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Indulging the Totally Selfish Joys of *Selfless Giving*

Here's the science behind creating a chain reaction of goodness.

Though economists and grumps have long argued to the contrary, many spiritual traditions teach us that, at our core, we are loving, generous, and kind. Recent research confirms this idea. Michael Tomasello and other scientists at the prestigious Max Planck Institute have found that even infants too young to have been conditioned by the conventions of politeness will automatically engage in helpful behavior. Research conducted by Dale Miller at the Stanford Business School shows that adults, too, are instinctively driven to help others. The difference between children and adults is

By EMMA SEPPALA
Illustration by PATTY IBA



that adults will often restrain themselves from this natural instinct because they are concerned with what others will think. We hesitate to follow our natural instinct to be loving, generous, and kind because we fear others will believe we are acting out of selfish motivation. And, of course, we may fear the same thing — that our natural drives to be helpful are secretly selfish — and so we hold back. Are we being selfish? Should we restrain ourselves?



“The key to happiness is helping other people.”

University of Michigan researcher Stephanie Brown, in a study of over 400 elderly people, found that those who engaged in more helping behavior were healthier, happier, and lived longer than others. Of course, one reason for these findings may be that people who are healthier have more opportunity to be of help to others. Data indicates, however, that positive emotions and social bonding (both a consequence of service) have protective effects on health that may explain these findings.

So helping others is a natural instinct that helps us to be healthier, happier, and to live longer. So, yes, it is selfish — and it's extremely silly to hold back.

How Helping Is Contagious

Almost 40 years ago, when Bob Curry returned from serving in Vietnam, all he wanted was to return to a normal life. To the contrary, he found his life shattered by debilitating flashbacks. Not knowing anything about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Bob thought he was becoming mentally ill and began to self-medicate with alcohol. He soon became alcoholic, lost his job and his home, and devastated his family. He found himself living on the streets. One day, Bob ended up in a car accident that took someone's life. Charged with homicide, Bob finally hit rock bottom. During the two years leading up to his trial, however, Bob was amazed that other veterans, his family, and doctors from the VA hospital all rallied to help him. As a consequence of their support and determination, Bob was the first person to be acquitted with “not guilty by reason of insanity” for PTSD.

As Bob recounts the tale, the veterans and doctors who pitched in to save him had no reason to do so. “They didn't know me, and usually people don't want to associate with you when you are in so much trouble.” Their help not only saved him from jail but also inspired him to overcome his PTSD and alcoholism and to co-found Dryhootch, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping veterans with PTSD. Headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the main focus of Dryhootch is setting up coffee shops run by veterans, as places of community, healing, and education about PTSD.

Nowadays, you can often find Bob surrounded by young veterans recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan. Many have benefitted from the Dryhootch community and are now, in turn, volunteering to help other veterans. Bob shares that although the past cannot be erased, the work he is doing with Dryhootch has given him some solace. “It's the only thing that makes sense.”

The Chain Reaction of Helping

Social scientists James Fowler of UC San Diego and Nicolas Christakis of Harvard are famous for their work in studying

social networks. They have devised several experiments that show how helping is contagious — that acts of generosity and kindness impact others around them, and that others, in turn, act with generosity in a chain reaction of goodness. You may have seen one of the news reports about chain reactions that occur when someone pays for the coffee of the person behind him at a drive-through window or pays for the person behind her at a tollbooth. People keep the generous behavior going for hours. You can try this experiment yourself.

Another example of how service is paid forward is the story of Trevor Patzer, who was recently awarded with the Unsung Heroes of Compassion award by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The son of a ski instructor, Trevor grew up in Sun Valley, Idaho. When one of his father's wealthy students offered to pay for Trevor's education at a private East Coast boarding school, Trevor promised himself that he would repay the gift by helping others become educated. After graduating from Brown University, he went to work for Anderson Consulting. On a trip to Nepal, Trevor was moved by the tragic plight that faces a huge percentage of rural Nepalese girls. These girls suffer both from dire poverty and from a society in which few girls are taught to read and write; many are married by age seven, forced into child labor, or sold into prostitution. So in 1998, Trevor started the Little Sisters Fund, which, in a little over 10 years, has educated more than 900 at-risk Nepalese girls.

In a chain reaction similar to Bob Curry's growing band of veterans, many of the young women who have graduated from Little Sisters are inspired to work in service professions, like nursing or teaching. Some of them have even formed their own non-profits and continue to mentor other young at-risk girls in the Little Sisters Fund. Now working full time with the Little Sisters Fund, Trevor's goal is a chain reaction that will educate one million Nepalese girls by 2050.

Your Brain Lights Up When Giving

“I truly believe that if you want to be happy, the key to happiness is helping other people,” shares Trevor. “There is nothing more fulfilling than helping somebody else; it doesn't matter how you help. When you are committed to making the world a better place, that's where true satisfaction happens.”

