

Generosity Stories

This week we are sharing a few stories of generosity, large and seemingly small, that have moved us (and along the way referencing some inspiring books). Let these bring a smile, and maybe some inspiration to open to more kinds of generosity and gratitude for the generosity of others. There is a suggested practice for the week at the end.

From a Zen Student:

When I was a young man I was living at the San Francisco Zen Center, paying a small sum for room and board. One day the Abbot told me, "You should go to Tassajara (the monastery)." I knew what that meant. That meant that he saw me, he saw what I needed and what I was ready for, and in a grand gesture of heart that was so instinctive he did not even think about, he wanted to give that to me. It meant that he was saying to me, don't concern yourself anymore with worldly needs. We will provide you with housing, food, robes, practice instruction, practice schedules, and inspiring places to practice in.

Everyone at Tassajara was grateful. The mindfulness was palpable everywhere in the care and beauty of the grounds and buildings, the altars, even the toilets. We engaged in mindful practice all day long, bowing to each other as we passed on the trails, bowing as we offered food and as we received food, bowing to the magnificent Buddhas in the meditation hall and on our own altars who were a reflection of the great wisdom and compassion that was so much a part of these places, bowing to our cushions before we sat on them. Generosity of heart was the prevalent etiquette. We would not block a server's generosity by always accepting food that was being offered, even if we didn't want it. If someone had overslept and missed morning meditation, someone would go to her cabin and approach on the ground, below her, respectfully touch her lightly and bow. Nothing needed to be said.

The greatest gift was the gift of space, so much time and space to meditate, to generously give attention to myself, to allow my Big Mind to develop, to see all the unfortunate places, to silently scream, to feel all that was in me to feel, and to feel my generosity in this patient seeing. A Zen patriarch, Wu Hei, said, "What is the gate of Zen? Complete giving."

Another Zen story from Gil

Gil tells the story of when he went to Eiheiji, a Zen temple in Japan, and sat a sesshin. At the end of the sesshin Gil met with the Abbot. He gave the Abbot an envelope with a small amount of money, a formality to express himself, which was received graciously. When it became clear to the Abbot that Gil was a Ronin monk, a monk without a teacher, he left the room and came back with an envelope, which Gil found out later had more money than Gil had given him. Since Gil was not going to take him as his teacher, it was important that he help Gil find one, so he gave Gil train money to go to the next monastery. This is the tradition.

From *Pay Attention for Goodness Sake* by Sylvia Boorstein

[A neighbor who was dying said] "Sometimes I think about killing myself. I could you know, it would be easy, I could just take too much morphine. Each time I get ready to do it though, I think of someone else I need to tell something to. I have a friend with a new business, I have some good ideas for him. And my nephew has marriage problems, I think I could help him. Sometimes I can't think of one more thing to do, but then I think I *might*. So I don't do it [don't take the morphine]."

From *Living This Life Fully: Stories and Teachings of Munindra* by Mirka Knaster

[Munindra was a very important Indian teacher in our tradition, the teacher of many of our teachers. A young traveler had been asked by a friend to bring Munindra some gifts but didn't know much about him]:

"We chatted a bit and Munindra said to me 'Oh, you must stay the weekend with me and we will practice meditation together.' I kick myself now because if I had the opportunity again, I would take it in a heartbeat. But at that point I didn't even have reverence for the Dharma. So my thought was, 'Who is this guy anyway? Why would I want to spend a weekend meditating with him?' I said, 'No thank you.' Then he said, 'You must at least stay the night, and we'll meditate.' And I said, 'No, no, no.' He said, 'OK, at least you must stay the afternoon, and we could talk about the Dharma.' Again, I conveyed that I wasn't interested. He just smiled and said, 'OK, well, let me feed you.' I remember, quite distinctly, sitting down at his table and how carefully he attended to me, making sure I ate well. I begin to cry every time I recollect this. He kept standing up to serve food into my plate with such kindness, warmth, and generosity."

From *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality and Gender* by Zenju Earthlyn Manuel

"I remember when I was a child my father tipped his hat to strangers on the path. I would smile and nod along with him, and the strangers would nod back. What I received in the nod back from the strangers was recognition that we were living beings. It meant that my undeniable difference was nonetheless seen as part of the landscape of life. To be recognized as a living being without so much as a spoken word was to acknowledge a life that cannot be seen in a mirror but rather is seen only in each other.

This kind of acknowledgment, the passing nod along the way, is an old southern tradition. My Louisianan parents taught me that in nodding "hello" you let folks know that you see them—not their faces, but their lives."

Some suggestions adapted from *The World Could Be Otherwise* by Norman Fischer

- Wipe counters in public restrooms and recall that you do this for the next person coming in and for the counter itself.
- Do something every day for your own health and well-being: meditate, exercise, eat something healthy, take a sky-gazing break.
- Practice saying to someone "How are you?" and actually meaning it. Think of some follow-up questions.
- Compose a grace before meals that reminds you that the food you are about to eat is a miraculous gift from many people, tools, animals, plants, air and water, sky and earth.

Practice:

Try to notice and act on at least one generous impulse every day (or notice that you have done so naturally). You might experiment with a mix of face-to-face and anonymous ("stealth") generosity. Or you might look back at the end of the day and notice the generous impulse in little things you did naturally. Pay attention to how you feel before, during and after these acts. You might also try to notice or recall one example each day of the generosity of others that you've benefited from.