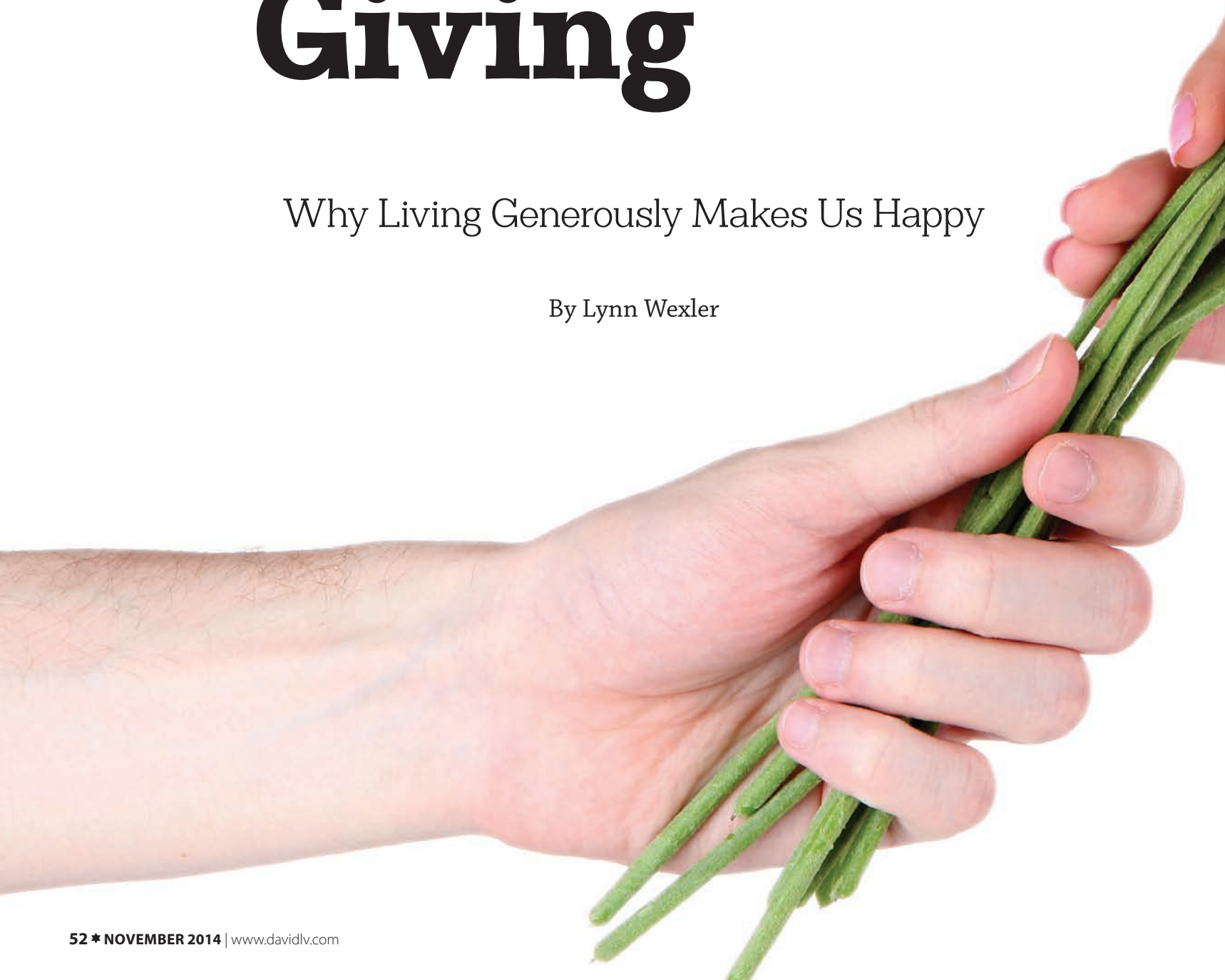


The **Psychology** of **Giving**

Why Living Generously Makes Us Happy

By Lynn Wexler





Humans are magnificent creatures, with an exceptional capacity for emotion, ingenuity and intellect — features that distinguish us from animals and plants and enable us to perceive what others may be experiencing or need.

Social scientists long have considered if human beings are philanthropic by nature. Current studies in neuroscience have shown that, indeed, we are. We're hard-wired to be generous. And by all measures, it appears to make us feel good!

Through MRI scanning, which highlights blood flow in different parts of the brain, scientists can identify precise "circuits" that reveal the biological hardware that makes altruism possible.

"While it's too early in the research to understand all of the variables that may contribute to this, we can take comfort that when we give and engage in acts of kindness, the *pleasure* and *social attachment* centers of the brain are activated, or light up, and we experience a positive and uplifting biological sensation," says bioethicist Stephen Post of Case Western University's School of Medicine.

Psychologists who study the phenomenon of generosity have dubbed this the "helper's high," he says.

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Scientists aren't the only ones who understand the emotional benefits of philanthropy. Retailers are eager to tap into the feelings of consumers geared up for the annual holiday gift-giving ritual. It's the universal way to demonstrate interest and appreciation, and to strengthen our bond with others.

Holiday shopping, of course, can be stressful – as we scurry from store to store, braving the multitudes and enduring traffic tieups to find the perfect gifts for family, friends and business associates — without breaking the bank. Research suggests it's worth the struggle.

