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Generosity as a Vital Human Need

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Many youth are adrift in this highly materialistic culture, and only 20 percent of today's teens can identify a purpose for their lives.¹ As Victor Frankl observed, existence only becomes meaningful by commitment to a cause beyond oneself.² This article highlights the power of generosity to transform lives.

Prologue:

“We treat each other with respect.”

At a recent conference in Germany, we met youth who were alive with purpose and hope. These teens led a workshop session where they described the *Grundnamen* [key norms] they had chosen to guide their relationships with peers and adults:

We treat each other with respect!

We look out for one another!

We help others if they have problems!

We reject all physical or psychological violence!

Their values clearly challenge the self-centered mindset of current culture. These young people were boldly espousing democratic principles for treating all persons with dignity. Their own personal experience with violence had shown that abuse of power can only be countered by values of respect. Translating their words:

Violence in any form includes humiliation and depreciation of the other person. When we engage in violence, we want to make the other “small” and ourselves superior. That stands in bold contrast to showing respect to one another.³

So how did these teens create their culture of respect? They are part of a Positive Peer Culture (PPC) program operating in a unit of a large youth prison near Adelsheim in southern Germany. Accompanying them to their conference presentation was a veteran prison guard. He recounted that many correctional staff used to call in sick because of the stress of this job. *“Aber jetzt kommen wir gerne zu Arbeit!”* he exclaimed. [But now we enjoy coming to work!] Although confined in a secure prison, these youth have formed bonds of respect with their peers and adults in authority.

Recounting their transformation of values, one youth observed, “We used to have fights every day, but now we never fight because we have learned to treat one another as human beings.” This is particularly noteworthy since many of those incarcerated were not native to Germany but had diverse ethnic backgrounds. When the PPC groups mix with residents of other prison units in work details, it is apparent how different the tone is among those youth who feel they must put on a front of toughness. While PPC youth are sometimes ridiculed by other inmates as being “soft,” they are secure in their core values: “We treat each other with respect.” This article explores research and practical strategies for using Generosity as the most potent tool for positive youth development.

Hooked on Helping

We first visited Adelsheim two years ago as PPC Germany launched this peer-helping program in a secure unit of a sprawling youth prison. We explained to the two dozen teens that they would be asked to help one another. The goal was to encourage each young person to develop strengths in the four areas of the Circle of Courage:

Belonging: Building positive relationships with significant others

Mastery: Achieving, solving problems, and discovering strengths

Independence: Growing in personal power and responsibility

Generosity: Developing empathy and concern for others

We displayed drawings of these four concepts created by Native American artist George Bluebird for the book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*.⁴ The youth were intrigued to learn that the artist is incarcerated for a crime committed in his early twenties.

While wary of typical “flaw-fixing” treatment, the youth quickly embraced the four growth goals of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. It is little surprise that young people seek to belong, for such is the lure of gangs. Further, they want to succeed, even though they may struggle in school. And the drive for independence and power is a centerpiece of adolescence. But generosity—getting teens hooked on helping—has been overlooked by major theories of learning that presume humans are self-centered.

A unique feature of our training in these German PPC programs was that both staff and young people participated together in workshops. As research by James Anglin of Canada has shown, most problems of youth at risk are “pain-based behaviors” which signal that needs are not being met.⁵ To spark discussion about how to best respond to pain-based behavior, we often use two contrasting photos of children in distress. The first visual shows a tearful child, the second a furious youngster. Those who view these images agree that their natural inclination would be to console the upset child. But the second image of the angry boy evokes little empathy among adults.

Troubled teens may actually have greater awareness of what another young person might need than many adults hired to handle such problems.

Youth from peer-helping groups became very animated with the image of the angry boy. They proposed many plausible theories about what might be troubling this youngster. Troubled teens may actually have greater awareness of what another young person might need than many adults hired to handle such problems. This is consistent with Anglin’s research showing that youth at risk are more likely to understand pain-based behavior while adults cling to control-based consequences.

