

February 3, 2008, UU Giving: The Next Big Thing

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If you have a day where you're disgusted with the media's obsession with that poor woman, Britney Spears, and have had just enough of that; or if you are beaten down and depressed by the relentless bad news that the media gives us, I recommend that you pick up the book, "Giving" by former President Bill Clinton. The book is subtitled How Each of Us Can Change the World, and this is full of inspiring examples of human beings at their best and it will lift your spirits and inspire you, I promise. For instance, the story of Oseola McCarty is told here. Oseola McCarty is an 85-year-old black woman from Hattiesburg, Mississippi who gave \$150,000.00 to the University of Southern Mississippi to endow a scholarship fund for African-American students with financial need. Here's what you need to know about Oseola McCarty. She had to leave school when she was in 6th grade because there was no one else to take care of a childless, ill aunt, and since the time she was 10-years-old for 75 years, she washed and ironed other people's clothing. She never had a car, she never got to go back to school, and she worked hard until the day she was no longer physically able to work hard. She saved all those years, and when she planned her retirement with her banker, she wanted to give back, and she decided to give 60% of all she had saved so that young people would have opportunities that she never had. That's inspiring to me.

Also, inspiring is the story of 2 Minnesota 6th graders who were moved by the suffering caused by hurricane Katrina, they wanted to do something to help. So these 6th graders started "Kids to the Rescue" fund. They decided that they were going to give a dollar of their allowance, and they were going to get all the other kids they knew to give a dollar of their allowance, who would then invite kids they knew to give a dollar of their allowance and they ended up collecting \$24,000.00 for hurricane Katrina victims, and that's inspiring to me. You know, I'm inspired by our own church school children who have had a corresponding relationship with the kids in our partner churches in one of the poorest areas of the Philippines, and knowing that those kids don't have art supplies, they decided to collect and send them art supplies.

The book is full of inspiring examples like that of people giving, not just money but time, which for many in our culture is a more valuable commodity even than money. Giving things out of our abundance in this society, things that in our society get thrown away but can in other parts of the world be the difference between life and death, giving away things like medical supplies that would have ended up discarded and food that would end up discarded. Giving skills from macro-economic advice to governments in the developing world to helping a child at risk read better. Something we can all do. There were inspiring stories of gifts of reconciliation and new beginnings in areas of the world where ethnic conflict has been killing and tearing people apart for generations. There were some people who reached out across those divides in friendship and took the risk of seeing those folks as human beings. And then, there are gifts that keep on giving, for instance The Hefer Project. A goat, a few chickens could mean the difference between starvation and living for a family in the developing world but the great thing about the Hefer Project is that the people who receive the gifts of livestock must then promise to give the offspring of that gift to someone else, to help them rise above subsistence. Another wonderful gift is a model of something that works and can be replicated elsewhere. This year the book that was picked for One Book, One San Diego is a book called Three Cups of Tea, and it describes the work of Greg Mortenson. Greg Mortenson was a climbing bum, a mountain climber who lived to climb some of the world's tallest peaks. When he was trying to ascend K2 in the Himalayas in Pakistan, he got disoriented and separated from his party. He was rescued by some very impoverished villagers in Pakistan and nursed back to health. They took care of him, and one of the things that he noticed was that the kids were trying to learn, and they were trying to learn despite the fact that there were no professional teachers and despite the fact that there was no school building. And so he promised them somehow he would build them a school with a teacher so he sold everything he had and came up with \$2,000.00, and then he wrote letters to every celebrity he could think of. The only one who responded was Tom Brokaw with a hundred bucks. And then finally, he received, in pennies, from an elementary school in Wisconsin, \$643.00, and that got him the media attention he needed to attract the support he needed, and now, Mortenson has built 58 schools in Pakistan that served 24,000 students, more than half of them girls. Remember, in Pakistan, many people think that girls should not be educated, and many of the boys that are being "educated" there are being educated in the most extreme form of Islam. So, think what one person's giving has done and what it still can do in this world.

