

Be generous: Setting the stage for forgiveness and healing

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

"Families are weird." This is the mantra of a pastor friend, his way of coping with the manifold complexities of his own family as well as those of the families with whom he ministers. He contends that if you start with this description as your baseline, you will be able to laugh at the absurdities that emerge, rather than become frustrated because you continue to hope against hope that family members will act reasonably and even charitably toward each other.

Most pastors have a stock of horrific wedding tales to tell about family members not speaking to each other or becoming angry about trivial matters that end up ruining what should be a celebratory day. My wife and I officiated at a wedding at which everybody in it was related to the couple in one way or another, but hardly anybody was speaking to anyone else because of divorces, remarriages, longstanding feuds and irritation about details of the wedding. Old scores were being settled in petty ways. At times we pastors felt as if we were in multiparty peace talks with warring factions rather than at a wedding. The bride's goal was to survive without anything getting worse.

Small wonder that some pastors prefer presiding at funerals to presiding at weddings. At funerals family members are more likely to be ready to share their grief and remember their loved ones in thanksgiving. Yet I have known of funerals where a family member does not attend because of unresolved grievances, and of situations in which bitterness became more entrenched when people disagreed about what would happen in the service, or about who would speak and who would not. And then there are the hardened feelings that often result in struggles over inheritance, whether of money or of family mementos.

"Be generous." That is the mantra of another pastor friend. It was also how he had responded to a particularly difficult situation in his own family. It struck me as profound pastoral wisdom.

It is a phrase to be recited at weddings and funerals: when in doubt, be generous. When angry or frustrated or irritated, be generous. When your self-interest or pride

is being attacked, be generous. When longstanding sibling rivalries erupt, when sacrifices need to be made, when there's an opportunity for hospitality, be generous.

Generosity is particularly important during the times surrounding weddings and funerals. At these times the stakes are so high, the intensity of the emotions so visible, that they mark relationships and carry symbolic freight for years to come. People remember slights and fights then more than they do at other family gatherings or reunion times. A slight to a family member in a will, or in the distribution of mementos, can mark the beginning of lifelong exclusion.

By contrast, unexpected generosity can lead to an inclusion that enables healing and joy for years to come. Sometimes the generosity can be a small gesture with enormous consequences, while at other times it may be quite costly—emotionally, financially or both. But it is worth it.

Of course, the injunction to be generous is wise counsel for life more generally. It is, after all, one of the nine fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5, to be cultivated alongside love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And 1 Timothy 6 links generosity to the discovery of “the life that really is life.”

We can learn to be generous regardless of our situation in life. Indeed, I have encountered generosity both in spirit and in sharing resources among the poorest of the poor as well as the richest of the rich. I have discovered that the two kinds of generosity are often linked: those who are generous with their time and energy, those who have capacious hearts and hospitable spirits, are also generous with their resources. Similarly, those who are stingy financially tend to be rigid and bitter in their relationships with others.

How can we help people learn to be generous? One key way is by intentionally teaching certain practices, especially in families. A familiar problem in family foundations is that children and grandchildren often lack the generous spirit of the founding family members and want to clutch onto the resources for themselves. We must help children cultivate both the habits of giving and the interior dispositions and capacities to sustain those habits over time.

I learned this lesson unexpectedly from my son a number of years ago. My wife and I had begun to do our extra year-end charitable giving by gathering our kids together with us to make family decisions (we learned the practice from my brother's family).

The next summer, our ten-year-old son received a \$20 bill as a reward at a camp. On the way home, he indicated that he wanted to put \$10 in his savings account and give the other \$10 to a homeless shelter we had supported the previous Christmas. I was tempted to tell him that we gave far less than 50 percent of our money to such places, but then realized that he was offering me a profound lesson in generosity.

If we can learn how to be generous in the small interactions within families on a day-to-day basis, we will develop the habits that sustain us in the more emotionally intense times of weddings and funerals. The reverse can also be true. A commitment to be generous in an intense time, even when generosity happens unexpectedly, can set the stage for forgiveness and healing and enable a new dynamic for the future.