“There is an enormous sense of satisfaction when seeing the expression on the face of someone you've given a gift to,” says Devin A. Byrd, an associate professor in the behavioral sciences department at South University in Savannah, Ga. “A functional high is generated just searching for the gift,” he adds.

Shopping isn't the only way to reap the biological gains of giving. Most forms of charity provide basic necessities to those in need — food, water, clothing, health care and shelter. Others involve volunteering at homeless shelters, visiting the imprisoned or homebound or mentoring at-risk youth.

The Greater Good Science Center, based at the University of California, Berkeley, conducts studies on the psychology, sociology and neuroscience of well-being. Researchers identify five advantages of giving that influence and elevate the giver's state of mind.

Giving makes us feel happy. A 2006 study by Jorge Moll and his colleagues at the National Institutes of Health found that when people give to charities, regions of their brains associated with pleasure, social connection and trust are activated, creating a “warm glow” effect.

Giving is good for our health. A 1999 study led by Doug Oman at UC Berkeley found that elderly people who volunteered for two

or more organizations were 44 percent less likely to die over a five-year period than their non-volunteer counterparts. One reason suggested is that giving reduces stress associated with a variety of health problems.

Giving promotes cooperation and social connection. When you give, you're more likely to receive in turn. These exchanges promote trust and cooperation. John Cacioppo, in his book *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, states that: “The more extensive the reciprocal altruism born of social connection ... the greater the advance toward health, wealth and happiness.”

Giving evokes gratitude. Whether you're on the giving or receiving end, the gift elicits feelings of gratitude, and research has found that gratitude is integral to happiness, health, and social bonds.

Giving is contagious. A study by James Fowler of the University of California, San Diego, and Nicholas Christakis of Harvard, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, shows that when one person behaves generously, others are inspired to follow suit.

Just because we're hard-wired to help others, though, doesn't mean we will act upon our proclivities.

Biological explanations for generosity don't account for environmental influences and individual initiative. Culture, education, values, religion and the surroundings in which we live also may have an effect.

Dr. Lu Dezhi, author, scholar, and a significant proponent for modern philanthropy in China and the U.S., had this to say in a May 2013 paper titled *Philanthropy and Collective Sharing*: “There is no need for philanthropy under a system of full public ownership. Under Marxist and Socialist theory, philanthropy is unnecessary because the outputs of society are limited; all could share in the fruits of the hunt. In communist society, philanthropy is also unnecessary. The government actively meets all needs. If disabled individuals need crutches or wheelchairs, the government provides them.”

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Thus, Dezhi believes, philanthropy springs from and can only thrive in a society of private ownership.

The drive to support charity is also codified, if you will, in the world’s major religions.

“Tis better to give than to receive” is a Christian proverb, suggesting that charity given purely from the heart will be returned to the giver in manifold ways. Charity is typically understood as a voluntary act of goodwill and a marker of generosity.

Many Christians follow the concept of tithing — a requirement in the Old Testament for the Israelites to give 10 percent of their means to the needy. The New Testament does not command Christians to submit to the tithe system — only that gifts should be “in keeping with income.”

Giving is essential in Buddhism, but one’s motivation for giving is equally important. The *Anguttara Nikaya* — Buddhist scripture — lists a number of motivations for giving, including being shamed or intimidated into giving; giving to receive a favor; and giving to feel good about oneself. According to Buddhists, the practice of giving is intended to release oneself from greed and ego. Some Buddhists believe giving also is good because it accrues merit and creates karma that will bring future happiness.

Islam, through the Quran, mentions two forms of charity - *Zakah* (obligatory) and *Sadaqah* (voluntary). The literal meaning of *Zakah* is “to cleanse” or “to purify,” in this case one’s wealth, to honor the will of Allah, to whom all means belong; and to work toward the betterment of the *Ummah* - the whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion. Islam requires that once a year Muslims with substantial means give 2.5 percent of their annual earnings to the mosque for distribution to the poor.

The concept of charity does not exist in Judaism. The closest word to charity in Hebrew is *tzedakah*, meaning justice or righteousness.

Although *tzedakah* is often translated as charity, the concept is broader, and deeper in meaning. *Tzedakah* is not a choice. It is one of the 613 *mitzvot* (obligations stated in the *Torah* – the Bible). Jews do not give charity out of kindness alone but rather from the obligation to create a just world, as commanded in the *Torah*. The *Talmud* (the record of rabbinic teachings) states that the poor also must give so that they, too, can perform the obligation.

According to the 12th century Jewish scholar Maimonides, how one gives is as important as what one gives. He identified eight descending levels of *tzedakah*, the highest form being giving that enables the recipient to become self-reliant (a job or a loan to get started). This is followed by giving when neither party knows the other’s identity; giving when the recipient’s identity is known to the giver but the recipient doesn’t know the giver’s identity; giving when the giver doesn’t know the recipient’s identity but the recipient knows that of the giver; giving before being asked; giving after being asked; giving less than you can but giving it cheerfully; giving begrudgingly.

Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, echoes Maimonides’ self-reliant giving in a proverb the Chinese thinker is believed to have written: *Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime.*

Whether we buy gifts, volunteer our time, provide job opportunities or donate money and belongings this holiday season, giving is designed to be a year-round engagement.

Research has shown that giving may have an innate basis in humans, and societies suggest that external influences and beliefs play key roles as well. In either case, philanthropy can warm the heart of the giver, the recipient and the community, while fostering social connections and generosity in others. In the process, the altruist gets as good as he gives.