“Giving” or “giving back”, as it’s also called, is the latest big thing, it is the big thing. All the celebrities are doing it; they’re all giving back. Isn’t it great? Brad Pitt is building houses in New Orleans. Oprah built a school in South Africa and is funding all kinds of other projects in our country and all over the world. Bill and Melinda Gates are giving away tens of billions of dollars for educational and health projects in the U.S. and in the developing world. And Warren Buffet, who some people say, is the richest man in America has announced his intention to give away 95% of his wealth. I’m glad to see this day when giving is in. The thing. The big thing. Isn’t that cool? You know, in our celebrity obsessed culture, people do what celebrities do, and for once, it’s a good thing. It’s not just the next big thing. It’s ancient wisdom. There is not a single one of the world’s great religions that does not see generosity as an essential part of spiritual transformation. Generosity is part of the spiritual path of every single one of the world’s great religions without exception. In other words, what they’re saying is you can not be stingy and grow into your full humanity. For Jews and Christians, there’s the practice of tithing, giving away 10% of your income every year. Sonya and I have long practiced tithing, we call it a modern tithe because we give 5% to our church and 5% to other causes and organizations that build the kind of world that we want to see. It gives us joy to know that our money is supporting the things we care about, it makes us happy. And since we started this practice, we’ve been better off materially as well. Some of you have wondered why we have the custom of saying to our visitors that they’re our guest and they should let the offering pouch pass by. Well, every survey that I’ve seen of people who do not go to church say that one reason they don’t is that they believe that the church is only out for their money. You know, we’ve had these scandals of religious organizations who have ripped people off and have only gone after their money, and that has tarnished the reputation of every religious organization in this country. The fact is, that these folks are our guests and for guests, you give. You don’t ask. They are our guests. But for people who have made this church their religious home, I have no problem asking you to give and to give generously because I believe that the local congregation is the organization, the institution in this world that has the best chance of transforming our world.

Recently, I have been challenged to put the mission of First church in business terms and it wasn’t hard for me to do that. We are in the business of creating human wholeness, and our

product is transformed lives that heal the world. We're in the business of creating wholeness, and our product is transformed lives that heal the world, and I'm happy to give to that and I'm happy to ask you to give to that, and I can stand here with integrity because I put my money where my heart is.

You don't have to have a lot of money to make a real difference. Many of you have heard about micro-lending. This is where a small amount of capital giving to somebody in dire poverty in the developing world will allow them to start a small business that will lift them out of poverty. Those who receive those loans pay them back, even though there is no collateral, at a rate much higher than any other kinds of loans. For instance, there is an organization called Kiva. You can get on their website, you can pick somebody that you're going to lend as little as \$25.00 to, and that will help them start a business and lift them out of poverty. Just \$25.00, and you're going to get that back to re-lend or to keep. Ed Law is involved in a micro-lending project even much closer to home, which funds small businesses in Mexico for single mothers who are struggling. There is an opportunity for a little bit of giving in terms of our dollars to make a huge difference.

There is a story told about Jesus and his followers. It was said that they were sitting in the temple and they watched people come to the alter and give gifts to the temple, putting big piles of money up there for the temple treasury and they noticed a widow in rags come up and put two coins which were the equivalent of a penny on that alter. Jesus said to his followers that poor widow has given more than anyone else combined in the spiritual world because she gave everything she had. We're about to start a major building project for Bard Hall, we're going to rebuild it. Build more space. It's a building that will serve this church for generations to come and help us to expand our ministries and our programs here. There is a lot of excitement about this project, it's wonderful. People are very happy about it and already we've had generous responses and the promise of more generous responses. We've talked about how we all need to pitch in to make this project work. It's going to be a lot of money. 4.5 million dollars is what we expect it will cost. And so, this has been a happy project, but there is one thing that hurts my heart and that is when I've talked to people who don't have a lot that they can give to this project and they're feeling left out. There is a big financial range in this congregation. Some of us have a lot, all we need and more, and we can give from that abundance but there are others here, I

know, who are struggling every day to make ends meet and some of you have talked to me and you've said about how you feel left out. Please don't feel left out. We don't want you to do without the essentials of living. I wanted to be clear to you right now, that in my eyes, those of you who are struggling, what ever little bit you give is equal spiritually to the largest gifts that we will receive. Please don't feel left out. This is something we're all doing together and we can all be excited about.

I'd like to invite you now into a thought experiment, if you're game. I'd like you to think about the most generous hearted person you know. Do have their picture in your mind? Maybe you could close your eyes if that helps. Think about them. How does thinking about them affect your mood. Notice. Do you feel happy, inspired, lighter, loving? Notice. Maybe that person isn't even physically present? Notice how they affect your life for the good. We human beings are built in such a way that we're just not happy grabbing and keeping the things that flow through us. We're meant to pass them on. To give of our time, our money, our love, our care. Jim Hightower, the radio commentator is fond of saying, "I've never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul." Whatever it is that you manage to collect in this life, when the time comes when you have to leave this earth, it won't do you a bit of good. It'll be a problem for the people left behind to deal with. But what we do, our deeds, what we do while we're alive for good or for harm, live on in the people we touch. They live beyond our days and years. How do you want to be remembered?