Decades of research have documented the efficacy of peer-helping programs.⁶ Yet those who focus on deficit and disorder have been skeptical of youth empowerment philosophies. For example, psychiatrist William Glasser once told a PPC researcher that he was opposed to giving responsibility to irresponsible youth. Such pessimistic views are invalidated by emerging research on strength and resilience.⁷

PPC is now rated by the California Evidence Based Clearing House as supported by research.⁸ There is also a growing literature on Positive Peer Culture in the German language.⁹ A prominent European scholar in this field is Christoph Steinebach from the Zurich University of Applied Science. His research suggests that Generosity is the master variable in creating resilience and self-efficacy. In subsequent discussion, we summarize these findings and provide a preview of the new book by Steinebach and colleagues, *Helfen als Bedürfnis* [Helping as a Need].¹⁰

Clear Thinking

Neuroscientist Gerald A. Cory notes that the human brain has two algorithms, self-preservation and concern for others—he calls these Ego and Empathy.¹¹ Children have the capacity for *emotional* empathy from birth while *cognitive* empathy requires the ability to imagine what others may be thinking which is called mind-reading or theory of mind. But just because one is using the logical brain does not necessarily enhance empathy, since thinking distortions can rationalize self-serving behavior.

Humans by nature are motivated to help others and to refrain from hurting behavior. However, prosocial behavior can be sabotaged by thinking errors which permit persons to ignore or even attack those in need. Virtually all young people—even delinquents—know the difference between right and wrong, according to moral development researcher John Gibbs.¹² When harmful behavior persists in spite of negative consequences, thinking errors may be overriding the voice of conscience. Thus, peer-helping groups learn to recognize distortions in thinking which justify hurting behavior. This list known by the acronym BAMMS is summarized on the following page.

Humans by nature are motivated to help others and to refrain from hurting behavior.

Thinking errors are pernicious propaganda which rationalizes behavior that can hurt self or others. Once young people can think more clearly, they are able to take responsibility for their actions and become better equipped as helpers.

Moral Minds

Harvard researcher Carol Gilligan demonstrated that humans have two standards for making moral decisions: justice and caring.¹³ Males are more likely to use the standard of justice (e.g., showing fairness) while females are more strongly motivated by caring (showing empathy and compassion.) Both are legitimate standards and usually complementary. In the Old Testament, the book of Micah combines these in the call to *act justly and love mercy*. These principles are reflected in the values espoused by the youth in peer helping programs.

BAMMS Thinking Errors

Roadblocks to Responsibility

Blaming

Assigning blame for one's own harmful actions to outside sources.

- *I lose my temper because people make me mad.*
- *The principal and teachers just aren't fair.*

Assuming the Worst

Believing others have hostile intentions and that failure is likely.

- *I might as well lie, nobody will believe me anyway.*
- *You can't trust anybody, they will just stab you in the back.*

Minimizing

Describing problems as causing no real harm or even being cool.

- *Everybody uses some drug, it's no big deal.*
- *I teach people not to mess with me.*

Mislabeled

Referring to others with belittling or dehumanizing labels.

- *The jerk deserved what he got.*
- *She is such a low-life, nobody can stand her.*

Self-centered

This is the core of all thinking errors, ignoring the needs and views of others.

- *I don't care about anybody, I watch out for number one.*
- *If I see something I like, I take it.*

Researchers from the Max Planck Institute in Germany have conducted many novel studies showing humans are ultra-social.¹⁴ These findings indicate that caring and justice are innate from early childhood.

Caring: As soon as they are capable of intentional action, children are intrinsically motivated to help others across many situations. When 18-month-old toddlers observe an adult dropping an object, they automatically pick it up and give it to the person. Two-year-olds who have experienced normal nurturing will show compassion to others, and this predicts their prosocial behavior into adolescence.¹⁵ When participating in a cooperative task, three-year-olds object if a partner shows selfish behavior.

