can you imagine a time when strings can be seen as good or appropriate?

Do you have "relationships of giving" that have little relationship or gift giving involved? What can you do to change these?

When does giving become a source of pride?

How do we give without placing ourselves in control or above those we seek to help?

Describe a time when your actions appeared giving but were actually something quite different. What values were at work?

Are there stories of generosity that seem too extreme? Why? How are they different from stories you find inspiring?

The following stories are particularly relevant to conversations on the themes covered in this section. We encourage you to read them aloud to each other and let the conversations flow! They can be found on www.learningtogive.org and soon in the anthology *Tell These Secrets: Tales of Generosity from Around the World*.

- *An Ox for a Persimmon*
- *Mullah in the Turkish Bath*
- *The Trouble with Helping Out*