

HOW TO BE A STAR

2 Corinthians 8:2-4
9th in the Series, "Antifragile"

INTRODUCTION

I suspect that many of you, like me, miss some aspects of childhood. Some of childhood I don't miss at all. For instance, I don't miss going to school or experiencing the unmitigated cruelty of other children. I don't miss the travails of navigating through adolescence with all its awkwardness, self absorption and emotional angst. But what I do miss is the wonder of childhood. For kids, life is, well, larger than life. It is filled with possibility and excitement. It can even be magical. Laurie and her family used to spend their summer vacations at her grandparents' cabin on Puget Sound. Those were sweet times that now resonate in her mind with great memories. For her they were times of family togetherness, relaxation and adventure. One of her memories was of going with her brothers and cousins to special places in the woods. One of those was a magical place they called "fairyland." Several years ago we visited that cabin. Laurie took us to fairyland. To say it was a disappointment would be an understatement. There was nothing mystical, magical or exceptional about it. It was just a place in the woods identical with every other corner of those woods. The magic was all in their childhood minds.

For me, one of those childhood special memories had to do with trains. Jerry and I loved riding on the train back to Cleveland to visit our grandparents. To this day we have a powerful and nostalgic love of trains. While Laurie and I were up in the northwest recently we went for a ride on the Amtrak. Sadly, there was nothing magical about it. It was just a way to get from one place to another.

I saw the excitement of childhood displayed recently when Laurie and I went to Disneyland. We had just gone on the Space Mountain. We both felt the need for restrooms so we went to the ones next to the ride. While I was in the men's room two young boys came in, obviously brothers. The younger one insisted that he did not need to use the facilities. He was fine. The older, obviously wiser brother said to him, "you'd better go now because we won't be able to go when we're in space." In their minds those two little boys weren't preparing to go on a thrill ride at an amusement park, they were just about to blast off into space.

We cannot become children again, nor do we want to. But is it possible to restore the exuberance, enthusiasm and magic to life even when our childhood is but a distant memory? Can we have a young spirit no matter the age of our body? Imagine that we can have that enthusiasm and joy in any and every circumstance, whether good or ill. That certainly would cause us to be more antifragile. But is that possible? I believe that it is, but one element of that enthusiasm is quite surprising. Today we will look at a passage of Scripture that reveals one of the keys to experiencing a life of joy and exuberance. I suspect you will be surprised by what it is. This key appears in 2 Corinthians 8:2-4.

EXPOSITION

THE MACEDONIAN CHRISTIANS: WERE DEALT A BAD HAND

1. You can read about the founding of the churches in Macedonia in Acts 16-17. The churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea were all founded in a context of riots. For instance Acts 17:6 says that in Thessalonica after a riot the whole city was in turmoil. The new Christians in that area faced animosity, hostility and outright persecution. Some of them had been beaten by mobs.
2. We see scenes of rioting in the Middle East on television with large crowds yelling and throwing rocks, the only thing keeping them at bay is police or soldiers with weapons. Imagine the same kind of scene where you are the target of the mob. That's what the Christians faced in one locale after another in Macedonia. Life for them was uncomfortable, quite dangerous and tenuous.
3. Look at how Paul describes their circumstances in verse 2. They lived in "the most severe trial" and "extreme poverty."
 - a. The severe trial was the hostile environment they lived in. Imagine what it would be like to be ostracized by former friends and even family. You would be criticized and excluded by people you thought cared about you. That alone would be hard.
 - b. But added to that was the threat of violence or abuse. Some of your brothers and sisters in Christ had already been beaten and even tossed in jail. You never knew what might happen next, but you would know

that if someone did attack you the authorities would not protect you nor would your attackers be brought to justice.

