



Women of Mission And How They Grow

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As I turn the corner into midlife, I find myself questioning many things — what sort of work I want to do, how I am spending my time and what legacy I want to leave in the world. Sometimes my pondering leads me to a deeper reflection on my hopes for my children. I want my daughters to be givers, to be women of mission — not to adopt my mission and my values, but rather to learn and experience the world and shape their own beliefs in a way that is true to who they are.

I want them to be philanthropic, but not necessarily in the sense of donating large sums of money and having their names emblazoned on walls. I am talking about women who have a deep concern about humanity and consider themselves givers in the way they think of others and in the way they serve. I believe that's philanthropy at its simplest and in its most basic form, reflecting values I learned as a child, beliefs that grew along with me and helped to define me.

In his book, *The Power of Story*, performance psychologist Jim Loehr states, "Beliefs and values are not inherited or coded in the genes... [and they] aren't just static tendencies we possess, but qualities that, at various key turning points in our lives, as well as in our day-to-day life, move our story this way and not that, or that way and not

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this"¹ If that is the case, then having my genes and some little notes about my hopes for them tucked into journals won't be enough for my daughters to become women with strong values and a sense of mission.

This sort of reflection brings me back to my own experience, as theological reflection often does. What were the steps along the way that brought me here, and how might I help my daughters discover what philanthropy means for them?

MODEL 'GIVING IS LIVING'

My inclination for giving certainly started at home. I was raised by two parents who believed in philanthropy deeply and modeled it well. Though their approaches were different, both conveyed to their children that giving was an important part of living. My mom, a shy individual, spent time volunteering at the parish when needed, and she gave funds to organizations dedicated to causes she believed in. I remember her keeping a pile of envelopes until December, and then, as the end of the year approached, she would make a number of year-end gifts. Money went to organizations doing good work in the community, and she considered this one of the ways she expressed gratitude to God for all she had been given.

My dad, someone who loved to be out in the community, chose to donate his time, talent and



'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'



treasure to causes that were important to him, including education, Boy Scouts and the church community. Witnessing my parents' dedication to philanthropy planted a seed that continued to grow as I attended Catholic schools and interacted with religious orders. The experiences I shared with religious men and women shaped me as I watched them care for the poor, heal the sick, feed the hungry, advocate for those with no voice, and I understood that whenever they did something for another, they did it for God (Matthew 25:35-45).

Knowing these examples shaped me, I try to be intentional in how I model for my girls my love of philanthropy. I want them to understand there are many ways to give, it is not just about money — attending events, building community and serving are also important parts of giving.

INSTRUCTION AND FORMATION

Education is one of the key things that can help shape our children into people with a heart and habit for giving. This is not just about what happens at school, it is about using daily life occurrences to highlight the values I want to instill in my girls. This year, my older daughter has a classmate with cancer. It provides a great opportunity to discuss thinking about others. We have a new reason to think twice about going to school sick. We participated in the fundraising drive that would help cover the costs of the student's treatments. It's all child-sized philanthropy, showing how to be thoughtful and giving in ways and circumstances that my daughter can understand now that will deepen as she grows. This is the beginning of formation, which is a lifelong process that will continue to grow and shape her through the years.

One of the key things religious orders understand is their mission expands when they provide instruction and formation for those serving in their ministries. Part of the process is learning their founding history, but more importantly, we learn how the order's charism is translated into ministry.

Throughout my years in Catholic education, I learned to integrate mission-related concepts that nurtured my growing sense of philanthropy: What did it mean to Live Jesus? How could I live my life for the greater glory of God? What does it mean to be men and women for others?

My years in Catholic health care expanded that sense of giving. What does it mean to believe in a provident God? How do we show mercy to the

other? How might we be called to tend to those society has forgotten?

These concepts are important for my daughters to learn if they are to become givers, therefore I must be intentional in setting up experiences for them. The book knowledge won't be enough; there must be opportunities to shape the heart through service.

