LIFE & REFLECTION

The Good Neighbor:
Exploring Generosity of Spirit

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Why do people help strangers with no expectation of return? Generosity of spirit, and a larger sense of who our neighbors are.

"She didn't have to do that." "He appeared just when I needed someone." "They helped me and then they disappeared."

They are everywhere and yet sometimes they are hard to find. The neighbor who offers to feed your cat when you're called away on a family emergency. The grocer who suggests that you pay the next time when you discover that you have left your billfold at home. The young person who offers you a seat on a crowded subway when your arms are full of packages and a screaming toddler. Who hasn't felt gratitude and appreciation for actions that were taken unasked for but greatly needed in a particular moment? In these cynical times, we may wonder what they want from us. We may brusquely reject the offer, especially if it comes from a stranger. We may worry about appearing to be needy – I may be a little old lady, you think, but I don't need any scouts helping me across the street.

In recent days, we have seen moving examples of people choosing to help, rescue, support, and sadly, even give their lives for their neighbors - often ones they don't know and may have little in common with. We may wonder if we would have the courage, grace, and presence of mind to turn toward, not away from, those who are oppressed, frightened, or minimized.

People who go out of their way to help others without expecting anything in return seem to test the tenets of economics. Why would they go to the trouble without an expected quid pro quo? If I accept, doesn't it obligate me in some way? I hardly know this person - what's in it for them to help me out? We may keep a sort of scorecard in our memory - they did these things for me, so I owe them one - or two.

Mythology, religious texts, and children's stories often explore this theme. From the Good Samaritan to the Little Red Hen, we learn early and often that being generous has its rewards, tangible or intangible.

My daughter, then the mother of young twins, saw a couple with two small babies standing on the median strip holding a sign asking for help. She rushed home to locate an outgrown twin stroller and drove quickly back to deliver it to them. It would have been easy to ignore them or to hand them a dollar bill through the car window.

You expect this kind of support from your family and friends. When it comes from a stranger you are surprised, perhaps suspicious; you want to reciprocate immediately so as not to be in their debt. What is behind this behavior? Why do people sometimes do things that cost them something in money, time, or other resources with no expectation of a return? Studies show that we increase our happiness when we do something for others without expecting anything in return - even gratitude. Generous behavior activates reward centers in our brains.

I have always liked the concept of generosity of spirit - the sense that a person has just enough for themselves, yet gives to others, that they somehow enlarge or expand what they have to share it. The words suggest something good that overflows its container - this human has given freely and yet always seems to have something to spare for those who are in need of what they can provide.

According to animal behaviorists, generosity, also known as prosocial behavior, promotes species survival. Species as diverse as whales, monkeys, dogs, bats, and birds demonstrate these sharing activities, benefiting the larger group through cooperation and mutual support.

We live in a time where the news and our conversations often focus on cruelty, on competition, on mistrust and hatred. We are taught to be suspicious of the stranger, to hate those who are not part of our “tribe.” We learn that it is naive to trust anyone we don’t know well and we have plenty of experiences, in the real world and online, to convince us that this is true.

Perhaps people who practice this kind of unforced generosity have a different concept of “neighbor.” Their neighbors are not merely those who are geographically or genetically close - they have an expansive sense of “neighborhood" - a place without the ordinary boundaries of location. A place where the expansive “we” can connect with other humans wherever they live and whomever they are. Their joy is our joy; their pain our pain. Mr. Rogers had the right idea. Rather than simply lending a cup of sugar, we can share our empathy, compassion, and resources with others in the neighborhood - and we can live with a larger sense of who our neighbors truly are.

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Originally published on LinkedIn, February 23, 2026.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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