Justice: Animals compete for food, but even young children show a sense of fairness in distributing resources. They embrace group norms and by age three begin enforcing these in their play. Thus, if they observe a peer preparing to destroy another child's artwork or steal property, they object and intervene. By age five, children respond with empathy to a youngster who shows remorse for wrongdoing.¹⁶ And, if children believe that a partner is unable to play properly because of incompetence, they try to help teach the skill.¹⁷

Brain hormones affect the "neuroscience of nice."¹⁸ Variations in oxytocin and vasopressin levels cause some persons to be more inclined to tend and befriend than others. It may be that natural differences persist since group survival is ensured when

there is some balance between self-preservation and self-sacrifice. However, empathy pervades social life unless a perceived threat activates fear of “outsiders.” This is seen in hostile reactions to refugees entering many Western countries. It falls to democratic and spiritual values to tame xenophobia and unleash empathy. When caring behavior becomes the norm, the environment is seen as safe, as documented by research on peer-helping programs.¹⁹

Survival of the Most Generous

Human brains are designed to enable us to successfully adapt to the environment. Charles Darwin proposed that compassion for others was the strongest instinct in humans. Contrary to popular myth, he never used the term “survival of the fittest” which was coined by social Darwinists to justify theories of racial superiority.²⁰ Darwin was devastated by the death of his daughter and concluded that compassion was stronger than self-interest in most persons. In *The Descent of Man*, he wrote that “those communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish the best.”²¹

In an article titled *Forget Survival of the Fittest: It's Kindness that Counts*, DiSalvo heralded the pivotal role of generosity in human well-being.²² He drew examples from research on positive psychology:

- Reflecting on compassion for others boosts immune functions and shifts the brain to the left hemisphere which is associated with positive emotions.
- Talking about what we are thankful for—whether in classrooms, at the dinner table, or in a diary—boosts happiness and health.
- Helping others rather than pursuing materialistic pleasures leads to lasting well-being.

There is now a growing consensus that our generous spirit has insured the survival of humans over evolutionary history. An international body of researchers summarized converging evidence that generosity is a cultural universal motivated by the design of the human brain.²³

In his 1935 classic, *The Origins of Love and Hate*, Scottish psychiatrist Ian Suttie criticized both behaviorism and psychoanalysis for failing to recognize that receiving and giving love are the primary human motivations. Children are born with a generous disposition, and, if their gifts are rejected, they feel unlovable.

The baby then not only starts life with a benevolent attitude, but the Need-to-Give continues as a dominant motive throughout life, and, like every other need, brings anxiety when it is frustrated.²⁴

Abraham Maslow originally believed that the drive for power was the primary human motivation until he studied the Northern Blackfoot tribe in Alberta, Canada. Their culture was oriented around generosity instead of dominance and accumulation of wealth. Maslow estimated that “eighty to ninety percent of the population must be rated about as high in ego security as the most secure individuals in our [own] society, who comprise perhaps five to ten percent at most.”²⁵ That experience influenced his hierarchy of human needs. However, he initially put self-actualization at the pinnacle of his pyramid which was challenged as reflecting individualistic Western values. Maslow corrected this oversight in the last year of his life, placing *self-transcendence*—commitment beyond self—as the highest level of his hierarchy.²⁶ Ironically, most text-books are still stuck with self-actualization at the top.

Helping gives direct proof of one’s worth—being of value to others. While this truth has been known in all major religious traditions, most behavioral scientists were sidetracked by hedonistic theories. In *Psychology's Sanction for Selfishness*, Michael and Lisa Wallach summarized research which challenged the notion that the primary human motivation is looking out for number one. Instead, concern for others is innate as seen in their account of two toddlers:

The 15-month-old inadvertently knocked down his 13-month-old playmate to get a toy. When the younger child began to howl, the 15-month-old first hugged him to get him to stop. He then tried to pick him up. Finally, everything else having failed, he located the younger child’s bottle and handed it to him.²⁷

Since humans also have brain circuits for self-centered motivation, there must be a check on excesses. This is most apparent when the need for power is unrestrained by social values or societal controls.

