

## The Generosity Paradox: By Giving We Receive, But By Taking We Lose

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Americans who are more generous live healthier, more fulfilling lives. It's science.

Generosity is paradoxical. Those who give, receive back in turn. By spending ourselves for others' well-being, we enhance our own. In letting go of some of what we own, we better secure our own lives. By giving ourselves away, we ourselves move toward greater flourishing. This is not only a philosophical or religious teaching, it is a sociological fact.

The generosity paradox can also be stated in the negative. By grasping onto what we currently have, we lose out on better goods that we might have gained. In keeping to ourselves what we possess, we diminish its long-term value to us. By always protecting ourselves against future uncertainties and misfortunes, we are formed in ways that make us more anxious about uncertainties and vulnerable to future misfortunes. In short, by failing to care for others, we do not properly take care of ourselves. It is no coincidence that the word "miser" is etymologically related to the word "miserable."

This paradox of generosity should not be surprising. Many wise observers of human life have taught different versions of the generosity paradox. An ancient Hebrew proverb reads "One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but ends up impoverished." The Buddha taught that "Giving brings happiness at every stage of its expression." A Hindu proverb holds that "They who give have all things, they who withhold have nothing." And Jesus of Nazareth said "Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."

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But many people today seem not much shaped by the sayings of wise teachers from thousands of years ago. So, if we want to understand the power of generosity in a way that might influence our lives today, it may help to add to this traditional wisdom some empirical findings from social-scientific research. For the last three years we have been leading a study called the Science of Generosity Initiative at the University of Notre Dame. In that study, we have conducted a nationally representative survey of Americans' practices and beliefs about generosity, hundreds of interviews with Americans around the country on generosity, and participant-observation studies of local religious congregations.

What we learn is the following. First, the more generous Americans are, the more happiness, health, and purpose in life they enjoy. This association between generous practices and personal well-being is strong and highly consistent across a variety of kinds of generous practice and measures of well-being. Second, we have excellent

reason to believe that generous practices actually cause enhanced personal well-being. The association between generosity and well-being is not accidental, spurious, or simply an artifact of reverse causal influence. Certain well-known, explicable causal mechanisms explain for us the specific ways that generous practices shape positive outcomes. Third, the way Americans talk about generosity confirms and illustrates the first two points.

The paradox of generosity is evident in the lives of Americans. Despite all of this, it turns out that many Americans fail to live generous lives. A lot of Americans are indeed very generous. But even more are not. And so the latter are deprived, by their lack of generosity, of the greater well-being that greater generosity would likely afford them. This is the second paradox of generosity. Finally, as we mentioned above, many wise writers, philosophers, religious teachers, sages, and mystics have been teaching us about the paradox of generosity for thousands of years. What today's empirical social-science research tells us only confirms what we might have known all along, had we trusted traditional teachers.

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The paradox of generosity also seems to entail this relevant truth: Generosity cannot be faked in order to achieve some other more valued self-serving end. Generosity itself needs to be desired. The good of other people must be what we want. Generosity cannot be counterfeited. And fake generosity does not make us happier, healthier, and more purposeful in life. To live generously, one must in due time really become a generous person. Generosity must be authentic. It must actually be believed and practiced as a real part of one's life.

Generosity is like love in this way. People often say that we increase the love we have by giving it away. When we love other people more, we often then find that the love we feel only grows more. But that dynamic requires really loving the others, really giving them our love. Love must be genuine, and then when it is, the normal, bigger consequences of loving tend to follow. It is the same with generosity. For generosity to enhance well-being, it must be the generosity, not the well-being, that we are after. The enhanced well-being then comes indirectly and secondarily.

However, that fact does not mean that people must first somehow fully internalize and authentically personalize generosity before they can practice being generous at all. One of the best ways to become a truly generous person is simply to start behaving like one. Right attitudes often do follow right actions. New beliefs and insights are frequently provoked by new behaviors and instigation of habits. Like many things in life, we usually learn by doing, we perfect activities and attitudes by practicing them. So, while generosity cannot ultimately be faked, people certainly can learn generosity, can come to personally believe in, and practice real generosity, by first simply setting into motion new behaviors that are generous and then reflecting upon and soaking in their meaning and consequences.