- c. With the oppression came extreme poverty. It's not hard to figure out why. Recently I read a book called *Southern League* that is about the first integrated minor league baseball team in Alabama back in 1964. In the book I got glimpses of the horrible racism that existed in the south back then and the effects it had. African Americans were denied the opportunity to go to good schools, to hold good paying jobs, and even to be paid equal to white workers who were doing the same job they had. They were doomed to poverty. This is what the Christian minority was faced with in ancient Macedonia.
- d. In many cases they were shut out of jobs or lost their businesses because their clients refused to do business with them. They might have their possessions simply taken from them.
- e. Hebrews 10:33-34 gives us a glimpse of what could happen to persecuted Christians in the first century. "Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions." If you had your money confiscated, were thrown out of your house, were fired from your job and couldn't find another because of your faith, what would happen? You would be destitute and dependent totally on the charity of others. But the only people who would give you charity would be other impoverished Christians.
- f. The word that Paul used to describe the poverty of this group of Christians was used by Aristophanes in a passage in which he spoke of a very poor person who refused to be identified with people in "extreme poverty" because it was beneath him. It meant to live in destitution, to literally have nothing. They woke up each day with no food, wondering how they could possibly find enough food to get through another day, with little to no hope of any positive change in their circumstances.

WERE FILLED WITH JOY

1. Given their circumstances what would you expect to be the state of their spirits and their morale? I would expect them to be down, discouraged, weary and maybe resentful. The best I would hope for would be “faithful,” “committed despite all that was happening to them,” “enduring and persevering.” Hebrews was addressed to people in a similar situation and they were deeply discouraged. The writer of that book had to say to in 10:35, “do not throw away your confidence” and “you need to persevere” because they about to give up.
2. I remember talking to a Christian brother years ago who had been through a painful series of disappointments. He had lost his job, had spent a couple of years trying to get another but had seen only discouragement and rejection. His family’s financial condition had degenerated into a total meltdown and nothing he could do seemed to hold out any hope of stopping the bleeding. He was seriously down and feeling hopeless, and I didn’t blame him. I helped as much as I could, but it was like putting a bandaid on a fractured leg. He was discouraged, down, and asking where God was in his miserable situation. He wasn’t denying his faith, but the flame of his faith was faint and flickering, and lacking in hope and joy.
3. My friend’s situation was rosy compared to the Macedonian Christians. Yet Paul said they had “overflowing joy.” They had an abundance of joy. This is astounding. In their destitution, their tenuous circumstance full of ugly abuse from others with the constant threat of violence, they were so full of joy they couldn’t contain it. It overflowed their own full hearts and spilled onto other people around them. Obviously their joy did not come from the circumstances of their lives. It was inside them, and it came from the hope and love God had poured into their lives. That grace from God was so good, so powerful, it was worth more than any good circumstance they could ever experience.

GAVE TO OTHERS GENEROUSLY

1. Verse 2 is a statement that I find incredulous. In the terrible, grinding poverty and the extreme stress of their circumstances of the Macedonians their joy overflowed into rich generosity. How is that possible? They had nothing, so what were they going to share?

2. Paul was in the process of raising money to help starving, persecuted Christians in the Jerusalem area. The Corinthians immediately responded when they heard about this project. In fact, verse 16 says, “Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.” They jumped in enthusiastically. Unfortunately it was an emotional response. It was shortly followed by buyer’s remorse. After telling Paul they were going to give a lot they had second thoughts and decided maybe they had other priorities. Their promised donation never showed up. It’s like when a church is raising funds for some project and people pledge a certain amount toward it, but then, somehow the money doesn’t show up.
3. Paul decided to not even talk to the Macedonians about it because they needed the help as much as anyone. But they protested. Verse 4 says they “urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service.” They badly wanted to give, even though the people they were giving to were no worse off than they themselves. A friend of ours went to Haiti several years ago on some mission trips. She told us the poverty of the people they ministered to was just overwhelming. But there were two things about those people that stunned her. First, in the throes of their terrible destitution they were happy and full of joy. They were exuberant in fact. Second, they wanted to give to the people who had come to serve them. In fact, they insisted. They, who had literally nothing, found ways to scrounge something together to give to rich Americans because their joy and gratitude simply could not be contained. That’s what happened with the Macedonian Christians in the first century.
4. That is a theme not uncommon in this world. French journalist Dominique Lapierre went to Calcutta to investigate the slums of Calcutta. He went to an area named Anand Nagar, "the city of joy," which became the name of the book he wrote about the experience. It is the oldest and worst of Calcutta’s slums. There 70,000 people live in an area the size of 3 football fields. It is a place of raw sewage, pollution, and disease. The homes are hovels of 50 square feet that house 10 to 12 people. The people literally don’t have enough to eat. Yet they generally are joyful. He tells of a Catholic priest who came to minister to them. He wrote (p. 60), “discovering that he was going to stay among them, they all wanted

