

# Grass Roots Generosity

*Rick Herman*



An essay contribution to  
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## Participant Bio



**Rick Herman**

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Rick has served as President of Wheat Ridge Ministries since January, 2006. He joined the Wheat Ridge staff in 1992 as Vice President and Chief Operating Officer. Earlier in his career, Rick served as principal of Lutheran High School of South Florida in Fort Lauderdale and St. Paul Lutheran School in Boca Raton, Florida. He also served for several years as Executive Director for Parish Services for the Florida-Georgia District of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, where his responsibilities included encouraging and supporting education and youth ministries in 200 District congregations and 70 Lutheran Schools. Rick and his wife, Deb, who serves as professor of art and Chair of the Art Department at Concordia University Chicago, reside in Oak Park, Illinois.



## Grass Roots Generosity

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*“Generosity is the most natural outward expression of an inner attitude of compassion and loving-kindness.” Dalai Lama XIV*

Serving as the president of a non-profit organization that helps seed new health and human service ventures, much of my time relates, in one way or another, to the theme of generosity. Creating impactful programs and raising resources for important causes puts me in contact with people, both recipients of service and those who provide support for these services, who are generous with their time, talent and treasure. I have been personally blessed to observe and be inspired by such people over the years and many have become good friends and role models.

The same is true of most non-profit leaders. A great deal of effort in the United States and around the world intends to help people with special needs improve their quality of life. These efforts by religious institutions, non-profit organizations, foundations, or philanthropic individuals and corporations depend on the generosity of people. While I’ve met generous people wherever I have traveled, here in the United States we are especially and increasingly dependent on individual generosity rather than tax-driven support from local, state, and federal government sources. Those who are committed to social change at the grass roots level rely on personal and corporate support.

As the quotes sprinkled throughout this paper illustrate, philosophers and theologians for centuries have spoken about the concept of generosity and its positive impact on giver and receiver. An interesting working definition of generosity comes from *The University of Notre Dame Generosity Project*, which describes generosity as “the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly.” Generosity Project leaders contend that generosity is a learned character trait that involves both attitude and action.

*“You give but little when you give of your possessions.  
It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.”  
Kahlil Gibran - The Prophet*

I think we would all agree that when we describe a person as generous, we are referring to a broad array of actions and attitudes including not only donation of money and goods, but also giving of time, talent, and experience. Donating an organ to another person or laying down one’s life in support of one’s country or to protect a loved one, are extreme acts of

generosity. The most generous people I have known have also exhibited qualities of humbleness, kindness, compassion and good listening. At the end of the day, generous people want to make a positive impact in the lives of others. In the context of leadership, this intent is well described by Robert Greenleaf's description of servant leader:

*"The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived"?*

The world would certainly be a better place if generosity was the only impulse we possessed. Unfortunately, we humans seem to live in a tension between the competing desires of generosity and selfishness. On the one hand, "survival of the fittest" is a well-known aspect of evolution, making self-preservation a basic human instinct. We know that a portion of our brain exists to protect us from threats by controlling our self-defense instincts. Put another way, we might say that our survival instincts encourage us to put our own interests above those of others. Ironically, though, we also know that in order for a species to ultimately survive it must learn to cooperate and co-exist with others – essentially demonstrating generosity.

*"That's what I consider true generosity: You give your all, and yet you always feel as if it costs you nothing."  
Simone de Beauvoir*

My sense is that tendencies regarding generosity are also influenced by differing perceptions of the world around us. If one sees the world through a lens of abundance, we conclude that there are more than enough resources for everyone and we are apt to share what we have with others. If one assumes that there is a scarcity of resources, it becomes more difficult to be generous to others since the assumption is that we are competing for a limited amount of resources.

Interestingly, there appears to be an inverse correlation between personal wealth and generosity. Studies consistently show that the percentage of personal income donated to charity is highest among low-income people. There is a great example of this in a well-known Bible story: *Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all*

*the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.” (Mark 12:41-44)*

Generosity can also be driven by various motives. A person can be altruistic, with no concern for self, just the welfare of others. Christian theology, for example, teaches that all possessions are gifts from God entrusted to people and that the generous sharing of time, talent and treasure for the sake of others is a joy-filled response to God’s love.

