



Acts of Kindness—Motives and Relationships¹

Ted Ward and Kathleen Graham

Every human being is changed by the relationships in which he or she participates. In some degree we become what we do to and for others. Aggressors become hardened, the stingy lose their humane emotions, and the cruel become insensitive. Evil deeds harm the giver as well as the receiver.

Even so, acts of kindness and generosity have their effects on the giver as well as the receiver. In general, good deeds should have desirable effects; but since some of the outcomes can be undesirable, we should look deeper into the matter.

Four Motives for Acts of Kindness

An act of kindness is but one piece of a complex situation. The motive of the giver is another part of the situation; kind acts done out of a sense of guilt or as tools to gain advantage are commonplace. The response of the receiver is yet another part. Not all kind acts are accepted; the receiver may take offense at the inference that he or she needs help. Or the malicious receiver, seeming to accept the giver's kindness, may repay the kind act with a cruel one. All of these possibilities are woven into the drama of life. Nothing is simple.

Of the many facets of a giving/receiving situation, the most crucial is the relationship it creates. Relationships are the great driving forces of human development. Relationships among people determine their present condition and their future capabilities. The human being is a social creature; each person becomes unique in ways that cannot be accounted for in genetic and intellectual terms. The individualistic assumptions underlying the discipline of psychology ultimately bow to the sociological and transactional forces that shape the uniqueness of a person. Probing "inward" reveals that the way the person has processed his or her dealings with others accounts for what the personality has become.

To evaluate an "act of kindness" we look at the nature of the act, the motives of the "giver," and the responses of the receiver. We also need to look at the effect that the act has upon the relationship between the giver and the receiver. Whether it is a small act of neighborly kindness or a large-scale project of international assistance, the effect on relationships is a crucial outcome.

Much of the tension between people can be traced to the relationships that have resulted from their giving/receiving acts. The tendency to assume that if one's motives are pure and if the act is "kind" in the eyes of the giver, that the results will be good. Not always so!

It is easy enough to think of situations in life wherein people are hurt by acts of pure but naïve kindness: the blind man helped across a street he didn't want to cross, pre-sugared tea for a diabetic guest, and spraying the dust off a neighbor's car when the windows are open. "Oh, but I thought you would like that!" It is half an apology, half a judgment. Somehow the fault must be transferred to the receiver; somehow the "kind act" must be justified. Not so; there are kind acts that cannot be justified. We must learn that no act is an end in itself. We must come to see that the relationship fostered by the act is every bit as important.

¹ Unpublished paper, 1981

Four motives or reasoning processes (should we call them the logics of giving?) account for most acts of kindness. On the basis of one of these motives and the consequent thought processes, or some combination, the giver determines his or her actions toward the receiver.

Motive 1: *The Golden Rule*

Doing to others what one would want done toward oneself demands more than asking, “What would *I* want?” The difficult part is *empathy*: what would I want *if* I were in the other person’s situation? Since it is very difficult to *feel* from someone else’s viewpoint, the Golden Rule tends to become a simple alibi for making judgments on a self-pleasing basis. It isn’t enough to assume that the receiver would want something the same way in which the giver wants it or wants to do it.

Motive 2: *Sharing from Abundance*

Whatever it is that one has in over-supply that is what can or should be given. This logic is a good motivator, since the “embarrassment of riches” often points to some feasible sorts of sharing. But it can be absurd. Consider the massive stupidity of sharing from our nation’s number one over-supply: nuclear armaments—or military resources, in general; remember Viet Nam? And we cringe when we consider the uselessness of our wheat surplus as a tool of famine relief in rice-eating Asia.

Oddly, some forms of our abundance don’t seem to be sharable anyway. As a whole, we are among the richest people on earth but we don’t like to send money. Church people, for example, are notoriously unwilling to give funds to missions to hire national persons. Instead, we give enormous amounts to hire, transport, support, and retire Americans simply because they are willing to take their skills overseas. (Especially in the case of technical skills already available among national persons overseas, this practice is a major factor in mission inflexibility and unaccountability.)

We should *offer* from our abundance but only *give* that which the receiver sees as valuable. Down with the missionary barrel and the legendary used tea-bags! And a resounding “Bah, humbug!” to mutual assistance contracts that demand markets for American over-production as a requisite for needed items of aid.