Most spiritual traditions agree with Trevor that the greatest happiness lies in service: treating others as we would treat ourselves, helping wherever we can, and sharing what we have. Underlying this idea is that we are all connected; another person's happiness is therefore also our happiness. Now, brain research provides support for these ideas.

One brain-imaging study headed by neuroscientist Jordan Grafman from the National Institutes of Health examined brain activity under two conditions: receiving money for oneself and observing money being donated to charity. The researchers observed similar activity in the brain's “pleasure centers” (the mesolimbic reward system) in response to both

situations, suggesting that we may experience similar levels of happiness when we receive money and when we see money being given to a valuable cause.

In another revealing experiment published in *Science* by Harvard Business School professor Michael Norton, participants received a sum of money. The experimenters told half of the participants to spend the money on themselves and the other half to spend the money on others. At the end of the study, the participants rated their happiness levels. Those who spent money on others felt significantly happier than those who spent money on themselves, suggesting that giving to others increases well-being above and beyond spending money on oneself!

As Bob Curry said, "Serving others keeps me from thinking about myself," an observation that reveals another important truth. When we spend time focusing on ourselves, we often worry about our future or ruminate about our past, which inevitably leads to a "poor me" attitude. In fact, research finds that self-focus — a preoccupation with "me, myself, and I" — is linked to states of anxiety and depression. When you do something for someone else, however, that state of self-focus immediately dissolves. Think of a time when you were feeling sad or upset, and a close friend or relative asked you for urgent help with a problem. Shifting your attention to uplift a friend naturally alleviates any negative emotions you may be experiencing. Pay attention to the feeling that arises as you spend time in any act of kindness or service. The sense of belonging and connection expands, and with that comes immense joy.

The Mother Teresa Effect

Why are the lives of people like Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., and Desmond Tutu so inspiring? Research by Jonathan Haidt at the University of Virginia suggests that seeing someone helping another person creates a state of "elevation." Have you ever been moved to tears by seeing someone act in a loving and compassionate way? Haidt's data suggests that it may be this elevation that then inspires us to help others and is the force behind the chain reaction of giving.

Another great volunteer, Francesca Jackson, was moved to service by President Kennedy's famous quote: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Raised in a military family, the idea of "service" was a way of life. Francesca grew up during a time in which the whole African continent became free from colonialism; it was the time of the birth of gay rights, women's rights, and human rights. Inspired and moved by these values, Francesca decided she wanted to help relieve the trauma and suffering of the most destitute and neglected people in society: victims of HIV/AIDS, children and adult prisoners, and veterans returning from war with combat stress. A practitioner of meditation for 36 years, Francesca decided the gift she had to share was the peace she experiences through her spiritual practices. Now, Francesca teaches internationally as an instructor and volunteers with the Art of Living Foundation

and the International Association for Human Values.

"I want to help people who have been cast aside and neglected by society and those behind bars," says Francesca. "I am interested in going into the dark and turning on the light, watching someone whose heart has been crushed turn around and realize his or her full potential. The thing that we have that is the most valuable on this planet is the human potential, and if we really truly believe that it's important, we can't afford to leave any of it behind."

The Antidote to Compassion Fatigue

Service does not have to involve moving to Africa to work with orphans, or starting one's own non-profit. Service can mean simply smiling at the post-office clerk. We all know what lies in our range of possibility, and each day presents countless opportunities to do good in some way. Nevertheless, some people are concerned with what may seem like an added responsibility of helping others. Others have experienced "compassion fatigue" — the exhaustion that can occur in service professions. As healthy and satisfying as it is to give, it is also not possible to continue giving without periods of restoration and rejuvenation. This may be where spirituality and practices such as yoga, breathing techniques, and meditation can help restore a balanced state of mental and physical health.

Francesca, Trevor, and Bob have all, at some point, been touched by these types of practices that calm the mind. Trevor explains, "When you do these practices, what you identify as being important is not so much 'Oh, that jerk cut me off' as it is 'How can I be of service to my community?'" Francesca shares that "serving others is the embodiment of what spirituality actually is; it's beyond just sitting with eyes closed, although that has a value. It's about taking all the principles of spirituality and putting them into action."

As we begin to feel ease, peacefulness, clarity, and health permeate our lives through calming practices, our potential to make a difference in the world increases. Have you noticed that you are more likely to hold a door for someone after a yoga class or when you come out of a church? Seva, the Sanskrit word for "selfless service," is a natural outcome of a peaceful mind and a full heart.

Emma Seppala, Ph.D., is a researcher at the Center for Healthy Minds and at the University of Wisconsin. Her current work involves finding ways to ease the minds of combat veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

For information on Bob's, Francesca's, and Trevor's work: Bob Curry, dryhootch.org; Bob@Dryhootch.org / Francesca Jackson: francesca@artofliving.org / Trevor Patzer: littlesistersfund.org; taptrevor@yahoo.com.

Work with prisons: prisonsmart.org. Work with people living with HIV/AIDS: hivartofliving.org. Work with veterans: pwht.org

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