Egalitarian Power

David Blumenkrantz describes human evolution as the ultimate evidence-based trial.²⁸ Our resilient brains and cultural wisdom were designed to insure survival and well-being. And, since humans lived

in hunter gatherer groups for 99 percent of our history, our brains are adapted to that kind of lifestyle.²⁹ This common culture of origin shaped the structure of our **social brains** and our **cultural values**. There are still many examples of indigenous peoples whose ancient practices are being studied in modern times. From such research, one can conclude that humans are best equipped to survive and thrive in egalitarian cultures. The Circle of Courage is a parsimonious summary of the values of such societies as documented by anthropological research on Native peoples in North and South America.³⁰

For thousands of years, humans were reared in an environment where survival depended upon sharing of resources and harmonious relationships. While there were many cultural differences, indigenous societies shared common values. This short list uses the present tense to describe indigenous values that still exist:

- Children and elders are held in great respect.
- The village is involved in rearing all children.
- Resources are shared to meet needs of all.
- Leaders are selected to be servants of the people.

Agriculture arose after the last ice age which radically changed the nature of cultures. No longer nomadic, people could accumulate and even hoard possessions. Traditions for sharing of resources were disrupted by greed. Alpha males with wealth and weapons grabbed power. The warrior mounted on a horse could invade distant peoples with impunity. Slavery, abuse, and conquest became commonplace.

There is no reward people value more than being treated with esteem. By showing respect to others, we dignify them.

Riane Eisler describes two contrasting systems for governing human societies—cultures of respect (partnership cultures) and cultures of domination.³¹ For most of our existence, humans thrived in egalitarian cultures. But for the past 10,000 years in highly populated areas such as Europe, coercive cultures have disrupted human harmony. Women were no longer revered and

protected but treated as chattel. Massive disparities of wealth separated rulers and peasants. Violence, crime, and warfare reached extreme levels. And residing in crowded and polluted environments led to health problems that decimated populations.

On the positive side, democracy with norms of inclusion and fairness sought to restore egalitarian environments. Steven Pinker has cherry-picked statistics on progress in recent centuries of European civilization, such as reductions in the murder rate over the last several hundred years.³² But taking the long view, positive advances mark a return to egalitarian cultures—often reborn in democratic values.

The earliest authentic democracy in North America was the Iroquois Confederacy. This league of Native American nations developed the Great Law of Peace dating back to 1451 AD and perhaps earlier. Less well known was Good Earth which thrived from 1500 to 1700. This indigenous Oneota city along the Big Sioux River in present-day South Dakota and Iowa was the largest human habitation in North America.³³ All tribes came together in peace at this trading center with a population larger than New York and Boston. But democracy is a fragile flower which withers with abuses of power.

The Addiction and Cure

*Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*³⁴
Lord John Acton

All humans have a need to exercise power over their lives, first by self-regulation and then by self-efficacy—controlling one's destiny. This need can only be met in cultures which share power. In effect, we are born with democratic brains which are massively mismatched to societies that pursue power and hedonistic pleasure. Further, powerlessness has highly deleterious effects on mental and physical health.

The comprehensive review of the science of power is authored by social psychologist Dacher Keltner.³⁵ He documents how persons are initially given power because of the belief they can help the group. But without external restraints or internal values, they become corrupt. He garners a large body of research including neuroscience which show many destructive effects of unchecked power:

Empathy deficits. Brainstem dominance programs stifle empathy.

Impulsivity. Dopamine pumps impulsive, pleasure-seeking behavior.

Disrespect. Powerful persons feel free to be rude to those less powerful.

Egocentric. Those in power believe they deserve privilege over inferiors.

Indigenous peoples developed elaborate safety-checks for power-leveling.³⁶ Children were reared to see acting superior to others as disrespectful. Decisions were made with consensus, so all had input. Selection of leaders precluded bullies gaining power by having grandmothers choose chiefs. If persons became arrogant or abused power, humor was used to restore humility. If this didn't work, the others would ignore the person in power, turning their backs or walking away. Finally, in extreme but rare cases, the person was removed from the community. An intriguing example was when all of the tribe would silently depart in the middle of the night, leaving the disrespectful leader behind without anyone to dominate.

