



Photo: Patience Salgado

Generosity 2.0

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My wife and I were on a walking pilgrimage in a sparsely populated region of Western India when we were approached by a radiant villager. "I would like to offer you a meal," he said, "Will you accept my offering?" When we gladly agreed he added, "We don't have any running water or electricity in our small hut. Our family is poor but we like to give from whatever we have."

Our consumer culture programs us to expect something in return for everything we give, and as a result, we often miss the true value of giving. Embedded in any act of generosity is the potential for inner transformation. Done right, we won't necessarily "have" more, but discover through a sense of interconnection with all life, that we require less. As our awareness grows, we understand our role as instrument of a larger unfolding and witness each small act of service as an unending ripple that synergizes with countless others, all part of a collective wave. With that understanding, we begin to play our part – first, by becoming conscious of the offerings we receive, then by holding gratitude for them, and finally by continuing to pay it forward with a heart of joy.

That simple farmer delivered an unforgettable sermon in abundance. He knew that the real value of his gift was his internal shift, from consumption to contribution, transaction to trust, and isolation to community.

Connecting to the Inner-Net

Margaret Mead famously said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Looking even more deeply, it is the small acts of that small group of people that end up snowballing into significant change. And each small action is predicated on even subtler inner awareness. The seat of authentic strength lies in that intangible space within us.

While many of us intuitively understand the power of internal change, we are often seduced by external change that can be neatly measured, categorized and owned. Certainly, external changes are required for the world to progress but when coupled with an inner transformation, they affect the world in a radically different way.

This is why Gandhi spent each Monday in silence, why Martin Luther King Jr. prayed twice as much on busy days, and Cesar Chavez practiced Yoga regularly. It’s why Mother Teresa declared, “We can do no great things; only small things with great love.”

In that spirit, in April 1999, four of us walked into a homeless shelter aspiring to “be the change we wish to see in the world”. We wanted to serve using our tech skills. No strings attached. When the Executive Director of the shelter openly wondered about the “catch”, we had to convince her that our “return on investment” was simply the opportunity to practice

generosity. Our first project was building a website for the shelter. Initially, many of our peers in Silicon Valley's dotcom boom culture didn't "get" our motivations, but as they experienced the joy of giving, thousands volunteered and hundreds of websites were built. All our work was offered at no charge – in the spirit of a gift.

And that is how a fully volunteer-run organization named CharityFocus was born.

We started by building free websites for nonprofits, but that wasn't the deepest part of our mission; what we really wanted to do was to support people's inner journeys. Websites were the initial tool, but we also shared lunches with the homeless. On Wednesdays, we hosted meditation sats open to anyone wanting to practice stillness. A few of us pooled small amounts of money to donate to nonprofits. We ran email lists that regularly sent out inspiring messages. When one of us ran across an insightful book, we would congregate at a local coffee shop to delve deeper into its themes. If someone was passionate about a specific cause, we showed up in solidarity. In essence, anything that nurtured someone's process of giving was a potential CharityFocus project.

Although we didn't know it at the time, CharityFocus wasn't an organization. It was an ecosystem.

An ecosystem simply holds space for value to emerge organically. Our

DailyGood.org service, for example, began with one person emailing an inspiring quote to five friends every day. Ten years later it has more than 100 thousand readers worldwide and has evolved into a daily message that includes a quote, a link to a good news article, and a small “be the change” action that everyone can take. Its impact can’t really be measured, but its value has been demonstrated time and again. DailyGood’s broad readership includes grandparents, activists, philanthropists, professors, students, and monks. Eduardo writes us to say he reads out the email to his family over dinner every night. At a Native American reservation, a high school teacher posts a printed copy of it on their bulletin board daily. In Minnesota, a college class includes it as a part of their leadership curriculum. In an ecosystem, all this indirect value – the ripple effect – has space and time to add up, synergize with other ripples, and multiply into something completely unexpected. In humble fashion it continues to seed many unpredictable manifestations.

A lot of these ripples will remain unseen for years, some perhaps even for generations. It doesn’t matter. What we keep learning and relearning is that the size, impact or duration of each ripple makes no difference; what matters most is the simple knowledge that when we are deeply being the change, ripples keep rippling.

Technology Powered Ripple Effect

Back in the 1800s, a ripple-effect effort like CharityFocus would have gone completely unnoticed. Small acts of personal transformation, without a staff or a budget, weren't easy to leverage.

In the Internet era, though, it is micro acts that are creating revolutions. People are writing entire encyclopedias in that spirit (think Wikipedia). Throw in some collaboration tools, and unpaid engineers are creating products that rival multibillion dollar companies (think Linux). Add the power of self-publishing, and volunteer-citizens are able to topple lobbyists and bring about radical policy changes. With a trillion web pages online, and 5 billion anticipated mobile users by 2011, we live in decidedly different times. In the past, we could do small things just for the love of it, but big change largely required money, power and influence. Not anymore.

