

The Gift of Compassionate Giving

With Jim Manske

"What I want in my life is compassion, a flow between myself and others based on a mutual giving from the heart."

-Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D.

Can you imagine that? What would the world be like if there was flow between all of us based on "mutual giving from the heart"? Can you think of a more effective and reliable strategy for peace than making sure everyone's needs are met reliably and abundantly? Are there any models for us to follow that could inspire this quality of compassionate giving and receiving?

There are likely many such models. In fact, **I wouldn't be surprised if you catch yourself living in this world of compassion every day if you look carefully.** I agree with Marshall when he says that "it is our nature to enjoy giving and receiving in a compassionate manner."

Can you remember some acts of giving today? Practically any act of kindness counts, even a smile or a hug given to a family member; a kind word to a stranger at the grocery store or post office; retrieving something that someone has accidentally dropped and giving it back to them; giving a whole-hearted gratitude or even a tip in acknowledgment of the connection you feel with a person serving you. Even a friendly word to your dog or giving your kitty a scratch in her favorite spot. You've probably racked up more than 10,000 acts of compassion in your life!

And, you probably would like to be more effective in compassionate giving and receiving, or you wouldn't keep reading this! For inspiration, let's look at the ultimate model.

Ho Ho Ho!

-Santa Claus

The cultural superhero of this consciousness is of course Santa Claus. No other being, whether mythical or real, embodies compassionate giving and receiving more than St. Nick.

First, he enjoys listening to others express their needs. Imagine the excitement of a child climbing onto Santa's lap and betraying her secret wishes. Nowadays, these wishes are often encrusted with layers of consumerism and materialism, **but Santa hears more deeply.** I imagine he connects to the needs each child expresses underneath the strategies of the latest toy or game craze: Fun, Connection, Belonging, Love...do you have other guesses?

I do not know of a more compassionate gift than deeply listening to the needs of another person without any expectation of reward or fear of punishment. Do you? In NVC, we call this kind of listening "empathy".

Second, Santa hears only requests instead of demands. Santa understands in a deep way that he is not the exclusive and only strategy to fulfill another's needs. If his bag of goodies does not contain exactly what another has asked for, he trusts that a multitude of other bags (strategies) exist that can fulfill the other's needs. Santa has transformed scarcity into abundance!

Third, he also understands that requests people make to him are made with an open heart. In other words Santa hears something like, "I would really enjoy this toy Santa, and I understand that there are millions of others who may have similar requests. I trust you Santa, that you will give to me only that which you can enjoy giving!"

When Santa hears requests in this way, I'll bet his whole body relaxes. There is no need to guard against giving a gift that you cannot give. There is no need to fear the resentment that comes with obligation or threat of punishment. Santa understands and conveys that there is a "yes" behind every "no". The yes points to needs that we all share.

Fourth, Santa understands the joy of giving. Imagine what goes on in Santa's mind as he checks his list, matching requests with resources and lovingly placing gifts under the tree or in the stocking. His joy must be boundless as he does not even need to watch the enjoyment of the child receiving a particular gift. I imagine Santa savoring second hand joy "in advance", as he empathizes with the feelings and needs of the child receiving their heart's desire hours after Santa has dropped off the gifts.

One image Marshall often used to convey this is the "joy of child feeding a hungry duck." Who's having more fun as the child offers bread crumbs to ducks in the local pond, the kid or the ducks? Both are enjoying the interdependence of giving and receiving. The child does not leave the pond thinking, "now that duck owes me!" **There is never a hangover of resentment for a gift given from the heart.**

Finally, **Santa feels enriched by the opportunity to give!** When children ask him for support in fulfilling their needs, Santa feels grateful because they have given Santa the opportunity to give to them. This is a virtuous cycle of hearing from another what would make their life more wonderful, then fulfilling their hearts desire triggering gratitude and joy in both give an receiver, and empowering both to ask for their needs to be met in the future. This is the flow Marshall dreamed of.

How can you participate and embody the consciousness of Santa?

1. Look for and make opportunities to **listen deeply to others**. How about you find a practice buddy and share speaking and listening for 30 -60 minutes each week? Who could you call right now to set something up?
2. Be on the alert for you hearing another person make a demand. **If you hear a demand, take responsibility for how you heard it.** Transform the demand into a request by connecting what the other person is asking for into their needs. See that the idea they expressed to you is just one of a multitude of possible ways to get their needs met.
3. **Be willing to say "No" by revealing what you are saying "Yes" too.** For example, if someone asks you to attend a holiday party with them and you feel unwell, consider saying something that conveys your empathy for the other's request, expresses the needs you are attending to, and offers an alternative way for the other to get their needs met. "I imagine you want to have fun together at the party. I'm feeling exhausted and need to take some time to recharge my batteries by myself. How would you feel about asking Bill to go with you instead of me? I understand he is eager to meet new people."
4. **Pay attention and savor your acts of compassionate giving.** Each gift you give is an opportunity to celebrate and feel joy. See how many times you can catch yourself each day giving a gift whole-heartedly. Write them down in a gratitude journal, expressing gratitude to yourself for creating the world you want to live in!