



Generosity as a Life Preserver

By Judy Brodkey, M.S.W.

In 1985, I had the privilege of attending the NGO Forum at the United Nations Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya. During that gathering, I signed up for a tour to visit a local Masai community. Masai women and children in ceremonial garb greeted us, danced for us and with us, and invited us into a tiny brick building where they had prepared a feast of meats, potatoes, carrots, and jelly sandwiches.

This was my first experience being in the midst of abject poverty and it left a lasting impression. Returning from that African trip, I remember saying to myself, "No matter what happens to me in my life I will never be as poor as the Masai people I met in that dirt hut."

As the years have gone by, this insight has served me well. As I have been laid off, been unemployed for long stretches of time, and, like many of you, have seen bank account bottom line dwindle during the past year, I have had a clearer understanding of my situation - and my wealth - in comparison to most of the people in this world.

As is true of many of the rest of you reading this newsletter, I do have times of significant fear. I know that there *are* people in this country, indeed in my community, who have nothing or next to nothing materially speaking, people who actually do know poverty as all encompassing as those Masai families.

Still, I am constantly reminded that all of us, regardless of our economic situation, still do have giving hearts as evidenced by that Masai community. Generosity is actually a key lifeline for living well at this time. It is an essential way to connect deeply with our true and best selves.

There are times when I'm grumpy, inward turning and in no mood for generosity. However, at other times I've seen firsthand that generosity dissolves barriers, connects me with others, diminishes my closed-mindedness, increases my sense of community, helps heal me, reduces my fear, fills me, opens me.

I used to assume that generosity required a lot of dispensable income, however I now know our opportunities for generosity are so much broader, including:

Generosity Towards Self: We are generous towards ourselves when we are on our own side, when we decide to notice what is good about us and what we have done well, when we value the miracle of our existence; and when we take good care of ourselves.

Generosity of Acknowledgement: Still working on this paragraph.....Tape 3 or was it the letter on Joy - We are generous when we acknowledge the presence of another. In the blank culture, rather than "Hi" the standard greeting is _____, meaning "I See you". When we see each other and acknowledge one another - with a smile, a nod, a response, making eye

contact - whatever might be appropriate at the time - we are generous.

Generosity of Appreciation - When we are open to noticing and openly appreciating the gifts, contributions, intrinsic qualities, kindness, accomplishments, and generosity of others, we are generous.

Generosity of Time - In a culture where "being busy" seems to be a chronic state, each wise decision to intentionally give of one's time to a friend in need, a family member, a co-worker, a stranger, or an organization through volunteering is an act of generosity. This doesn't mean we should give and give and give until we have nothing left of ourselves. Rather, we can choose in healthy ways if and when to give of our time.

Generosity of Our Knowledge - About a year ago our local public broadcasting system set up a social network which enabled listeners to sign up and share their expertise about current news issues. When we share what we know in ways that can help other learn, grow, act, change and solve problems, we are generous.

Generosity of Forgiveness - Norman Cousins wrote that, "Life is an adventure in forgiveness." We have numerous opportunities to forgive those in our extended circle of life. Generosity of forgiveness means taking the time to learn tools and approaches for forgiving so we can practice forgiveness in times of need.

Generosity of Material Resources - All of us have numerous opportunities to give, whether it be making a loan to a friend, offering an unemployed person a meal, making a donation of used items to Goodwill, joining our favorite organizations, investing in a new idea, or in many other ways. It doesn't take a lot to make a difference.

Generosity of Listening - So often, all that anyone else needs in the present moment is someone to listen to them without giving advice, judging, or trying to solve anything. When we choose to listen to someone and give them our full attention, we are generous.

Generosity of Remembering the Truth for Others - It is a gift to hold out the truth for others who feel discouragement, fear, concern, confusion or a host of other emotions. This does not mean we try to get others to stop feeling whatever they happen to be feeling. Instead, we can let them know that we'll remember they are smart, or that they'll get another job, or that they have many gifts, no matter how crummy they may be feeling right now.

These are just a few of the many ways we can choose to be generous during hard economic times. What other types of generosity can you think of?

As with many other aspects of life, taken to extreme, generosity of any kind can be detrimental. However, wisely and intentionally given from the heart, generosity is one way to move the world - and your life forward - in ways you may not have imagined. A giving heart has a wisdom of its own that can preserve what is best in ourselves and the world.