



# The Ecstasy of Giving

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**He who gives liberally goes straight to the gods;  
on the high ridge of heaven he stands exalted.**

→ Rig Veda 1.125.5

**For it is in giving that we receive.**

→ St. Francis of Assisi

**G**iving often ignites a joy in the heart that can fill our emptiness and satisfy our deepest longing. Recently, I had an unexpected experience of this truth when my friend Pamela Kraft, founder of Tribal Link, a nonprofit organization working with indigenous peoples, invited me to hear Daniel Rogei Salau, a member of the Maasai community. Daniel is one of the coordinators of Tribal Link's collaborative initiative for a Maasai girls' education program in Africa.

On the phone, Pamela told me, "You must come. Daniel is an extraordinary person. Unexpectedly, he arrived in New York, so I am inviting some friends over to meet him."

Needless to say, I was intrigued. I had never met a Maasai tribes person before and I wondered what he was doing educating girls in Africa. So, out of sheer curiosity, I attended the last-minute informal gathering.

Twenty people came to the event. Daniel, a soft-spoken man who emanated both humility and passion, spoke about the school and the girls he was dedicated to. He said the purpose of the school was to improve each girl's own personal life and also to choose girls who would come back as leaders and help other girls in her community. Although the state pays for education through grammar school for all, girls have less opportunity for education than boys do. Maasai women are expected to take care of the household and raise children. Most are subject to antiquated tribal customs in which they have few rights, as compared to the men. Girls as young as 10,

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are commonly exchanged as child brides to total strangers for cows and other material necessities. The decision to undergo the painful ritual of clitoral mutilation is made by the girl's husband, not herself.

As Daniel spoke, slides were projected on a screen behind him of various girls at the school as they engaged in their daily activities. At first glance, they seemed unknown and foreign to me, a world apart, living in an arid, undeveloped land that was both primitive and basic. It was hard to fully identify with them, as their lives were so vastly different from mine.

However, as their stories unfolded, I learned some of what they endured daily just to get to school, such as walking five miles on foot to and from school, having to be vigilant of the wild animals that could attack them, and warding off men that would try to rape them. Daniel described the determination of the girls, in spite of all their obstacles, to get educated. I began to see them in a new light and admire their courage and resolve in the face of such danger. I could not help but note how my college-educated children and their friends had taken their right to be educated for granted, as I had. We simply expected an education and viewed it as a natural part of life to which we were entitled.

As I continued to listen to Daniel speak and view the slides, I focused on one girl who seemed around eleven years old. Suddenly, something unexpected came over me as I gazed into her eyes in the picture. I had the distinct sensation that part of my soul was flying into hers. It was as if, in that moment, I had become one with her and I knew her deeply. She was no different than I had been at eleven. Yes, we had different skin color, extremely distinct life circumstances, and dissimilar religions and cultures—but she was the very same sensitive girl I was at eleven, with the same aspirations, innocence, imagination, insecurities, hurts, and desires. We were the same essence inhabiting different bodies in dissimilar times and cultures. Her vulnerability and mine were exactly the same. I totally understood who she was and how it felt to inhabit her body. Then, the thought occurred to me that I had to help fund her education. How could I not do it, as she was I? I had not planned to do this, but I realized that not helping her was in some way hurting me since we shared one and the same essence.

With that awareness, a huge oceanic feeling of love overtook my entire being and I was filled with a profound and ecstatic joy. At that moment, I longed for nothing more. I was

flooded with happiness. I needed nothing else to be content. Things that I thought could make me feel happy—traveling the world, more money, a dream vacation, a brand-new car, or the best champagne or chocolate in the world—could never elicit the bliss of this tidal wave of love overflowing from within me. This was far better than anything material this world could offer me. I was reminded of the wisdom of the Indian sage Swami Vivikenanda, who said, “Do not stand on a high pedestal and take five cents in your hand and say, ‘here

my poor man,’ but be grateful that the poor man is there, so by making a gift to him you are able to help yourself. It is not the receiver that is blessed, but it is the giver.”