Motive 3: *Human Compassion*

When we become aware of “sub-standard” conditions in which other people are living, an emotionally loaded motive takes over. Whether it is out of a sense of embarrassment, a feeling of guilt, or simply a compassionate concern, we seek ways to make the others’ condition more like ours. The major problem is in the way we assess needs for others. What is *really* sub-standard and what isn’t? From anyone’s viewpoint, something in every other person’s condition is sub-standard. The happy family man sees the bachelor as living in sub-standard conditions. The servant may see the cold and friendless life of the rich master as sub-standard.

On a cross-cultural basis, human compassion can be a faulty emotion. Because of profoundly different views of the world, outlooks on life, and value systems, in general, cross-cultural assessment of need is very difficult.

Both secular aid and religious missions fall into this trap. Many stories are told of frontal attacks on polygamy “to improve the sub-standard conditions of women,” on burial practices “to conserve farmland,” and dietary change to include some largely unavailable source of protein. Most recently, the Indians in Guatemala have had to wait patiently while Americans and Europeans make their houses and villages “earthquake-proof”—never mind that no one can tolerate the temperature extremes created by the lovely new corrugated metal roofs!

It isn’t easy to keep compassion in line with logical reason. We tend to see how life might be better—in our own terms: more comfortable, free from pain, hunger, and disease; but they are *our* comforts, *our* pains, *our* hungers and diseases. We must work hard to gain awareness of differences in

lifestyle; and we can help the receiver do the same. As people become aware of alternatives, they can make their own decisions about what conditions they want to change, in what direction, and with what resources.

Motive 4: *Life is at Stake*

Because humans share a viewpoint about the value of life itself, we tend to assume agreement in advance about life-at-stake issues. When we act on our own view of how best to perform a rescue, we are aggressively intolerant of those who see the matter differently. Whether it is permission to fly relief supplies to the starving children of Nigeria during the Biafran uprising or well-drilling projects in the Sahel, we must get on with it! Saving lives seems, for the most of us, to have its own justification.

Evaluation of Acts of Kindness

Evaluating an act of kindness should take account of the particular logic underlying the act. For example, if the “Golden Rule” motive is evident, the major issue to be examined is the degree of empathy. If it is the “Sharing from Abundance” motive, the major issue is the appropriateness of the abundant commodity. In the “Human Compassion” motive, the major issue is whether or not the viewpoint of those who are being “helped” is allowed to shape the means used to act out the compassion.

The “Life is at Stake” motive presents some special problems. Simultaneously it is both rational and emotional. Evaluation is particularly difficult. Religious motivations, especially the concerns to “save the lost,” usually adopt this logic; objective evaluations of such efforts are rare. The act of salvation—whether spiritual or physical—seems to be adequate justification. And since no one likes to set the monetary worth of a life (or a soul,) no matter what the costs, the efforts are always deemed worthwhile.

All acts of kindness, no matter what motive, need to be put to the test of relationship building; but life saving is especially hard to submit to this test. Consider the grateful-for-life reaction of the rescued non-swimmer. The profound gratitude of a blinded, burned, and smoke-saturated victim will overlook the wet and harsh over-the-shoulder lugging by a fireman. The medical literature has often reported the strange psychological dependency and child-like adoration of the patient for the surgeon. Acts of rescue seem to be self-justifying and not to require further evaluation. Perhaps so; but what if the one who has been rescued is, because of the new relationship, doomed to discontinue normal life processes and any further development as a human being? Improbable? Consider the matter of the forms of relief that cause total dependency. Do not even our own national and state patchwork programs of welfare and unemployment compensation in some cases suppress the normal tendencies toward fulfillment and social contribution?

The “Gift Package”

Acting upon one’s motives and shaped by one’s empathy, resources, and awareness of the receiver’s values, one creates a set of giving actions. The actions created in this “gift package” are based on assumptions about what will be seen as pleasurable, what should be done to make the gift acceptable and sufficient to meet the need of the receiver, and assumptions about what will cause receivers to take the gift and use it. Receivers initiate their own actions, and hold their own assumptions about authority, responsibility, and control in relationships.

If well planned and well received, the gift package can activate a way of escape and provide the receiver with the needed encouragement for self-initiative, thus assuring a measure of freedom to pursue a new future.

But if the giver holds all the resources and all the responsibilities, the “gift package” will not lead to initiative. It can even become a tool of oppression.

Relief, Rehabilitation, and Development

Relief: *In large-scale assistance, relief is the most common point of entry.*

Essentially a sort of physical or social rescue process, relief is an admirable response to the extremity of disaster—flood, earthquake, or famine. Rarely are the motives of relief work challenged, since the giver seems to have so little to gain. (Only those who have worked in disaster relief have any idea how hard it is to transform good intentions into substantial results!)

