

Nature of generosity

Author explores this laudable trait and its role in an increasingly self-centered society

Generosity is a trait we commonly admire in others and aspire to for ourselves, although the realities and pressures of daily life can make it difficult to put into practice on a regular basis.

Nevertheless, generosity is actually a natural instinct that can become habit forming once we tap into it, believes Barbara Bonner.

Bonner, who lives in Housatonic, is the author of a new book, *Inspiring Generosity*, published by Wisdom Publications of Somerville, Mass. The book (inspiringgenerosity.net) was formally launched with a March 2 reading and reception at The Mount in Lenox.

Bonner’s book features quotes, poems and short true stories of people who have had transformative experiences, often unexpectedly, that connected them to their own spirit of generosity.

Bonner started her professional life as an art historian and became involved in the New York museum world as a curator, deputy director and director. She went on to become a vice president at Bennington College and then a senior vice president at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Stockbridge. She currently is a consultant who works with nonprofit organizations nationally.

Bonner and her family became part-time residents of Berkshire County in 1990, while she was deputy director of the Museum of the City of New York. She moved to the region on a full-time basis in 2000.

She has been active as a volunteer or board member with local organizations, including IS183 Art School, the Austen Riggs Center, the Berkshire Museum, the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center and the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, among others. She is a co-founder



Barbara Bonner, a resident of Housatonic and consultant to nonprofit organizations, has written a new book on the subject of generosity. She points out that there is a clear distinction between generosity and philanthropic giving, although the two are often viewed in similar terms. (Courtesy photo)

of the Denise Kaley Fund for Berkshire County Women with Cancer.

In the following interview, Bonner discusses her views on the nature of generosity and why she decided to write the book.

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BERKSHIRE TRADE & COMMERCE: Many people would say that our modern society is the antithesis of generosity. Business and politics have become increasingly

ruthless and often seem to be driven solely by power and the bottom line. And individual behavior and the culture seem more oriented to selfishness and aggression rather than generosity. How do you view that?

BARBARA BONNER: I have to agree to an extent. It’s difficult to remember a time when there’s been such a disconnect between the idea of generosity and the self-centered values that seem to define the culture we live in today.

There’s a great paradox. We actually are a very generous nation. Philanthropic giving is at an all-time high. We see our country’s generous spirit whenever there is a disaster, like the response to 9-11 and all of the contributions and help that people were eager to give after Hurricane Sandy and the earthquake in Haiti.

But, at the same time, we are also the most materialistic, grasping, self-involved culture in recent memory. That’s reflected in many ways.

It’s important to remember that while a handful of people have become immensely wealthy, there are 97 million Americans who live in poverty. That is not a sign of a generous society.

That contradiction is one of the reasons I got so involved in exploring the subject of generosity. I had a lot of questions about it, myself. What is generosity? How does it relate to our basic nature? What are its qualities? How do we feel it and express it in our lives? What is its role in society?

BT&C: Is it possible that the pressures to survive today – especially in the current economy – are suppressing the ability of people to act generously?

BONNER: I don’t think that’s the case. Generosity exists on its own terms. It’s not dependent on income or how comfortable our circumstances are.

In fact, if you look at the numbers, in every economic climate, it’s always the poorest people who contribute the most to others, as a percent of what they have.

One reason for that is that they’ve experienced what real need is, and they have a strong desire to help others who are in difficult situations.

That, in my view, is evidence that when we are in touch with our own generosity, it does flow naturally.

One of the basic questions this raises is whether or not generosity is an inborn trait. Does it come naturally, or is it something that we have to learn and make an effort to cultivate?

That has become a subject of wide-spread interest and investigation in recent years. There have been fantastic scientific studies of people and animals all over the world that have examined this question of whether or not generosity is part of our fundamental nature.

Fortunately, the evidence strongly points to “yes.” Most of these studies have come to the conclusion that generosity is a basic trait we are born with. We all have a natural drive within us to be generous.

You can see that in babies. They often display a natural generosity of spirit.

That leads to the question of why, as a culture, we manage to talk children out of that side of their nature as they grow up.

BT&C: What led you to write a book on the subject of generosity?

BONNER: I grew up in a culture of privilege, where generosity was almost non-existent. Then, I spent my adult life in the world of nonprofit organizations, including fund-raising and philanthropy.

Several years ago, I started to feel that philanthropic activity had become disconnected from the basic spirit of generosity that was the original driver of it.

Instead of a culture of generosity, philanthropy has become more about establishing complex relationships of mutual exchange and arm-twisting. The conversation is about money and material goods.



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I began to explore all of this in depth. I did a lot of research into generosity, and talked to people about it and looked for examples of how it works.

Eventually, I had gathered a great deal of material on the subject, and I decided it would be interesting to compile it into a book. After I had written a good chunk of it, I plunged into the task of trying to get it published, and I started talking to authors and agents and publishers.

