

Psyche & Soul - 15

WANT TO BE HAPPY? BE GENEROUS!

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

This weekend we shall reflect on the contribution of generosity to health and happiness...

The Gospels have two marvellous stories of generosity. One is of the widow who put her entire life earnings, though so small, into the temple treasury (Lk. 21, 3). Jesus appreciates her generosity.

The other is that of the boy with five loaves and two fish. Quite a bit of food for a boy to consume. May be that was the ration for his whole family. Whatever, the boy's generosity in giving away his fish and loaves helped to feed five thousand hungry people (Jn. 6, 9-12).

There are any number of modern day stories of generosity. One such story, an extraordinary one, is that of Mr. Kalyanasundaram from Tamil Nadu, who was given the rare title of Man of the Millennium.

What is best known about Mr. Kalyanasundaram is that he donated his entire salary from the first day of starting his job as librarian at Kumarkurupara Arts College, till the last day of his service to charitable causes. He also gave away his entire pension money to charity. To sustain his own simple life style Mr. Kalyanasundaram worked as a waiter/cleaner in a local restaurant and did other sundry jobs.

His generosity expressed itself in many other ways as well.

When the Sino-Indian war broke out in 1963, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru made a public request on radio for people to donate to the National Defense Fund. Mr. Kalyanasundaram, then a student at Madras University, donated his one valued possession – his gold chain.

When floods ravaged South Tamil Nadu districts in 1992 Mr. Kalyanasundaram travelled to several villages and donated books, school uniforms and stationaries to 10,000 children.

He donated his entire millennial price award of 30 lakh rupees too charity.

Mr. Kalyanasundaram wants to be useful even in death. He has donated his body for scientific research after his death.

Extraordinary generosity, indeed!

REWARDS OF GENEROSITY

What did his generosity bring Mr Kalyanasundaram? Recognition, yes. The joy that comes from giving, surely. The satisfaction of so many lives being enriched, no doubt.

But there is much more. Scientific research tells us that just like gratitude that we explored in the last podcast, a generous disposition has extraordinary impact on our emotional health and wellbeing. Such a disposition evokes in us positive emotions with consequent benefits.

Generosity is a proven mental and emotional health enhancer. Jesus' exhortation, "Give and gifts will be given to you..." (Lk.38) is true in many, many ways.

Research shows that generosity reduces stress, prevents depression, enhances our sense of purpose and leads to overall life satisfaction and wellbeing, making us healthier and happier.

Research has also shown that helping others enhances the helper's own happiness. Generosity trumps selfishness when it comes to success and life satisfaction in the long run.

Generosity leads us to perceive others in more positive light and enhances social connectedness and builds positive personal relationships, both of which are proved to enhance emotional wellbeing and contribute to reduced risk of mortality.

Generous actions create a "feel good" factor, which in turn, enhances self-esteem, a necessary contributor to emotional health. These actions release endorphin, dopamine and oxytocin – the feel good chemicals in our body – which brings about a "helper's high" and helps fight stress and disease. *Feeling* good is a natural byproduct of *doing* good. Stinginess – the opposite of generosity – on the other hand, has been found to evoke a sense of shame, which negatively affects emotional wellbeing.

More importantly, just like gratitude, a generous disposition also enhances our immune system and extends our lifespan. Generosity reduces blood pressure, anxiety and depression and lowers the risk of dementia, thus contributing to wellbeing and a longer and happier life.

Thus, there are enough reasons for us to be generous.

WHAT IS GENEROSITY?

What actually is generosity? Generosity is not just giving gifts or donating to a good cause. To be generous, as the dictionary defines it, is to be "magnanimous." Magnanimous means having a "large soul," from the two Latin words "magna" meaning large and "anima" meaning soul. So, real generosity is about the largeness of our heart, from which flow the deeds of kindness and compassion.

For the great catholic theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas, magnanimity is the greatest of all virtues. It is the cherry that tops all charity.

LITTLE WAYS TO BE GENEROUS

We need not be, and may not afford to be, as magnanimous as the poor widow, or the boy with the fish and loaves of the Gospel, or Mr. Kalyanasundaram, giving away all that we have. We can be generous in little ways. We can contribute a bit of our time, make a small donation, give away a book we have already read, or the clothes lying unused in our cupboards, spent a few minutes with a distressed person, make someone feeling blue laugh, give free tuition to a struggling poor student, volunteer to help our neighbours or at the local parish or charity.

Countless, indeed, are the opportunities to be generous.

For reflection

We could now spend a few moments reflecting on how generosity plays out in own lives. In what ways can we be a little more generous, even magnanimous? ...

What do the two Gospel scenes cited at the beginning of this podcast and the story of Mr Kalyanasundaram evoke in us? What do they inspire?...

The Jesus who appreciated the generosity of the widow and the boy is with us here and now. We could spend a few moments sharing with him what these stories evoke in us. We could also ask him to show us how we can be more generous in the coming week.

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Have a pleasant and generous weekend.

Be well. Be safe. Be blessed.

Thank you for listening/reading.

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