However, generosity can also be influenced by self-serving needs. A person might be more likely to make a charitable contribution to a cause knowing that her name will be included on a list of alumni donors, that the gift will leverage important business relationships, or result in a tax deduction. Someone who donates to a cause or volunteer his time generously may do so because it makes him feel good, which is ultimately a self-serving motive.

Nicholas Christakis, a sociologist from Harvard University and James Fowler, a political scientist from the University of California, are contributors to the Notre Dame Generosity Project. They contend that without generous behavior social ties would disintegrate and the networks around us would disappear. Conversely, when social networks are established, acts of generosity multiply. Their observations support the view that generosity is fostered when people are in relationship with and value others in the community. *In other words, our tendency to be generous, like so many of our values and perspectives, is shaped by those closest to us – our parents, siblings, other family members, and friends.*

Many leaders in the churches and other faith-based organizations that I interact with are very concerned about whether parents are teaching their children to be generous, as it seems clear to them that generosity must be taught and encouraged. Supporting this assumption, a survey conducted by Independent Sector, asked individuals to describe activities they observed as children that influenced their generosity as adults:

- Seeing an admired person who isn't a family member help others.
- Seeing a family member help others.
- Doing volunteer work.
- Raising money door to door.
- Being active in student government.
- Belonging to a youth group, such as the Boy Scouts.
- Being active in a religious organization.
- Being helped by others.

My sense of generosity was certainly influenced by my parents. Mom and dad were not particularly active in volunteer work or general philanthropy, but they were faithful in their giving to our church. I remember as a child watching them drop their offering envelope

every week into the plate that was passed around during the worship service. Until I grew old enough to think it wasn't "cool," I was always pleased when they gave me the envelope to put in the plate. This was a small thing, but looking back at it now, it created a model for faithful giving that has continued throughout my life.

While perhaps overused, the observation that "it takes a village to raise a child" seems like an appropriate response to the question of how generosity will truly become grass roots in nature. Unless people are raised in an environment where generosity is consistently valued, taught, and practiced, the selfish side of our survival instincts will win the day.

*"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."  
(Hebrews 13:2)*

Generosity must also be supported by related values and behaviors. The steady barrage of disrespect, violence and distrust that comes our way through the media and discourages the spirit of generosity must be countered by daily examples in our homes and neighborhoods of justice, respect, and peaceful resolution of conflict. Children growing up in nurturing and caring home environment are more able to view others with empathy and care. Schools have an opportunity to foster generosity by intentionally teaching and promoting mutual respect and by preventing bullying.

*"The wise man does not lay up his own treasures.  
The more he gives to others, the more he has for his own."  
Lao Tzu*

Organizations that exist to do good by sharing resources and services to help create and sustain healthy communities have a significant responsibility and opportunity to encourage grass roots generosity. These actions are most effective when motivated by the needs of those we serve. As we invest resources in communities...

- Are we committed to helping the community eliminate root causes that drive the need for our services?
- Are we doing our best to assist individuals, families and neighborhoods as they use their own talent, experience and generosity to develop their community?

Likewise, as we work to secure the resources we need to pursue our missions....

- Are we operating from a mindset of abundance that celebrates and encourages our donors to be generous to whatever causes touch their hearts, or one of scarcity that tries to limit support to our own organization?

- Are we managing our funds effectively and being transparent about how contributed resources are being used?

The combination of systems, processes and motivations required to achieve social change are much too complex to be catalyzed by any one motive. This said, encouraging generosity would be a great place to start! Imagine people driven by a spirit of generosity at the grass roots level in families, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods and communities working together with care and mutual respect to make the world safer, healthier, more just and more peaceful. An exciting vision! I pray that it will come to pass.

*“For it is in giving that we receive.”  
Francis of Assisi*

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