to organize his household. Some offered a bucket, others a mat, an oil lamp, a blanket. The poorer they were, the more eager to give.”

IMPLICATIONS

GENEROSITY HELPS US BE ANTIFRAGILE

1. If the Macedonians were like that in their circumstance doesn't that suggest they could overcome anything? To be joyful and giving in their situation is the epitome of antifragility. Proverbs 11:25 says, “A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.”
 - a. Remember that in the Old Testament physical things were frequently used as images for spiritual truth. So the physical prosperity mentioned in this verse pictures spiritual prosperity to come in the new covenant. The Macedonians were definitely generous since they wanted to give generously even when they had nothing to give. What this Proverb tells us is that somehow they would gain, they would prosper, their souls would grow more alive and more fresh through their desire to bless other people despite their own poverty. Is that not the very definition of being antifragile? In stress they became more alive! Exuberance and enthusiasm abounded through hardship.
 - b. Proverbs 22:9 says the same thing. “A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.” Do you want to do something really good for your kids? Be generous. Psalm 37:26 says righteous people are “always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed.” That tells us that God sees being generous as part of the character of a righteous person, and that a person who is generous brings a blessing into his own children's lives.
2. Many people have perceived the importance of generosity to having a full life, one marked by joy and exuberance.
 - a. John Bunyan said, “You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you.”
 - b. St. Francis said, “It is in giving that we receive.”
 - c. Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.”

- d. Everyone knows that generosity is a beautiful and graceful quality and they love to see it. There was a little picture of this that took place at a baseball game a couple of years ago. It happened at a game between the Arizona Diamondbacks and the Milwaukee Brewers in 2011. A 12 year old boy named Ian, a passionate D-backs fan, was at the game. Like most fans he hoped to catch a foul ball. One came quite close but bounced out of his reach right to an usher. The usher tossed the ball back and Ian caught it. Thrilled, he showed it to his dad. Then several people pointed out a boy a little younger than Ian who was distraught over not getting the ball. Seeing him, Ian immediately went over to him and handed him the ball. The scene played out on TV as the D-back announcers, Mark Grace and Daron Sutton commented. Seeing what Ian was about to do Sutton said, "Are you kidding me? This kid is going to do this?" When he handed over the ball Grace said, "That is big time, right there." Sutton said, "I can't believe I just witnessed that." Grace said, "That is awesome." Sutton said, "You, young man, are a star." He's right. If you want to be a star, be generous.
3. How does generosity bring us life and make us antifragile?
 - a. Victor Lebow, a retailing analyst, wrote in an article in *Futurist* journal, "our economy demands that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction in consumption." Studies have shown that the same part of the brain that is activated in worship also gets activated when we buy some new possession. So getting stuff masquerades as connecting with God. It pretends to be a spiritual experience. But generosity pulls the mask off materialism. It breaks its hold on us and frees us so that we can experience the real thing, real connection with God.
 - b. The unfortunate reality is that wealth and possessions gain a hold on our hearts. In fact we have seen already that what they promise is an illusion, so they can hold us captive to an empty lie that will never bring us the fulfillment and joy we long for. It is a delightful and light feeling to get free of that.
 - c. Perhaps you have had something similar to this happen. You have a beautiful new car. It is just gorgeous with its flawless, gleaming paint.

