

Sharing a Gift

by Jefferson McKenney, MD, FACS, FICS, ASPE



Dr. Jefferson McKenney with an Ortho Clinic patient

Still and silent she sat dead-center of the bed. Dark eyes locked on mine, she seemed like a little mouse surrounded by hospital sheets, her right arm engulfed in the big splint bandage from the emergency room. Up until this moment, she was just the next problem—the source of the X-ray of “the 5-year-old with the bicondylar humeral fracture.”

Dra. Elmi, *la doctora de turno* (the doctor on call) in the ER, had presented the “little mouse” between the second and third operations of the day. Now, we were between the third and fourth. I double-checked the 5-year-old’s name from her record, found her bed number on the in-patient board to which she had been added when she was admitted, and I was now standing at the end of her bed—though I was thinking of my own daughter when she was hurt, a long time ago.

In Spanish, I said, “Maria Elena. That’s you, right?” Her gaze unwavering, she made the slightest of nods. “That’s a pretty name.” Then I—the gruff and gray old surgeon in scrubs—

introduced myself. And although I knew the answer already, I asked her, “How’d you hurt your arm?”

After a few seconds of silent stare-down, I looked over to the middle-aged woman sitting at Maria Elena’s bedside. She offered, in Spanish, “She was getting mangos and fell, poor little bird.” This woman seemed a little too old to be Maria Elena’s mom, and she spoke like she was Maria Elena’s *tia* (aunt) or *abuela* (grandmother).

Still, wanting to get the word from the horse’s (mouse’s?) mouth, I nodded, then turned, and asked, “¿Cuándo comiste por última vez, María Elena?” (“When is the last time you ate, Maria Elena?”) Still as a statue, black eyes never turning away, she kept her peace.

I glanced over to her... *abuela?*... *tia?* She turned to Maria Elena and said, “¿Cuándo comiste, mi amor?” (“When did you last eat, my love?”)

With her eyes still locked on me, Maria Elena made an almost inaudible little bird chirp, and her bedside guardian said, “*No come desde ayer!*” (“She hasn’t eaten since yesterday!”)

Sensing the relentless push of the “turn-over clock” (the time between one operation and the next) and needing to get some kind of informed consent from someone, I asked the woman at the bedside whether she was Maria Elena’s “family.” When the woman told me she was actually here with her grandson—as she pointed across the pediatric ward with her chin and a turn of her head—it all began to make sense to me. The poor, in general, and the Honduran cultural personality, in particular—perhaps because they can so easily relate—tend to be very sensitive to the plight of someone else’s vulnerability. They tend to be generous with what they have, which usually consists of time and caring. They often share food, intimate medical details, and nursing duties. Medical personnel often have to work intentionally to sort out who is related to whom... and who is simply a “just-met” best neighbor.

As the neighborhood *abuela* turned back from her chin-pointing, I asked, “Do you know where her mama is?” She offered that she had heard that the little girl’s uncle had brought her down from the mountains *en bestia* (on horseback) and that he had gone back to get her mom.

The turn-over clock was calling me back to begin the next operation. So, not having the time to conjecture with the neighborhood *abuela* about just how long might be the travel time *en bestia* to and from this unknown village, I told them both that, since the fracture would need to be put into place and pinned under anesthesia, I would have to talk to her mom before we could fix her arm in the operating room. I said we would try to do that later that day, so Maria Elena shouldn’t eat anything yet, due to anesthetic precautions. They were both nodding as I hurried back to the operating theater and wondered what Maria Elena might have understood about “pins” and

“anesthesia” and what that had to do with her eating, since she didn’t have any food.

The fourth case was a slog, and it was after 6:00 p.m. and getting dark before we finished. The operating-room crew needed to get home, and we needed to get home. So, we called it a day—at least for the non-emergent surgeries. We would have to pin Maria Elena’s elbow the next morning. By the time I remembered that she still hadn’t eaten since yesterday, the cafeteria had shut down. I had some oranges that a patient had given me, and—looking around in a desk drawer—I found a little package of cookies.

So, I brought an orange and that little package of cookies down the hall to the pediatric ward. I laid them on Maria Elena’s bed and told her they were hers and she could eat them. She moved not a muscle but continued the stare-down game that kids here call *el serio* (the serious). However, if we had really been playing an *el serio* game, she would have lost on a technicality, as a tear rolled down her cheek.

