

True generosity comes from joy

Bone-deep generosity has nothing to do with means and everything to do with desire.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 31, 2019](#) issue



Photo by [Elaine Casap](#)

Agonizing memories of deep embarrassment can't be good for cardiac health. Merely recalling certain panic-stricken experiences can immediately spike blood pressure, elevate the pulse, and flush the face. When, in our first year of marriage, my wife and I passed on to another just-married couple a wedding gift we had received, we were present for the unwrapping. It was a lovely picnic basket, one of two identical ones we had been given. Unbeknownst to us, the "To Peter and Susan" gift tag was left in the bottom of the basket from our wedding. Our relationship with that couple changed forever that day.

Regifting can be a risky practice with all types of gifts except one—the kind we receive from God. When we share gifts or blessings that have been given to us by God, there's no end to the joy extended.

Besides time, money, or talent, there are other things of God that can be regifted. Bethany and Hannah Goralski are twin 25-year-old sisters who each donated a kidney to separate strangers earlier this year. Their dad died of kidney failure last year before they had the chance to donate to him. To honor his remarkable generosity with others, they elected to give life to someone else. Their decision triggered a chain reaction of anonymous kidney donations from friends of the people who benefited from their gift, and then from friends of others who had new life thanks to the succession of donors. In the end, Northwestern Memorial Hospital, in Chicago, helped coordinate ten donors and ten recipients, with potentially even more to come.

What inspires people to behave in such generous ways? I'm convinced that bone-deep generosity is a way of life that has nothing to do with means and everything to do with desire. It's one thing to enjoy spasms of personal generosity—a good deed here and a kindness there. It's another thing to be a person so generous in spirit that a desire to be grateful guides one's entire outlook on life.

There's no shortage of reasons for why we give. Sometimes it's for the sake of reputation, or as part of a competition, or out of loyalty. Sometimes it's a tax deduction, a sense of human solidarity, or some inner satisfaction that inspires us. On still other occasions, a worthy cause or even a perceived heavenly reward motivates us. But so many forms of giving involve careful calculation on our part. We're so busy trying to estimate the return on our investment or trying to ensure that we're the most effective stewards of our resources that we lose sight of the fundamental joy that undergirds true generosity.

Usually we think feelings of joy are a result or by-product of generosity. I happen to think joy precedes generosity. It's the disposition that enables it in the first place. To hear Bethany and Hannah Goralski speak of their joy in donating a vital human organ is to hear their father's joy echoing through their lives.

One of the great hymns of the church, "My Song Is Love Unknown," contains the words: "But, oh my friend, my friend indeed, who at my need did life expend; who at my need did life expend." I used to think those words referred only to sacrificial love. Now I see joy and generosity behind them as well.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Generous ways."