I must admit that the second the notion entered my head, I held back for a moment and thought, “Can I afford this?” and, “What else can I use this money for instead of giving it away?” I am not a super wealthy person, but I knew I could come up with the money to fund a girl's education. I intuitively sensed that this was far more worthwhile than using the money for myself. I could then relish in the joy of imagining her life profoundly altered by my gift as her school year progressed, and with that thought, my heart could be filled again and again. In comparison, buying something for myself held little allure. How often had I experienced the thrill of anticipation while buying something new that I desired? Yet, inevitably, the pleasure would wear off in a short a time as I got used to having it. Even the glow of a vacation quickly faded into vague and forgotten memories upon returning home. I realized the best, most enduring pleasure I could give myself, which made me the happiest, lay in an act of pure generosity.

Yes, I was fortunate enough to be able to fund this project, which, in turn, fed my soul. But I knew that money could not buy this richness of spirit within. It can be had anytime by giving from the heart in any number of ways. It can be found when giving time and attention, or by a kindness in word or deed, or in acts of service, or in offering an opportunity to someone who needs it. The ways to give are limitless and each person gives in their own unique style in ways that touch into their humanity and compassion.

I told Pamela about my decision. She became very enthused and thanked me profusely. Her thanks felt unconnected to me. I felt there was no need to thank me because my offer was a spontaneous act of generosity, which in turn had inherently fulfilled me. When I thought about it



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later, I understood that people give for differing reasons and the deeper intent of their giving colors the fullness, or lack thereof, of their experience.

At times, people give so that they look good in the eyes of others. In this case, the intent of their giving is to be admired or seen in a good light. Thus, their need for affirmation leaves them empty, wanting something more. For others, giving is a way to curry favor; inwardly they give with a spirit of “tit for tat,” holding the person psychically hostage until they are paid back. Underlying their generosity is an ulterior motive, leaving them with a feeling of aggression toward the one who “owes” them. Obviously, in these cases, there can be no uplifting of their spirits, as their hearts are closed. Others give because it is the “right thing to do,” and inwardly, they secretly hope they will go to heaven for their action, get good karma points, or are spiritually rewarded in some way. Here the giving is more altruistic, yet it has tinges of self-centeredness as the giving is to further enhance one’s own self, in this life or the next.

Giving without guile to enhance another’s well-being with no regard for what one gets back yields the most wonderful fruits of the spirit and is its own reward. The ancient Buddhists spoke of this wisdom in the Garland Sutras, saying, “Enlightened beings are magnanimous givers, bestowing whatever they have with equanimity, without regret, without hoping for reward, without seeking honor, without coveting material benefits, but only to rescue and safeguard all living things.”

Every faith across the world has implored us that it is better to give than to receive. This is not a commandment from a God where he/she points a finger and we must obey in order to be “good” and attain some form of saintliness. It is, in fact, a great mystery teaching passed down from many wise men and women through the ages that reveals to us that the path to personal happiness and inner satisfaction lies in giving. The simple truth is that what makes us most happy is when we give of ourselves and make others happy.

## Your image of giving:

In order to clearly see what you experience while giving, take a moment and follow the imagery instructions below. Simply close your eyes and allow the images to unfold.

1. Picture yourself giving something to a cause or a person in need. What do you see?
2. As you give, do you have positive or negative feelings?
3. As you give, how do you extend your hand in the giving?
4. Now see an image of your heart. See that it is beating.
5. With your heart in mind, again picture yourself giving something to a cause or person in need.
6. How does the image of your giving change when you keep your heart in mind?

**Source:** The above image is adapted from Dr. Akhter Ahsen’s Eidetic Parent’s Test Images. Akhter Ahsen. 1997. Eidetic Parents Test and Analysis. New York: Brandon House, Inc.

Ben, a 67-year-old man, reported this about the image he saw: “I see myself giving to kids who have cancer. Seeing them, I feel sorry for their suffering. I give to them with an open hand extending very gently so that they have the space to receive it. As I give, a pleasurable feeling comes over me. When I keep my heart in mind, I feel more excited. An even more expansive feeling comes over me or positive energy and I feel joy.”

Ben noticed an increase in his mood, energy, and sense of well-being while seeing the image. He said, “My heart feels good, enormous and I see a big smile in my heart!” ■

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