There was still no sign of her mom, and I had some loose ends to tie up: the last operative note, some orders, inform the techs about which instruments we should have ready for an operation the next day—that kind of thing. So, I told Maria Elena I would come back.

Thus, 45 minutes later, on my way out, I checked in on our little orphan. Either the nurses or the neighborhood *abuela* had given her a coloring book and a crayon, and she was doing her level-best to artfully apply that crayon with her non-dominant hand. I still needed to talk to her mom, so I asked the woman who was, by now, considered the adoptive *abuela*, “Did her mom get here yet?”

“Not yet,” she said with that universal shrug.

Then, I noticed that the orange and the cookies had been set over on the little bedside table, untouched. I said, “Princess, you haven’t eaten

your food.” She paused but, concentrating on her artwork—and on ignoring the doctor—she didn’t look up. So, I looked over to the *abuela* with the universal look of question on my face.

“I told her that, too,” the *abuela* said, “but she wants to wait to share it with her mommy.”

Recently—well, okay, more than a month has now gone by—Kathy Kendrick graciously suggested, “Perhaps you’d like to write an article for *Telicom* to share your experiences and knowledge with our membership.” For several reasons, this seemed like a *daunting opportunity*. An *opportunity* because this is a pretty selective membership of the gifted, a society to which I belong, with which I share some things in common, but of which, on a personal level, I’ve never met a single soul. *Daunting* because there is a lot of potential for good here; and to not waste the opportunity, I would need to think carefully about how best to share our somewhat eclectic life’s commitment (the “what” of our experiences and knowledge) and to at least suggest the answer to the “why” question.

The explanation to the question of “what” we do includes founding and directing a couple of charitable organizations, a hospital for the poor, a foster children’s home, a bilingual school in a developing nation *en medio de quién sabe dónde* (in the middle of who-knows-where). All of that information, in addition to the number years we’ve done this, the roads and electrical systems put in place, the water systems built and buildings constructed, the statistics of patients cared for, the operations performed, the students matriculated, etc., are all reasonably well covered or at least mentioned on our website, *Loma de Luz* (<https://www.crstone.org/>). Anyone who would like to know more of the story of *Loma de Luz* may contact me at j.mckenney@thousanders.com.

But, to focus on the physics seemed to be missing the metaphysics. I am, after all, writing to Thousanders—members of the International Society for Philosophical Enquiry. I am also writing to a society of “people who score at or above the 99.9th percentile on a standardized psychometric test of intelligence,” i.e., $> +3\sigma$. That is an extraordinary gift, more easily quantified than qualified. But I will take a few swings at the extraordinary qualitative nature of your gift by offering a few comparisons to $> +3\sigma$.

- To begin with the obvious, in a city of a million, there are no more than a thousand of you.
- If you were a coin toss of a fair coin, you would be 10 heads in a row: $(1/2^{10}=1/1024)$.
- If your measure of intelligence were equated to a measure of height, as a US adult male, you would be taller than 6’ 5”; and as a US adult woman, you would be taller than 6’ 1”.
- If you were one of those fabled 12,000 able-bodied male students being timed in the mile run for the University of Illinois study, you would obviously place in one of the 12 fastest times. You would also be running that mile in 4 minutes, 52 seconds or faster. For a frame of reference, the US Army PFT fastest score is 6 minutes, 22 seconds for a mile (actually, 12 minutes, 45 seconds on a 2-mile run).
- If all of these superlative comparisons have given you the proverbial “big head,” consider that yours (for the above-mentioned 6’ 5” tall man) would also be $+3\sigma$, i.e., ≥ 62.5 cm, which is a very big head, indeed!

So, for this extraordinarily gifted group of people who claim at least some interest in philosophical enquiry, I would like to leverage the physics (the “what” we have done over approximately the last 25 years, and continue to do, at *Loma de Luz*) to consider the metaphysics, the broad concepts of

“why” we do this. I would like to do so by asking two questions—questions which I have come to believe apply to everyone, whether or not one cares deeply or couldn’t care less about the “whats” or the “whys.”

The first question is an outworking of Maria Elena’s story and the thousands of similar stories I have experienced related to the work of *Loma de Luz*. It is simply this:

Why would a five-year-old girl, hurt and scared, hungry and alone—who hasn’t eaten for more than a day—postpone her eating so she can share the only food she has with her mother?