You drive to a store and must park in...horrors...the parking lot. You know what happens in parking lots. Thoughtless churls park next to you and carelessly swing their doors open slamming them into your beautiful car putting a ding in it. Someone backs out and, not paying attention, backs into your bumper, then just drives away. Now you have a dent in your no longer perfect, beautiful car. So you park in the farthest parking space in an area where there are no other cars.

- d. I contrast that with what happened with the car we had prior to the one we have now. We had it until it was 14 years old. The last few years it was a battle-scarred old warrior. A guy in our church who was starting a new business detailing cars told us he wanted to use his new polishing process on our car for free. We were delighted. He didn't know what he was doing. It looked good at first, but he actually removed some of the paint, so in its later years there were patches on it where the gray primer was showing through. It had a myriad of dings, nicks and dents. It didn't look great, but the cool thing about it was I didn't worry about it. I'd park it anywhere and if some jerk banged into it, so what? What was one more ding or dent? There was a delightful freedom in just not worrying about it.
 - e. A few years after I graduated from college I was working in a ministry with college students. I lived in an apartment in Long Beach with a couple of other guys. One night while we were all out a burglar broke into our apartment and stole every item that had any value at all. Stereo, television, camera and equipment, guitar, all gone. After that when we left we didn't even bother locking the door. So what if some thief came along. What was he going to steal? We had nothing left to protect. So we didn't have to worry about it anymore.
4. Our stuff, our money and our possessions, get hold of our hearts. They preoccupy our minds, they make us fearful and threatened that something might happen to them or that we might lose them. Generosity breaks that hold on us and allows us to focus on what really matters, on what we really want to do in this life, which is to honor God and to bring joy and love to other people, for that's where life is found. I have this shirt I really like that I got back in 2001. When Toby was in high school he was in an event where he was supposed to wear a shirt like the one I had. He

asked if he could borrow it. Back in those days Toby wasn't always the most careful with things like clothing articles. I said he could borrow it, but I began telling him to not leave it somewhere, to make sure not to misplace it or lose it, and to try not to ruin it somehow. He began to think having this shirt was too much responsibility so he said, "Uh, never mind, Dad, maybe I'll find something else." I realized what an idiot I was being. It was just a shirt! It was not a big deal. I finally came to my senses and said, "Toby, don't worry about it. You go ahead and use it and don't fret about it. It's just a shirt and it doesn't matter." I had to be set free from that shirt's hold on me.

5. In an article in *The Atlantic* magazine on March 20 this year Ken Stern addressed the question of charitable giving. Studies show that the bottom 20% of people in terms of income in our country give an average of 3.2% of their income to charity. Those in the top 20% gave only 1.3% Paul K. Piff, a social psychology research at UC Berkeley found that lower income people were more generous charitable, trusting and helpful to others than those with more wealth. He said "the rich are way more likely to prioritize their own self interests above the interests of other people."
6. Where we really get joy is in impacting other people. There is nothing better than making a difference in other people's lives and that's why generosity has the ability to restore to us the exuberance and magic of youth. It is because it simply makes life more fun.

GENEROSITY ISN'T AN AMOUNT, IT'S A STATE OF THE HEART

1. Corinth was a wealthy city. My guess is that even the little the Christians there had managed to scrape together in their half hearted effort to give was more than the Macedonians gave. But who was more generous? It clearly was the Macedonians because they gave when it hurt. The Corinthians only at that point gave grudgingly out of their surplus.
2. There's a familiar story from Jesus' life that illustrates this point. In Luke 21:1-4 Luke tells us, "As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins." So people were coming and giving to the Lord and making sure others saw how much they were giving. You can imagine some folks coming in and plopping down several hundred dollar bills. Wow, impressive, people thought. Then this widow comes and drops in

two pennies. Big deal, right? How is two cents going to help? But look at what Jesus said. “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