But relief is best seen as therapy—procedures to apply to situations that need restoration to normalcy. Relief is a part of abnormal and troubled circumstances. Relief should be temporary and of limited terms. In no way is it an end in itself. The very fact that relief is needed is evidence that things are not right.

Relief can be evaluated against the criterion of rehabilitation. Do the relief activities lead promptly to rehabilitation? If not, they foster dependency.

Relief is sometimes attempted “at arm’s length.” It doesn’t work. Any helping relationship in which the receiver is physically absent for long periods of time will lack humaneness. The giver will reduce his or her perceptions of the receiver to a series of procedures, rules, and conditions. Physical presence is needed if a deep and rich relationship is to develop.

Rehabilitation: *Is the second phase of assistance.*

In medical terms, rehabilitation begins after the ambulance, after the emergency room, after the re-setting of bones, and the applications of healing salves. Then the rehabilitation takes over. Rehabilitation is sometimes a long painful process, but it always moves forward in terms of the increasing capabilities of the one being rehabilitated. True rehabilitation is not a display of the resources and power of the therapist; it is a demonstration of the involvement of the wounded and the needy in their own restorative processes.

Rehabilitation, too, must not become an end in itself. It must be evaluated in terms of the bringing about of a readiness for normal development. Relief and rehabilitation are preparatory phases: they should not be made goals nor should they be engaged in overly long.

Early in a healthy relationship, dependency may be present and needed. Dependency can provide the basis for trust, respect, security, and an element of how to work with another. But it is hazardous; at what crucial point does the relationship become “frozen dependency?”

Dependency or enlarging freedom depends on the particular case. What sort of relationship develops is dependent on each party’s ability to allow the other to share the control of the situation. Willingness to surrender the driver’s seat, to surrender a portion of one’s autonomy and self-direction is necessary. The initiator of the relationship, especially if he perceives himself to be the stronger, will find it very hard unilaterally to change the pattern of established relationship. Perhaps the essential concept of submission found in the finest marriage relationship is similar to the sort of trust and sharing needed.

Development: *Is the continuing normal human condition.*

From birth to death, development of the person unfolds from stage to stage, phase to phase, and quality to quality. The processes of development are part-and-parcel of the creation itself. The human being is created to develop. Societies and nations are human beings in the aggregate; and they are destined to develop. Development occurs through interactions and transactions among internal conditions and external conditions. The social dimensions of development are very real. The

individual and the nations are shaped by the kinds of transactions in which they are involved. When those relationships are rich with stimulation and uplifting encouragement, development is enhanced; when the relationships are morbid and lacking in mutual respect, development is repressed. One's sense of worth and dignity is a vital requisite of development. What works against dignity, works against development. Intimidation, suppression, and enslavement are counter-productive of human and national development.

The Historical Stages of Relationships in Assistance and Missions

Large-scale involvement and interventions across national boundaries are of fairly recent times. The "modern" mission movement goes back scarcely 150 years. Massive international assistance programs are a phenomenon of the post-World War II period. There are striking parallels in the histories of both these great movements of our time. The first relational stage in each was characterized by *giving*. The meeting of needs in the most direct manner has a sort of simple authenticity and elemental beauty. As is true of relief, in general, *giving* is the only humane action when one party has the need and the other party has the resources.

Giving is admirable enough; but it has potentially devastating effects on relationships. When all the giving flows in one direction, the humaneness of the relationship is destroyed. Whether in interpersonal relationship or international relationship, once the giver and receiver roles are assigned and frozen, the relationship that follows is sorely lacking in potentialities and development. The most obvious of the problems is the dependency that makes receivers ever obligated to humble themselves before others just to survive. The *giving* stage, whether in assistance or in missions, cannot be sustained for long without doing damage to relationships.

"Give a man a fish and he can eat today. Teach a man to fish and he can eat for a lifetime." This allegedly oriental proverb very well illustrates the need for moving from the *giving* stage to what almost always follows—the *training* stage. On the assumption that abilities and competencies can be imparted like a sort of super-commodity, all sorts of expertise are poured into the rehabilitative process.