She certainly was not motivated by something she had read or learned in school. She couldn’t read, she had never been to school, and that coloring book was probably the first book she had ever actually held in her hands. She came from a subsistence farming family isolated by many hours of difficult walking (or horseback riding) on trails up in the mountains, where there is no electricity, no phone signal, no roads, and no schools within walking distance. It is highly unlikely that Maria Elena was compelled to save and share her food due to some inculcated creed or religious instruction. Teleologically, I can see no Darwinian survival premium in the small, the young, the injured, or the weak choosing to starve in order to share food with someone only slightly more powerful.

I contend that she was acting out of a deeper and intrinsically human motivation. Maria Elena’s story is, of course, anecdotal. Yet, it is by no means anomalous. For more than 30 years of working in charitable settings—usually in developing nations throughout the world—it has been my experience, thousands of times, that human beings are deeply motivated to *share a gift*.

I am a Christian, and *Loma de Luz* is unapologetically a Christian work. Generosity is certainly a fundamental Christian virtue—e.g., from Christ’s own teachings, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). However, generosity is not an *exclusively* Christian virtue. It is esteemed as a virtue in most of the major religions of the world. Though perhaps more formulaic in nature, generosity is one of the *Pāramī*, the 10 perfections of Buddhism. Though more obligatory in nature, *Zakat*, obligatory charity, is the third pillar of Islam.

But people are also motivated to share a gift across religious lines and *in the absence of* religious education... as was the case with Maria Elena.

The drive to give seems to come from the realm of “The Law of the Heart,” which the Apostle Paul wrote about in his letter to the Romans: “Whenever the nations”—or, “the *ethnos*” in Greek—“who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness” (Romans 2:14-15). This is more a philosophical assertion than a religious one. And Paul’s conclusion did not occur in a vacuum. Three centuries earlier, Aristotle asserted that, in the highest level of human relations, “...one does the good *simply* (sic) for the benefit of the other” (*Nichomachean Ethics* VIII).

One century after the Apostle Paul, Marcus Aurelius formulated the following as fundamental stoicism: “... a human being is formed by nature to benefit others, and, when he has performed some benevolent action or accomplished anything else that contributes to the common good, he has done that for which he was constituted” (*Meditations* 9.42).

Aquinas ponders deeply and ploddingly on the subject of *Caritas*, with at least 36,000 words

in the *Summa*, such as, “Charity is compared to the foundation or root in so far as all other virtues draw their sustenance and nourishment therefrom, and not in the sense that the foundation and root have the character of a material cause” (*Reply to Objection 2*).

Descartes set forth *générosité* as “the key to all the other virtues.”

Hume listed charity high in his (long) list of *natural* virtues, relatively invariant across cultures.

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant humorlessly swings the sword of categorical imperative to slay the converse of generosity (i.e., he refutes the proposition that selfishness would be good).

Nietzsche considers the gift-giving virtue as an innate human potential (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Part One*).

I am admittedly even more poorly informed in Eastern philosophy than in Western, but it is my understanding that Confucius considered the altruistic quality of “Ren” (“humaneness”) to be the fundamental virtue and the unifying outward expression of Confucian ideals.

His contemporary, Lao Tzu, wrote, “The wise man does not lay up his own treasures.”

The point of this drive-by abstract of some of the all-time greatest philosophical all-stars is not to try to establish some *proof by consensus* of a specific answer to the original question. However, over nearly three millennia of the development of human thought and across multiple cultural lines and cosmologies, many of the most committed and greatest thinkers have come to reasonably

compatible conclusions. This realization does offer considerable *proof of concept* that the motivation to share is fundamental to the human constitution.

The second question begins first with the proposition that, “You have been given an extraordinary gift.” It is my hope that the majority of Thousands at least intuit through Paul’s “Law of the Heart” that, in some fashion, this proposition is true. To those who consider their 1-in-1,000 ability to be an *arbitrary and statistically unlikely but random occurrence* in a universe of *arbitrary and statistically unlikely but random occurrences* with no commensurate connection or obligation to anything or anyone, I would be glad to continue this discussion privately. And to those Thousands who don’t consider their intellectual capability to be anything extraordinary: you haven’t been paying attention.

But for those of you who can accept at face value the proposition that “You have been given an extraordinary gift,” the second question follows.

A 5-year-old girl, scared, hurt, hungry, and alone, is given an orange and a package of cookies. She waits to eat any of it so she can share it with her mom.

You have been given a life-long intellectual capability equal to or greater than three standard deviations above the mean.

Many of us may already be doing our best to live out the answer to the following question, but the question remains:

What are we doing with this gift?

—jcm Ω