3. A person who is truly generous isn't measured by how much he or she gives but by their heart. A generous heart wants to give. It will find a way to give. It will rejoice in the giving. It may be money that it gives, or it may be a kind word, a listening ear, or it may give time, that most precious commodity of all. Whatever the need of the moment, the generous heart looks to give it. And the generous heart sees the resources God has entrusted to us as tools to be used to bless others. A generous person simply wants to share what he or she has with others.
4. As part of this same appeal to give Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:11, “you will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.” In other words, God will supply what you need. Why does he do that? Is it so that you can have lots of stuff? No, it is so that you can be generous in every situation, whatever is needed. This is not, as some shyster preachers cast it, a get rich formula. It is a statement that God will supply what you need, and the purpose of his supply is to enable you to be a generous soul who looks always to give to others, no matter what their need might be.
5. Daron Sutton said of that young man at the baseball game who gave generously, “you, young man, are a star.” God wants us to be stars, no matter how much or how little we have. That boy became a star by giving up a baseball. A baseball only costs around \$10 or \$11. That's not much. But it was what was needed. It was caring more about that other boy than about himself that made young Ian a star. That's the truth about generosity. It is simply caring about others, loving them, instead of being preoccupied with self, then acting out that love.

GENEROSITY IS A FUNCTION OF JOY AND PASSION

1. Note where the Macedonians' great generosity came from. It came out of their overflowing joy. It was not derived from their circumstances. Their situation was discouraging, difficult, daunting and dangerous. The joy was inside them. It was there despite their circumstances. It came from

- being free and happy because they knew the one true God, they knew he loved them and they were his children, and they knew they had the hope of eternal life. They were so full of joy over those things that they could be giddily happy even when their situation was grim.
2. I think of my daughter, Carissa. She waited for a long time for the right man to show up in her life. At times it was discouraging, even heart breaking for her. There was a lot of loneliness. But then Michael arrived, and he was the man she had hoped she would find but feared she never would. During their wedding at one point I said to them, "Today you both are marrying an imperfect person." Carissa interrupted and said, "No I'm not." What a joyful occasion it was when they got married. But they had one month together, then Michael was off to war. It has been a long, difficult separation for them. They had been told Michael would be home October 1. It seemed so long. Then it got worse as it looked like his return would be delayed even longer. Then about 10 days ago, we got the great news. Michael will be coming home in 2 weeks! Carissa learned that wonderful news right in the busiest season of the year. Her company has a national conference going on and she was under lots of pressure. And she didn't care. All of a sudden there was just joy. Just happiness, because Michael is coming home.
 3. That is how it was with the Macedonians. Yes, they had it hard, but they had something way better than the best this world can offer. And the joy of that was so intense they had to do something about it. They had to give not because it was a duty, but because they couldn't help themselves. The interesting thing about generosity is that it is both a result of joy and a cause of it. When we are joyful and grateful we will want to share and be generous, and when we do share and give to other people we experience more joy. This creates a really healthy and beautiful cycle, in which joy causes generosity, which causes more joy, which causes more generosity.
 4. What limits our generosity is losing sight of what we have. God has given us so much grace. Last week I woke up one morning and for no discernible reason I had some serious vertigo. I had to go to the bathroom, but I was so dizzy I couldn't stand up at the toilet, I had to sit down. As I sat there the room felt like it was spinning around me. It was awful. It made me nauseous. I had to go through much of that day

suffering because of it. It did get better. I was reminded that it is a glorious thing, a huge blessing, to wake up in the morning and not be dizzy. We should thank God every day for that no matter what else may be happening in our lives.