I got very lucky because, in 2011, a publishing company, Wisdom Publishing, heard about it and approached me. They said they had been looking for a book on this subject, and we came to an agreement for them to publish it.

BT&C: *What is your purpose for the book? Does it have a message?*

BONNER: I wanted to provide examples of generosity, primarily through quotes and short stories. So, the people who read it will draw their own conclusions.

It's a modest little book, But I hope that, in its way, it will help to elevate the conversation about generosity, and stimulate people to think about it and talk about it more.

Hopefully, it will also encourage readers to look at the role of generosity in their own lives.

BT&C: *You said that the world of philanthropy has become detached from generosity. What do you mean by that?*

BONNER: I don't want to sound like I'm overly critical of philanthropy.

Philanthropy is great, and I still work in that world as a consultant. Philanthropy has a vital role in society as the way we support important institutions like hospitals, social services, cultural organizations and schools.

And, I want to add, we're very fortunate in the Berkshires because we have a lot of wonderful nonprofit organizations and generous people who support them.

However, in a larger sense, philanthropy today has little to do with the spark of generosity that originally started it. In earlier eras, people founded and supported institutions primarily because they wanted to do something that would benefit society. They were driven by generosity, without other ulterior motives.

But today, the fund-raising side of the nonprofit world has become increasingly bureaucratic and formulaic. It's all about how to raise enough money to reach target goals.

And philanthropic donations are not necessarily motivated by a desire by the givers to be generous.

Generosity may be one part of philanthropy. But we also give money in the hope that people will admire us or because we believe it will benefit us in other ways. We may see it as good for our business, and use it as a form of public relations. Or we may become involved in philanthropic

activity as a way to meet important people and advance our social standing. Those reasons fuel a lot of philanthropic activity.

What interests me are people who move with a different engine – who are motivated by a genuine sense of generosity, without concern for what they might get back.

BT&C: *How does generosity differ from philanthropy?*

BONNER: Generosity and philanthropy are actually separate conversations.

In the media we hear a lot about giving money as being the way that generosity is expressed. But the spirit of generosity is not dependent on money.

It's possible to be very philanthropic but not be generous at all. It's also possible to be very generous in spirit without giving away any money.

Generosity is based on something larger than money or material goods. It can take many different forms.

True generosity is driven by an inner fire that stems from a spirit of genuine selflessness.

It's a way of thinking and living and acting that is not connected to any desire for personal benefit to ourselves.

An act of forgiveness is a form of generosity. When we decide to give someone the benefit of the doubt, we're acting generously. When we engage in social activism for its own sake without any personal benefit, we're expressing generosity.

There are well-known figures who embody generosity on a large scale. Martin Luther King and Ghandi are often cited. They saw problems in society that needed to be corrected and they dedicated their lives to that, without concern for the personal consequences.

But there are also countless examples of generosity by everyday people that are occurring all the time. These can be simple little acts of generous behavior like smiling and holding the door for someone, or it can take more dramatic forms.

Immediately after the bombs went off at the Boston Marathon, for example, there were people who instinctively ran towards the explosions to help, instead of running away. Disregarding the danger and rushing

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in to assist others epitomizes the spirit of true generosity.

While I was researching the subject, I started collecting stories of average people who were transformed and became connected to their own generosity by some experience that flew into their lives.

In the book, I distilled hundreds of those stories into the 14 that I selected to include in it. The stories are a powerful testament to the power that generosity can have.

BT&C: *Do you believe it’s possible to foster systemic generosity on a larger level? Can our culture be reformed so that generosity becomes the normal way of doing business, rather than greed and selfishness?*

BONNER: Well, that's obviously a very large question. Life and society are very complex, and many things would have to change for that to happen.

But it's certainly possible, if you accept that generosity is part of our basic nature.

I also truly believe that generosity is contagious. The more we connect with our own generosity as individuals, the more it

becomes the way we behave automatically. And when people act generously, other people respond with generosity.

So, if enough of us practice generosity in our daily lives, it becomes more likely that our institutions and culture may eventually reflect that.

That's one of the reasons I wrote the book. I wanted to contribute to that in my own small way.

BT&C: *What has been the response to the book?*

BONNER: So far it's been very positive. Of course, some of that is to be expected, because generosity is a subject no one can hate. So, people say a lot of nice things about the book.

But I think it is also touching something deeper and genuine in people. To be honest, I've been very surprised, because sometimes when I give a talk I can see people in the audience becoming very emotional.

The conversion about generosity seems to be addressing an unspoken need and a yearning people have.

We all know that if you're locked into yourself and unhappy, you can't buy joy.

Generosity, on the other hand, enables you to experience a life of real meaning and connectedness. I think we're all looking for that. ♦

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