

The Power of GIVING

By Diana Rico

IT'S EARLY NOVEMBER, AND THE LOVELY, TWINKLY SNOWFLAKE LIGHTS have just been strung across Wilshire Boulevard. As I drive beneath them I immediately start to feel the pressure to shop for gifts. It doesn't matter that I don't yet know whom I'll be seeing for the holidays or that the weather hasn't turned appropriately cold. The stress descends, I start to get resentful, and I wonder where in the world that old feeling of joyful holiday communion has gone.

This time of year brings up a confusing stew of emotions around the urge—or the obligation—to give gifts. Money and time stresses, rampant commercialism and the overwhelm of holiday responsibilities conspire to bury what is, in truth, an ancient human impulse. Can we, by applying a little consciousness, find our way back to the sweetness of the desire to give?

Spiritual traditions around the world have long exhorted the importance of giving. The Christian Bible says: "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver." The Torah advises, "If there is a needy person among you, don't harden your heart, don't shut your hand against your needy kin." The Buddha observed, "If you knew the power of generosity, you would not let a single meal go by without sharing it." The Muslim practice of Zakat, or "alms giving," is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, on par with prayer. Many Native American traditions have gift-giving ceremonies; the practice reaches its apex in the lavish potlatches (from the Chinook word meaning "to give away") of the Pacific Northwest coastal tribes, when hosts share their wealth by offering feasts, music, dance and sacred ceremony to their community.

In fact, the English word *community* comes from the Latin *communis*, meaning "bound together"—and that word, in turn, has the word *munus*, meaning "gift," as part of its root. So giving is a bonding agent that joins us together as a group, creates a system of exchange, and honors our interdependence as humans.

Genuine giving—giving that is done from the heart rather than duty—has deep power. Just ask Hollywood-based writer Cami Walker, author of the *New York Times* best-seller *29 Gifts: How a Month of Giving Can Change Your Life*. In her early thirties, Walker was stricken with debilitating multiple sclerosis. Within two years she had quit her high-powered advertising job, developed a prescription-drug addiction and become completely dependent on her new husband.

One night, thoroughly depressed, she called her friend Mbali Creazzo, a South African medicine woman. Creazzo, who draws from the Dagara African tradition and has also been a pioneer in integrative medicine in San Francisco, prescribed a ritual: Give away 29 gifts in 29 days. Walker was resistant, but decided she had nothing to lose.

On Day 1, Walker gave the gift of her time and attention to a friend who was suffering from more advanced MS than she was. Her girlfriend was ecstatic to hear from her. "When I hung up the phone, I felt lighter and I was smiling," Walker recalls. "And I thought, 'Okay, it does feel good to give.' Then, out of the blue, I got this call to do a consulting project. And I took myself out to breakfast to celebrate, and a guy just

Below: Where The Power of Half led the Salwens



anonymously paid for my breakfast!"

Walker continued her giving ritual for the prescribed 29 days—and found her life completely transformed. "The biggest change for me is I really did get my health back," she 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 those 29 days and I started writing again, and my business started to get back on track financially." She also kicked her drug addiction and strengthened her marriage.

Walker continues to give in 29-day cycles, and she even started a challenge website, 29Gifts.org, "to inspire a worldwide revival of the giving spirit." Some 11,000 members in 48 countries now share online about their own 29-day giving rituals.

Recent science suggests that Walker's experience of improved mental and physical health is not an anomaly, according to Dr. Stephen G. Post, coauthor of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People: How to Live a Longer, Healthier, Happier Life by the Simple Act of Giving*. "People who live generously, who contribute to the lives of others, on the whole if you look at health signs, these people tend to be considerably happier, healthier and on average live a little longer than those who self-describe as fundamentally selfish," says Post, who is also the founder and director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics at Stony Brook University Medical Center.

Giving also widens one's sense of humanity. In *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 describes how, in 2006, they saw a homeless man begging for food. "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 Hannah could not let go of the contrasting images she'd just seen.

The idealistic teenager challenged her parents about the disparity. "They were explaining to me, 'We're really generous at the end of the year and we give a lot,'" Hannah remembers. "But I was feeling like it sounded pathetic compared to how much we had." And it was, admits Kevin: "I think you could easily have looked at our lives and said the most important relationships we had were with our house and with our other stuff."

After a year of researching worthy causes, Kevin, Hannah, wife Joan and younger brother Joseph sold their luxurious home, downsized and pledged \$800,000—half the proceeds of their house

sale—to sponsor food, health and microfinancing programs for 40 villages in Ghana, through the New York City-based Hunger Project. Now, with their book, Kevin and Hannah 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. The Salwens vow that they themselves are the biggest beneficiaries of their giving.

"I now feel in my gut that the only thing that makes people happy is a deep community," says Kevin of what he's learned. Hannah adds, "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."

A couple of weeks after the lights have gone up over Wilshire, I'm driving again and thinking about these stories. I am moved to be

reminded of how giving heals people, deepens connections with family and friends, widens our sense of community. Ah yes, it's all coming back to me. Giving opens the hearts of both the giver and the receiver; it lets love go out and draws it back in. Next time I'm in the throes of holiday shopping, I will remind myself to tune into the simple wisdom of my heart. ☺



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