The relational hazards of *training* are potentially the same as in the *giving* stage, with a significant new problem thrown in! Though the relationships are not as apt to degenerate as in the first stage, *training*, too, can create or sustain dependency. Especially if the underlying assumption of the training is that learning is a matter of acquiring, the trainers are still the same old benefactors as the earlier "givers." An acquisitional view of learning causes people to train others as if they were inferior. The teacher possesses, the learner lacks. The teacher imparts, the learner absorbs. The one who needs is once again relegated to an inferior role. The relationship of dependency is perpetuated—to a point. And then the new problem becomes visible: people who are "taught down to" will ultimately seek out others to whom they can "teach down." Herein is the seed of hierarchical structure. It is no surprise that people in developing nations or in churches being ministered to by teach-down missionaries develop a taste for hierarchy and structured lines of rigid authority.

Training ultimately goes sour. Training is an inherently limited form of rehabilitation, and it is faulty unless it lays a prompt and clear foundation for normal development.

Development requires a very special sort of human relationship. Although the word *reciprocity* is potentially ambiguous, there is no better term to describe the transaction of give-and-receive in which both (all) parties are drawn together in common goals, common experiences, and common respect.

Reciprocity is the third of the great relational stages of development. The word sometimes suggests a concern for getting while giving, but the finer use of *reciprocity* suggests the mutual dignity of both parties offering themselves to the needs of the other. The crucial attitude is respect—for

oneself as being of value to the other, and for the other as one who will enrich one in return. The important fact upon which *reciprocity* is based is that every mortal has both needs and resources. Through the sharing of these needs and resources, both parties in the developmental transaction are made stronger. In this third relational stage, the distinction between giver and receiver is broken down. A constant search goes on to find additional ways to share resources. Through the search and the sharing—in both directions—the process of development is enhanced and the relationship of reciprocity becomes the very soul of dignity.

Fostering reciprocal relationships takes time. The kind of time spent is important. Programmed agendas on one person's part won't necessarily do it. Time which focuses on a life-orientation rather than a work-orientation allows time for a more affective-oriented discussion to evolve. "And without reciprocity, there is 'aid,' perhaps, but not co-operation or genuine development."³

Historical Note

The "modern mission" movement of the church is changing. Having gone through an infancy of *giving* and an adolescence of *training*, the *reciprocity* relationship is becoming again the major mode. Again? Indeed, yes; the church began its outreach in a relationship of reciprocity. The first documented act of a church sending out a missionary was to another church where a great work was already underway. From Jerusalem to Antioch was sent one man, Barnabas—renowned for one trait, his capacity to encourage. He was apparently sent to confirm and to encourage. He was apparently asked to stay and teach. He was a sharer, sent to share; he stayed to help. But the story goes on: this church at Antioch, helped but not dependent, not long afterward heard of a need at Jerusalem, the original "giving" church. And a special gift of funds was sent. The chosen messenger was none other than the original missionary, Barnabas, completing the first documented act of reciprocity in the church era.

Today, the Western church is facing up to the fact that its *giving* and *training* phases were, indeed, fruitful in many parts of the world. Adjusting itself to the reality that the young churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have no need for paternal supervision, the church is re-discovering reciprocity. In this direction lies development—and the liberty of the spirit and freedom of the Gospel that the Creator intended.

But, as so often in the human condition, we know more about what we *should* do than about how to do it. For more than 20 years, international assistance has been *talking* a good line. "*Partners for Progress*," "*Alliance for Progress*," "*Mutual Assistance*," are a few of the slogans. But the old habits still control the actions. We tell others what they need. We are suspicious of their motives. We insist on doing things our own way. National level programs are notorious for using political tricks to "encourage development." For example, one of the most demoralizing tactics is to find a national person to put in as head of the new program, arrange for that person to report directly to the Minister of Agriculture or Education and thus by-pass all the established staff in the ministries. The predictable backfire occurs over and over: the people who most need to affect and be affected by the development process are left out, become resentful, and ultimately find ways to scuttle the project as a retaliation. Will we ever begin to act on what we know?

Criteria for the Humane Relationship of Reciprocity

1. Both partners must want to work together.
2. Both partners must identify their own motives.
3. Both partners must honestly face their own needs and vulnerabilities.

4. Both partners must respect and share their resources.
5. Each partner must carefully avoid making the other dependent.
6. Each partner must put concern for the other above self-concern.
7. Each partner must respect his or her own worth as a helper.
8. Each partner must be willing to be helped.
9. Each partner must value the worth of community effort above the worth of individualistic effort.
10. Each partner must experience growth through giving while receiving.