

Generosity of Spirit
By
Daniel E. White October 9, 2023

When Judy and I described Island Pacific Academy to parents and students inquiring about the school in 2003 and 2004, we said that we wanted to educate children in the power of human kindness and to develop in the students a generosity of spirit. We believed that starting the conversation by talking about values would set a different kind of expectation in adults and students alike. The robust enrollments early in the school's history suggest that we were right.

Generosity has been on my mind in recent weeks, prompted by a short article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, (August 14, 2023) which got to our house the day following the Maui fires. The *Monitor* reported that there is a national panel known as The Generosity Commission which plans to issue a report about how everyday Americans “are re-imagining generosity and expanding its seeming boundaries.”

“In a poll of 2,569 adults last year [2022], most people not only identified as generous but also described generosity as ‘boundless,’ not confined to traditional charities, organized religion, or philanthropy...Researchers found ‘people understand generosity as the multitude of thoughtful and helpful ways we interact with each other and the worlds around us.’ Nearly two-thirds of respondents described generosity as “how they express their values.”

The Giving USA Foundation, a non-partisan coalition gathered from across the spectrum of people engaged in the charitable sector of our economy, established the Generosity Commission in 2021. Its mission has been to understand how givers and volunteers have been reimagining generosity. The *Monitor* wrote that the Commission expects to “rip up old notions of giving— whether in treasure, time or talent.”

The *Monitor* reported that a Stanford survey conducted in 2020 found that “less than 20% of Americans saw giving as a matter of money. They regarded generosity as ‘myriad informal’ acts of kindness [Wordsworth’s ‘little unremembered acts’] and connecting. The hypothesis of the research: Individuals give in more ways than even they understand.”

The article concluded, “One premise for the commission’s work is that generosity is ever-present...that this form of selfless love is hardly stagnant or limited.”

One of the by-products of the tragedy on Maui has been a consistent emphasis by multiple media on the response of the people who live on Maui to the fires, as well as how people who do not live there or have just a connection to it through a vacation trip have responded. Time and again, we see pictures of women and men in human chains

passing food, water and other supplies from a catamaran to a waiting vehicle. Every day we hear stories about people reaching out to those affected by the fire to provide whatever might be needed, from housing strangers to just lending a sympathetic ear.

On the national news, ABC highlighted a father and daughter who, when they heard about firefighters who were fighting the fires losing their homes to the fire, organized a mainland effort to supply those first-responders with motorhomes, delivered by ship to those in need. How many different ways have been established for people to donate money to support recovery efforts?

Significantly, the people of Maui responded faster than most government entities because they could; they did not wait to help whenever and however they could. Judy and I experienced that ourselves many years ago in Hawaii. Our Princeville house withstood the winds of Hurricane Iniki in 1992. We were on island a few days after the storm had passed to help clean up around our neighborhood, and we saw firsthand how the local people got busy to help those around them in need, not waiting for official action.

The Stanford finding emphasizes that generosity is not limited by money or things. “Myriad informal” things count, and they are more numerous than material gifts. “Individuals give even more than they understand.”

I believe Judy and I had that “boundless” nature of generosity in mind when we chose generosity of spirit as a founding value for the school. Not everyone can give something material. But everyone can be kind. Everyone can grasp that he or she might not be right in every instance. Everyone can acknowledge that, in all probability, most everyone else is trying hard to do what they think is right.

Except during times of tragedy, generosity of spirit gets short shrift in the media. Likewise, political discourse, even the attitudes people with opposing political views have toward one another, seems devoid of generosity of spirit. In focusing on generosity of spirit for the school, perhaps we were thinking that our graduates might help the effort to overcome the prevailing story line. The *Monitor* story suggested that they would be joining with many others in America in doing so.

Winston Churchill wrote that “we make a living by what we’ve got, but we make a life by what we give.”

People of a Certain Age, what we give is more than material in nature. We, too, are likely among those who give “even more than” we understand.

What if we were to hold up to the measure of generosity of spirit things that we hear, say, or see done?

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