Now, the Internet can aggregate the nonfinancial motivations of "amateurs" and organize them into significant social movements. For example, instead of 100 staff working 40 hours a week, 400 CharityFocus volunteers contribute 10 hours a week.

At a broader scale, and in even smaller increments, Wikipedia attracts more than 100 million volunteer hours per year. In a short amount of time, the Internet has given us the capacity to tap into reservoirs of

altruistic social capital. And when people get hyper-connected into mini trust networks, all kinds of new possibilities emerge.

In mid 2006, Juan Mann's grandmother died, and in consolation his friends gifted him a homemade music video that featured his experiment of giving free hugs at a local mall. Incidentally, they also posted the video online. Within days, much to their surprise, it had spread to millions. By the end of the month, the previously unknown garage band had a recording contract, Juan was interviewed on Good Morning America and Oprah, and received more than 40 million views on YouTube. And thousands of people around the world started giving out "free hugs" in their communities.

The Internet gives wings to not just Juan Mann, but to everyone. Anyone's idea now has a shot at being spread to millions, without necessarily having a budget, staff or a five-year business plan.

The Internet has become a movement machine, for distributed and decentralized emergence. Activists use this platform to galvanize protests, lobbyists use this platform to pass laws, governments use this platform to engage its citizens and CharityFocus uses this platform to amplify small acts of generosity and transformation.

Rekindling a Gift Economy

When we gift our services, we create social capital; when we aggregate the cognitive surplus of that community, we discover our organizational capacity; and when the Internet connects those strands into a collective network, the feedback loops between givers and receivers exponentializes the number of gifts. We end up rekindling a “gift economy”.

At a coffee table conversation in Chicago, a few volunteers wondered if we could shift the energy of college pranks towards kindness; soon after, we printed 100 "Smile Cards" encouraging people to do small acts of anonymous kindness and to leave behind this card, inviting the recipient to pay-it-forward. People could download the cards on the web or order pre-printed cards, which we shipped for free. The idea went viral. We figured we'd keep doing it until we ran out of money; what we didn't figure is that people's cups of gratitude would overflow and that they would send us not only unsolicited donations, but heartfelt kindness ideas and stories too. In just a few years, more than a million Smile Cards were printed, tens of thousands of stories were shared and distributed without copyright, and HelpOthers.org became one of the most popular kindness portals on the Internet.

In a gift economy, goods and services have greatest value when they are received as gifts – and when they are offered as gifts; beyond their face value, it is the circulation of these pay-it-forward gifts within a community

that leads to growth – growth in both the number and strength of connections. In contrast, accumulation or hoarding actually causes such a system to break down.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand the gift economy is by an example. On Sundays, volunteers in Berkeley and Washington D.C. run a unique restaurant called Karma Kitchen. At the end of the meal, the check reads \$0.00 with this footnote: “Your meal was a gift from someone who came before you. We invite you to pay-it-forward for the person after you.” The meal is actually an excuse – the real power is in the reframing of a day-to-day interaction: a table might be served by a CEO, an activist, or a teacher, and their expression of unconditional generosity shifts the environment towards community and trust. And it really works. Karma Kitchen has been financially sustainable since the first time it opened its doors over two years ago.

We all innately understand this ideal. Nature is perhaps the most complex system of interdependencies, but nothing is a quid-pro-quo exchange. All of our lives start with nine months of an unconditional gift, in perhaps the most poignant expression of paying forward what we ourselves have received. Many ancient cultures from Native Americans potlatches to the ‘dama’ gift-system of Mali to the sacred reciprocity of monastics in Asia - have been rooted in a gift culture. Most families, even in modern times, experience small scale gift economies.

Although it is hard to imagine such a world today, it is our modern internet technology that is, ironically, helping revive this ancient gift culture. In these connected times, small acts of kindness don't just transform the doer they keep circulating, and all those touched get more connected into trust networks. But while technology has been a key driver of this recent emergence, the true core of this movement still lies in the same place as it always has in the heart of the individual.

Take the story of my great grandfather: he didn't have many resources, but maintained a daily practice of philanthropy. On his daily walk, he would feed ant hills with small pinches of wheat flour. He didn't have the Internet, but he still connected to the Inner-Net. In turn, his goodness shaped the worldview of his children and subsequently their children. Today, those ant hills are a part of what I do, and my small acts of inner transformation today will help seed a seventh generation philanthropy.

Nipun Mehta is the founder of CharityFocus, a fully volunteer driven organization started in 1999 to inspire the young IT professionals to provide free web based solutions for nonprofit organizations worldwide. Having served thousands of nonprofits, without any overhead, CharityFocus has now become an incubator of "gift economy" projects ranging from web services to a print magazine to a restaurant. With a base of 285,000 members, they attract millions of global viewers to its websites.

