

## PRACTISING WELL

# Adopt the giving lifestyle today. Now, with boundaries!

BY **KATIE  
COWAN**

LET ME GIVE YOU A BEAUTIFUL, RESEARCH-backed, thoroughly reliable recipe for a good life: be a giver with excellent boundaries. Boom. What a delicious recipe: rich with humanity, loaded with promise, and no raisins.

I was reflecting on this after checking in with what other lawyer advice columnists have been saying. The Americans are very intense. There is a lot of insistence that you work hard ALL THE TIME and NEVER GIVE IN, and PROTECT YOUR REPUTATION AT ALL COSTS, all of which is fine and good, if a bit myopic and terrifying.

Something that I and the angry advice columnists might agree on though, is the benefit of being a giver. Of course, when they talk about it they say, “IF YOU STOP THINKING ABOUT YOURSELF ALL THE TIME MAYBE YOU CAN MAKE US MORE MONEY,” said with a sneer and a chest bump to the other columnists. The angry advice columnists are very concerned with earning more money and do not think much of their young lawyer readers.

While I would decline the chest bump and the focus on material reward, the truth is that people who orient towards giving rather than taking generally have happier, more successful lives in the long-term. And they are this way not just because giving is by its nature good person territory, and they earn a shiny halo; they are this way because giving *feels* good.

Let me explain. Humans are social. We are hard-wired to care for needs other than our own, because humans need to care about each other for a group to survive. What this means is that it generally feels good to do something for someone else. It makes you feel connected, and if they are grateful it makes you feel liked and powerful. We get lovely, emotional rewards for giving.

I used to think that thinking of giving like this was wrong. I was raised Catholic, where there is a lot of focus on giving and a lot of admonishment for feeling good. But then I read Adam Grant’s book *Givers and Takers*, and Brene Brown’s *Daring Greatly*. These books set out all the evidence for the richness and ease that come from being a giver (with boundaries, which I will get to).

Though these scientists wrote very nice books, the simplest citation of this principle came from Kristen Bell in a podcast.

Bell is an American actress who has starred in *Veronica Mars*, *Frozen*, and *The Good Place*. She also famously gives a lot of her time and money to charity, including helping homeless families move into new homes, spontaneously offering shelter to hurricane victims, and giving money to countless charities. When asked why she does it, she says she feels enormously fortunate in her life and a duty to share her good fortune. But she emphasises that she mostly does it because the giving makes her feel good. It makes her feel connected to people. She has anxiety and depression, and she finds that giving, especially her time, makes her feel better. For her, the simple fact that giving feels good is a good reason to do it.

There was a period, not as distant as you might think, when I wanted to be Kristen Bell, so I found this very persuasive.

Note, of course, that generosity runs the gamut from time and money given to charity, right through being thoughtful and warm to people, learning names, standing up for yourself or others, writing thank-you emails, pre-empting someone’s needs, being aware that someone is struggling and offering them a kind ear, affirming people’s work or courage or their own generosity, and any other big or small thing besides. It is not so much about resource distribution as it is a mindset of care for people.

All of this is subject to the giant caveat that successful givers have clear, robust, well-enforced boundaries, including being mindful of takers looking to exploit. Successful takers do not give indiscriminately. To be a successful giver is not to be weak or walked over, to give just because she was asked. (Equally, it is also not to stop being a giver when the occasional churlish person does ask or take too much.)

Let’s come back to the legal and work context. Law is a notoriously competitive

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