Throughout human history, ethical and religious ideals have also served to put a check on untamed power. And just as our brains have programs to pursue self-centered power, they also are designed for compassion and caring. Dacher Keltner notes that power will inevitably corrupt unless it is directed towards the service of others. His prescriptions for positive power are all grounded in tapping our brain-based motivation for caring behavior:

Respect. There is no reward people value more than being treated with esteem. By showing respect to others, we dignify them. Those with less power are often the most gifted purveyors of respect—praise, polite language, humble behavior—virtues that all should share. We display respect by asking questions, listening, and showing curiosity; we offer genuine compliments, praise with gusto, and express gratitude.

Empathy. This includes the ability to read the emotions of others as well as understand what they may be thinking. Empathy is often an automatic response to those we care about and those who are like us. The challenge is to help persons develop concern for others who may be different and even belligerent. As a youth in a PPC program said, “It is hard to like kids who hurt others, but it is our job to help them with their problems.”

Gratitude. Expressing appreciation for the contributions of others doubles the likelihood that persons will be helpful with a future task. Gratitude activates the reward and safety regions of the brain, also calming stress. Gratitude can be conveyed in nonverbal communication as well as the spoken word.

Kindness. Small recurrent acts of kindness weave the fabric of social communities. For example, touching is a natural way that people provide support to one another. A reassuring pat on the back or warm embrace releases oxytocin, a neurochemical that promotes trust, cooperation, and sharing. Acts of kindness also calm stress and make persons feel esteemed and valued.

In sum, these are the values we heard espoused by the youth in peer-helping groups. *In Circle of Courage terms, the ultimate control on power is generosity.*

Epilogue: “Curtain Call for a Cure”

We began with an account of a formal peer-helping program in a treatment facility. But helping others is a natural human quality in any healthy group of young people. We experienced this in a profound way when our granddaughter Raena was diagnosed with Friedreich’s Ataxia (FA) as a young teen. This rare genetic disease is a protein deficiency that attacks nerve and heart cells. Youth with FA usually will need a wheelchair before high school graduation, and they suffer from teenage-onset heart disease. There is presently no cure and mortality can occur as early as in the 20s.

While the cause of FA is known, the lack of public awareness means that research funds go to more visible disorders. Raena is active in high school performing arts, and when her peers saw what was happening to their friend, they decided to do something about it. Their plan seemed grandiose. They would rent the historic Orpheum Theatre and recruit the most talented youth in the city of Sioux Falls to perform Broadway musical hits. The high school students even formed their own organization, Fine Arts for Friedreich’s Ataxia. Co-president Mary Alice Lange explained:

You can do a bake sale, you can do a car wash, but we wanted a bigger audience than someone buying a cupcake. We wanted this to be a creative way of sharing information about this disease instead of just saying “the funds from this cupcake are going to a good cause.”



High school students rehearse “Curtain Call for a Cure” at the Orpheum Theatre in Sioux Falls, S.D. These youth raised over \$10,000 for research on Friedreich’s Ataxia after their friend Raena was diagnosed with this disease.

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After six months of dedicated practice and promotion, the students performed their “Curtain Call for a Cure” to a captivated audience. When all the bills were paid, they exceeded their goal by raising more than \$10,000 for research to fight this disease which steals young lives.

These youth-led efforts inspired adults to join the movement. A group of South Dakota fathers of teens with FA ran the Minneapolis Marathon, each raising a thousand dollars per mile. Next, researchers from Sanford Health proposed a major study of this disorder that could cut through the red tape of seeking grants in order to begin immediately. Time is precious for each of the 4,000 youth with this disease and their families. Thus, crowd-funding is being used in the race for a cure. This inspiring movement is described at the nonprofit site www.thefinishline.org.

Throughout eons of time, humans survived and thrived by taking care of each other. Young people who discover this powerful truth bring purpose to their lives. Over two thousand years ago, the philosopher Hillel the Elder made this call for service:

If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?

And if I am only for myself, then what am I?

And if not now, when?

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