EXPERIENCE

Attending Catholic schools, complete with moral education, formation and service opportunities, continued to nourish the seed of philanthropy in me. Serving the elderly, working with teenage mothers, feeding the hungry and providing education to inner-city children broadened my sense of who my community was and how I might be called to share my gifts and my desire to contribute to the communities I inhabit. These experiences not only shaped my practices, they were shaping who I was becoming.

In his book *Stages of Faith*, James Fowler states, "Our commitments and trust shape our identities. They determine (and are determined by) the communities we join. In a real sense, we become part of that which we love and trust."²

With that sense of joining communities in mind, I try to involve my girls in events and drives so we can share the experiences, and they can understand themselves as part of multiple communities. My older daughter Abby already has served at a soup kitchen and bought toiletries for the "children who don't have a home." My younger daughter Bella stood outside a grocery store with me, collecting items for a local food pantry. This is just a beginning for adding experiences of volunteerism that I hope will round out their concept of philanthropy and continue later in their lives.

INSPIRE

When I began to work in Catholic health care, I found myself constantly inspired. Learning the stories of the founding orders and watching them engage causes they so passionately believed in inspired me as well. I loved that they took on the causes no one else would undertake, and it touched something deep in me — I wanted to be more like them.

Over the last 15 years, I developed a trust in a Provident God. I embraced the idea that we treat all people with dignity, looking them in the eye and calling them by name. I had a growing desire to ensure everyone had access to education and

health care; I developed an interest in preventing recidivism; I supported retreat centers that provide space for people to explore meaning and purpose in life. The more I learned, the more my heart grew, and the more I wanted to give. Little did I realize, all these interactions and relationships were growing into a love for philanthropy. But finally, I recognized it: The inclination to give is a call, and it is part of my vocation.

Opportunities to educate and find inspiration need to begin now for my girls. Abby participates in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd³ at church. One of the goals of this program is to present religious concepts, and each week she is exploring themes that can shape her own sense of where she is being called. These early inspirations will continue to shape her as she grows.

I recognize God will call my girls to become most fully who they are, and those calls will likely lead them down varied paths in their lives. In the end, they must become who God has called them to be, and I need to let them have the freedom to decide how to embrace that call. My hope is they can be women of mission: thoughtful and giving, concerned about their communities and intentional about how they co-create the world we live in through their choices and participation.

ACT

Education and inspiration can motivate a person to give. But to truly be a philanthropic person, the inclinations must be translated into action. Fr. Gerald T. Broccolo, STD, defined spirituality as how a person finds meaning and purpose in his or her life in a way that is reflected in behaviors. So if the girls are to embrace a spirituality of giving, it can't only be considered philosophically, it must be translated into service of the other. And it must be bigger than just charity, which serves individuals but does nothing to address the communities in which they live. To really bring about the kingdom of God, we must move beyond char-

ity to philanthropy, which exhibits a love of humanity that eases suffering by changing the structures that hold people bound. Philanthropic action must be focused on the common good, making life better for all those in our communities.

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As I prepare for my daughters to turn 3 and 5 in the next few weeks, I am awash with feelings of how fast time flies and how I love the little girls they are becoming. Both demonstrate joy in life, thoughtful hearts and true love for those around them. My hope is these inclinations will continue to develop, and they will truly have a heart for others that can be expressed not just through charity that cares for people in need, but also in philanthropy that aims to change social structures. Now more than ever, we need people who care about their communities and are

willing to work for change that focuses on the common good, benefiting all those in the community.

It is never too early to start developing a spirit of philanthropy in children, which can develop as the years progress. I can nurture my girls through modeling behavior and creating experiences to shape them, enabling them to respond to the call they hear in their own lives to become women of mission.

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NOTES

1. Jim Loehr, *The Power of Story: Change Your Story, Change Your Destiny in Business and in Life* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 112-13.
2. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), 18.
3. National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, www.cgsusa.org.



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