

# **Open Your Hand: The Practice of Spiritual Generosity**

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## Open Your Hand: The Practice of Spiritual Generosity

I don't know anyone who doesn't wrestle sometimes with despair. News of the world is bleak. Global warming. Vanishing species. War. Terrorism. Poverty. It can be tempting to close the mind and harden the heart simply because the challenges that confront us seem overwhelming. What is hope in the face of so much bad news?

In a time of turbulence and anxiety, I believe that generosity is one of the key spiritual practices that can keep us sane. Not only that, the practice of generosity may be one of the most powerful ways that we can bear witness to a hope that lies beyond despair.

Here are three things that I am learning about the practice of generosity:

### **Generosity begins with God.**

This means that we receive everything as gift -- not just material possessions but everything that exists: this breath, this moment, and the moments we have until we die. Our capacity to think, feel, remember, and hope, our family and friends, the whole living breathing planet with its goldfinches and cougars, its foxes and salmon and birch trees -- all of it is gift.

When despair knocks on my door, I remind myself of the generosity of God. I turn to God and give thanks for whatever gifts I am able to appreciate: perhaps just the breath in my lungs or how dearly God loves me. In the hour of dread, what I manage to be grateful for may be very small, but that little glimpse may be enough to open the door to gratitude. The more grateful I feel, the more that interior abundance naturally wants to overflow into acts of generosity. Because God is so generous to me, I want to be generous to others.

At the same time, remembering the generosity of God can be a wonderful antidote to compulsive giving, the temptation to think that I have to give and give and give without asking for anything in return. It's been said that compulsive giving can be a sign of pride, a refusal to accept help from others. So when I get over-extended, remembering that generosity begins with God helps restore me to humility. Like every creature, I, too, need to receive. Allowing oneself not only to give but also to receive from others and from God is like breathing in as well as breathing out -- it is essential for life.

### **Generosity expresses kinship.**

The root of the word "generosity" is the Latin genus, which means "race, kind, or kin." To be generous is to make others kin. This is a very different notion of generosity than what we might

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call patronage or noblesse oblige, in which a powerful person or group of people deigns to share a little of its abundance with the poor and dispossessed but does not experience, or want to experience, any direct contact with the poor. Giving in this spirit can actually function as a power play, in which the rich congratulate themselves on their supposed generosity, while the poor remain dependent and disempowered.

True generosity expresses kinship. It recognizes that rich and poor alike are the beloved children of God, equally human and worthy of respect. Human societies tend to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a few and to relegate the poor to the margins, but a religious vision of our kinship with one another calls us to a generosity that inspires us to struggle for social and economic justice and not to settle for offering charity and handouts.

Despair may goad us to seek security through isolation and fearful self-protectiveness. Practicing generosity undercuts despair by reminding us that human beings are essentially kin -- we are connected to each other. We need each other.

And if generosity is all about kinship, maybe in this time of ecological devastation we are ready to expand our notions of kin to include not just our two-legged relatives but also the four-legged kind, and those with fins and wings.

### **Generosity expresses and strengthens hope.**

**T**ake global warming, for instance. Many of us are shaken by the reports of melting glaciers and drowning polar bears, disrupted seasonal cycles and intensifying droughts and storms. We wonder whether it is too late to save the precious web of life that our species is so wantonly destroying.

Committing oneself to carrying out generous actions on behalf of Creation is a way to take a stand for hope: this is the sort of world we want to create, a world in which people live at peace with one another and with the Earth, a world that is socially just and environmentally sustainable.

When we skip one car ride a week, or buy locally grown food, or replace incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescent, we are not just doing what is ethically right (though we are) and we're not just restraining ourselves or exercising self-control (though we may be doing that, too). We are also being generous, giving for the love of God and the healing of God's Creation.

When we are generous, we become a living sign of hope. And if enough people take a stand for hope, with God's help maybe we can change the world.

