

Generating Generosity

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Good morning. Christina did such a nice job of reading a story to the kids that I thought I would start off with two stories for all of us big kids.

The first is of a man who had so much leave time built up, he was in a “use it or lose it” position. A person in another department had been ill for so long, she had used up all her leave and was no longer being paid. Worse yet, without donations of leave from other employees, her health insurance would lapse. The man refused to donate any leave, because he didn’t personally know the woman. To be clear, he had something perishable that he couldn’t use, but he refused to give it to someone who desperately needed it!

The second story is of a girl named Hannah Salwen, who was riding in her parent’s car. As they stopped at a light, Hannah saw a homeless man sitting on the curb, next to the Mercedes stopped in front of them. The picture haunted her and caused her to question why some people had so much and others so little. She challenged her own affluent family to do something to change this – to make a difference in the world. Her parents responded that they did support several charities, served on the Board of the local Habitat for Humanity, and worked at a soup kitchen. With the laser-like focus of a fourteen year old, Hannah was not impressed. She kept pushing until finally, her mother asked her “So what are you willing to sacrifice? Would

you give up your home? Your room?" The question hung in the air until, one by one, the whole family answered "Yes, we would."

They sold the home that had been their dream house and used half the proceeds to buy another much smaller home. While the house was on the market, they studied the world's problems and chose hunger as the issue they wanted to focus on. Next, they investigated programs that would truly address people's needs and create long term solutions. The money from the sale of their home built two centers in Ghana that each provided a meeting place, a bank for microloans, a food-storage facility and a health clinic.

So why do people respond so differently to the needs of others? The religions of the world all urge us to be more like Hannah than the man in my first story. Charity is one of the obligations of an observant Jew. Many Christian congregations observe the tithe, and those that do not certainly encourage their members to give generously from the gifts God has given them. Islam teaches that zakat, giving a percentage of your assets, is one of the five "pillars" or obligations of the faith. The Hindu Bhagavad Gita states that there are three gates to hell: intense craving (kama), anger (krodha) and miserliness (lobha). In many Native American cultures, a person's wealth and worth is measured not by what he has, but by what he has given away. Buddhism teaches that the ideal person is one who, on the edge of achieving enlightenment, chooses to renounce it in order to help others.

With so much of the world's wisdom urging us to be generous, why do so many cling so tightly to their possessions? Why do we sometimes look into our own hearts and find that we are falling short of our best intentions? How

can we become more generous and giving, and respond to Hannah's challenge to change the world?

I believe we need to start with gratitude, a true awareness of the gifts we have been given. It's human nature to compare ourselves to those around us. This is what leads folks making more than \$250,000 a year to protest that they are not rich and shouldn't be subject to increased taxes. In certain neighborhoods, \$250,000 isn't a huge salary, but I'm sure most of us would be delighted to make do with it! In a similar way, the difficult economic times we have been living through may lead us to think of ourselves as struggling. But in fact, every one of us in this room is among the "haves" of the world. And while we do work hard for what we have, the biggest contributor to our wealth is having been born in the right time and place. These facts are easy to forget, but I believe they are essential to our spiritual health. Relative wealth should not be a source of guilt, but an honest awareness of, and gratitude for our blessings, can lead us to a more open heart.

The second element of increased generosity is a sense of optimism, a gut deep belief that more good things are coming our way. Jacquelyn Mitchard is the author of "Deep End of the Ocean", and many other books. She and her husband had just decided to adopt two Ethiopian sisters whose mother was dying of AIDS. It wasn't an easy decision. They already had seven children through birth and adoption, and resources, both money and time, were tight. But they were confident they could provide for the girls. Then came the call. They had invested all their money with a firm that turned out to be a clone of Bernie Madoff. They were completely wiped out and didn't

know where the next mortgage payment would come from. Surely, they would need to stop the adoption. But they didn't. Here are her words:

Well, we said, we could lose our money but not our souls. We don't really know how we're going to make it. Sometimes I think I'll crack from anger and overwork and regret. But most lives run in cycles. As for the girls, maybe we're fools. We just felt two wrongs didn't make for a good night's sleep.

That kind of optimism and faith in the future is a remarkable thing, and easier for some of us than for others. My family was working class. We had hamburger far more often than steak, but there was always enough meat to go around. My husband, Neil, grew up very poor. Some nights, there was nothing by fried cornmeal mush for supper. Their vegetable garden was not a hobby. Because of his background, he finds it hard to give money away. His solution is two-fold. He freely gives time to those who need help, and he delegates cash charity decisions to me. Even if he might not have done it himself, he's always supportive of whatever contributions I make on our behalf.

I read somewhere that people are meant to be rivers, not reservoirs. But you can only allow the riches of this life to flow through you, if you have confidence that the rain will fall, and more water will come your way. I think maybe it's a good thing to build a small dam, and divert a little water into a pond, because droughts do happen. Just be sure your spillway is low enough so that plenty flows to those downstream, and your pond doesn't get so big it turns stagnant.

The third component of generosity is perhaps the most important. It is vision – a clear and compelling picture of how much better the future could be. One of the legends of this Fellowship is how during protracted debate about whether or not this building could be built, Bill Berry brought in a model he had made. That concrete vision galvanized the congregation into approving the funds to create the original meeting hall. We now enjoy the results of our latest vision made real, in our expanded space.

A simply stated goal can be profoundly inspiring. In 1998, there were 350,000 cases of polio worldwide. Bill Gates had a vision to not just reduce that number, but to totally eradicate polio. In 2009, there were fewer than 3000 cases, but the fight is more intense than ever as the goal draws near. No one is willing to rest until this terrible disease is completely conquered.

Australian ophthalmologist Fred Hollows was struck by the number of poor people blinded by cataracts and other easily treatable eye problems. Over a period of about 20 years, the foundation he set up restored sight to a million people, at a cost of about \$50 per person. Fred's vision meant that these people were no longer burdens on their struggling families.

Vision can come from making an abstract problem personal. Research clearly shows that an identifiable person will move us in ways that generic, impersonal statistics won't. It's one of the things that makes Kiva loans so attractive to me. I'm lending my money to a particular person, whose picture I see and whose story I know. I have made Afghanistan the focus of many of my donations partly because of a picture of an Afghan girl that I use as the screen saver on my computer. I don't know who this girl is, but she

has touched my heart. When I make a donation, I am giving to her and her family.

Vision excites us, gives us hope and courage and makes us know that we can change the world. It starts with our hopes and dreams. Our sense of what needs to be better. What issues and problems speak to our souls and demand a response. These can be great things, or small. Focused on our own Fellowship, within our immediate community, or in the world at large.

As we strive to be more generous personally, and as a congregation, I believe it is our hopes and dreams that will fuel our growth. That will let us live with gratitude and optimism. That will give us back the spirit of a fourteen year old Hannah who won't rest until she makes a difference in the world.

This would be the spot where I would normally ask for your thoughts, but today we're going to try something different. During the potluck, a volunteer will be seated at each table. Their job will be to start a conversation about your hopes and dreams for this Fellowship and jot down your ideas. After the dinner, these folks will meet to summarize the conversations. We'll use them as a springboard for further discussion at the forum next Sunday.