

Random Acts of Kindness - The Joy of Giving

On 17th December 2008, a caller from Darlington rang into a national radio talk show. He had been standing at a bus-stop beside a well-dressed gentleman, when that gentleman suddenly threw a thousand pounds into the air and simply walked off. Others later rang into the show to verify that the story was indeed true and that they had scooped up some of the money for themselves. The radio host invited the gentleman to ring in with an explanation, but he never did. Bemused listeners like myself, could only wonder.

No doubt, the Darlington bystanders counted themselves as lucky on that particular afternoon, as indeed certain Londoners may well have done who received an unexpected visit from David Goodfellow, Benny Crane and James Hunter - aka "The Kindness Offensive". This trio of twenty-something year-olds persuade companies to donate to them valuable items, which they in turn distribute to people in need and on that particular occasion, they had organised the distribution of thousands of pounds worth of donated food, toys and Hampers.

When interviewed and asked why they put so much effort into volunteering in this way, their response was simple, yet touching. Other than wanting to make others smile, it made them smile! This is not surprising given their collective philosophy - they formed the group when they first met and discovered they each enjoyed talking to strangers and carrying out random acts of kindness.

How heartwarming that despite the current economic crisis, we still find people who are so willing to give so selflessly. Or perhaps it is precisely because of the crisis, that we are compelled to re-evaluate the meaning and indeed nature of giving.

US-based Cami Walker evidently felt the need to reassess her own values, when faced with the debilitating illness Multiple Sclerosis. Apparently, she was advised by her spiritual teacher, Mbali Creazzo, to give away 29 things in 29 days. Cami admits that she wrote down Mbali's suggestion and then promptly forgot about it, understandably not seeing how giving to others could help her in her predicament and feeling the need to conserve her energy for her own healing.

When Cami finally did return to her journal, she decided to follow through on the suggestion. As she gave something different to someone else each day, she felt more alive, invigorated and in awe of life and by the end of her 29 days, was even able to walk without the aid of her stick.

This isn't altogether surprising, as the health benefits of giving altruistically are well documented. Stephen G. Post, Professor of Bioethics at Case Western

Reserve University notes in his paper, "Altruism, Happiness and Health: It's Good to be Good":

"Altruism results in deeper and more positive social integration, distraction from personal problems and the anxiety of self-preoccupation, enhanced meaning and purpose as related to well-being, a more active lifestyle that counters cultural pressures toward isolated passivity, and the presence of positive emotions such as kindness that displace harmful negative emotional states. It is entirely plausible, then, to assert that altruism enhances mental and physical health." (Stephen Post is also co-author of "Why Good Things Happen to Good People").

In Cami's case, she soon realised - quoting her directly - that "healing doesn't happen in a vacuum, it happens through our interactions with other people". And so she invited others to take up the challenge for themselves - to date some 3,500 people from around the world have done so.

Now we need not necessarily join a movement in order to give to others - there are ample opportunities in our daily lives to do so, whether through the giving of our time and energy or through the giving of a literal gift – but clearly, helping others enriches our own lives. If it is true to say that there is more joy or happiness in giving than there is in receiving, then perhaps the more we give, the happier we become.

Henry Ford said "a business that makes nothing but money is a poor kind of business" and it is perhaps in this spirit, that charitable and philanthropic giving appears to be on the increase among larger businesses and the wealthy. Far from being cynical towards those who we may feel "can afford it", we should applaud their altruism, their continued efforts to give back to their communities and commend them for the positive difference they have made to peoples lives.

As for the expression "random acts of kindness", it was probably taken from a phrase coined by writer and peace activist Anne Herbert, who apparently wrote on a restaurant placemat, "Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty".

What a beautiful, simple, yet powerful notion - that we *practice* random acts of kindness. That we make it a repeated, habitual process.

And seemingly, senseless act of beauty? Perhaps this explains the actions of that well dressed gentleman in Darlington.

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