5. True generosity comes out of our hearts because we are so grateful, so happy with what God has done for us and are so full of love for him. When we are passionate about God generosity will naturally follow. Maybe you saw the little story about football player Brandan Jacobs. He was a bruising running back for the New York Giants, but after last season he was a free agent. It became apparent that the Giants weren't going to re-sign him because they didn't think they could afford him. So he signed with the San Francisco 49'ers. But about that time he got a letter from a woman who explained that Brandan was the favorite player of her son, Joe, an ardent Giants fan. Joe was crushed when he heard that New York wasn't offering him enough money. So Joe collected all his money and asked his mom to send it to Brandan. Enclosed with his mom's letter was his letter that said, "dear Brandan Jacobs, So you could go to the Giants, here is my money." There was \$3.36 in the envelope. Jacobs said he cried when he got the letter. Joe didn't give because he had to, because he was supposed to, he gave everything he had because he was passionate about Jacobs.
6. While we were on vacation we visited with friends who are pretty well off. As we were talking with the wife of this couple about some things they were doing at their home and some purchases they had made. She asked, "am I being a good steward?" The idea behind that question is that all we have actually belongs to God and we are managing it for him. That is a biblical concept, and I do think we should consider the question. But I wonder if it is the right angle for thinking about money. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:7, "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." The word translated "cheerful" is the Greek word *hilaros*. We get "hilarious" from it. Hilarious is a wonderful word. There are things I think are pretty funny. I like the Geico commercial that shows a camel walking through an office saying repeatedly to everyone "what day is it?" At the end he says "Hump Day, yeah!" It's funny, but it's not hilarious. Hilarious is laughing so hard you slap your knee and gasp for breath.

7. God wants us to be hilarious givers. He wants us to be knee slapping, gasping for breath in laughter givers. I think he wants more than that we would just be good stewards. Oddly the concept of being a steward is not nearly as prevalent in the New Testament as most Christians in our society make it out to be. We are only instructed to be faithful stewards in one verse, 1 Peter 4:10, and it doesn't have to do with money, but with using whatever gifts God has given us to serve others.
8. The "be a good steward" approach can make us dutiful. It could produce guilt in abundance. What it can never produce is hilarity. That kind of giving, hilarious giving, giddy giving, only comes out of joy and passion. I believe that what God wants is that we would be so passionate about him, that we would be so full of joy because of him, that we would be bursting with desire to give to him to the point of extravagance.
9. The simple reality is that when a person loves you more than you ever thought you could be loved, when you don't think you deserve that person and are astounded that he or she loves you, when that person seems to overwhelm you by continually giving in abundance to you, the natural response is to want to give to that person. Your heart bursts with desire to express love in tangible ways. Our anniversary comes up this week. I assure you, whatever we do to celebrate it, whatever I give to Laurie, it won't be enough to express the joy in my heart because of her. I will have to control myself to keep from bankrupting us in an effort to express love to her. And that is where true generosity comes from. So in the end, what we need is to be thrilled that God loves us, to remember his grace, to rejoice in him, then to express that love.
10. Most of us like to think of ourselves as generous. Who wants to be a Scrooge, a stingy, penny pinching miser? But to paraphrase Forrest Gump, generous is as generous does. Years ago Laurie related a story to me. She was driving and came to a construction zone where a lane was closed, causing a traffic backup. Cars had to merge from the closed right lane into the left. Everyone was being polite about it, each car in the left letting one car to cut into the lane in front of it, each car in the right waiting its turn to cut into the lane. Except for one driver. She was in a recent model luxury car, driving in the left lane and obviously impatient.

She drove right on the bumper of the car in front of her and wouldn't allow a breath of space because she was having none of allowing a car to merge in front of her. And she didn't. A car tried but she refused to yield so the other driver had to wait until she passed. What caused Laurie to take special note of the incident was the bumper sticker on the back of the woman's car. It said, "Practice random acts of kindness." Evidently the woman needed more practice. In her mind she was a kind person who did random acts of kindness. Somehow she couldn't see how her actions were very unkind. If we want to be generous we will have to actually give generously, of our time, our efforts and our money. In his book, *Antifragile*, Nassim Taleb discussed domain dominance. This is a description of an odd fact about humans. We have difficulty transferring a principle we learn from the context in which we learn it, the domain we discover it in, to the larger world around us. Domain dominance allows a woman to encourage others to practice kindness while being unkind. And it allows us to agree with the concept of generosity while failing to be generous on a continuing basis.

11. In the end, the key is gratitude, joy and love for God. We can't help ourselves from giving to that which we are passionate about. So practice gratitude, love God, become passionate about him, then let that passion out by giving of yourself to others. Learn like Ian at that baseball game to be a star, and do that by giving.