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INTRODUCTION

Making a Difference

“I’m sorry, but there is no known cure. Medication can offer some relief, but you’ll need to change your lifestyle—drastically.” The doctor continued, “It’s commonly known as fibromyalgia. The good news is that it won’t kill you. The bad news is that you’ll probably have to live with it the rest of your life.”

The rheumatologist had just diagnosed the chronic pain and fatigue syndrome that had plagued me for over a decade. His words resonated in my mind as I tried to understand the implications of his revelation.

Years before, I noticed telltale symptoms, but they were minor. So, I just ignored them. During that time, I was engaged in charitable activities at church and elsewhere. Overall, I enjoyed good health and didn’t let anything get me down. I was even performing freelance artwork besides working at my full-time job. My family was growing and prospering. Life was good. Yet the pain and fatigue steadily grew worse. Though I looked good on the outside, my internal health was taking a nosedive—fast. I needed more sleep to function normally. Alternative foods and eating habits became a necessity, not a choice. I saw different specialists and tried numerous medications, but none provided answers or the hope of relief.

It wasn’t until the rheumatologist diagnosed my condition that I began to understand what I faced. I realized the need to reevaluate my commitments and change my lifestyle. It was already tough trying to get through a forty-hour workweek. I realized that I had to make some hard personal decisions—reducing or altogether eliminating many activities, even Big-Hearted ones, or so I thought.

Through circumstances that began to shape my life, I realized that Big-Heartedness was not what I previously imagined. Performing notable deeds, ministering to the needy masses, or volunteering at every opportunity might just not be what makes up Big-Heartedness. Maybe all I needed to do was simply use my God-given gifts, no matter how small, to bless others. At the time, it was all I could do.

I soon discovered that a simple phone call or encouraging greeting card could lift a person’s spirit. I found that a brief, heartfelt prayer and gentle hug

could relieve someone's burdens. The evidence stared me in the face. I saw that the simple, ordinary things I did for people had a more far-reaching impact than I realized.

Around this time, the subject of people with big hearts came up in a conversation with my friend Donna. Her husband, Doug, was someone I worked with for several years. He and I developed a friendship because we owned motorcycles and shared a common enjoyment of riding. Though some would consider Doug a bit rough around the edges, he was one of those people who you could always count on to do what is right. Thoughtful, honest, and always going out of his way to help other people even at the expense of personal comfort was the hallmark of his character. I commented to Donna that I considered Doug to be a Big-Hearted Person. I shared how I felt inspired to write a poem about him and others I knew who displayed Big-Hearted attributes.

After completing the poem, I mailed it to Doug and Donna and to my uncle, another Big-Hearted Person, as a tribute. During the span of almost a decade, the Lord used this poem to teach me about the importance of Big-Heartedness. He has also used it to inspire Big-Heartedness in others and recognize those who make a difference in people's lives—no matter how small their contributions seem.

But, what *really* makes someone Big-Hearted? What sets them apart from others—specifically from the self-focused populace who live life only for themselves? In your search to discover the answers, maybe the first step begins by me asking *you* a question.

ENTER THE BIG-HEARTED

When you hear about someone admired as having a big heart, what picture comes to mind?

Perhaps it's someone with a ready smile who is willing to help anyone in need, regardless of the cost. Maybe you imagine a person who serves others unselfishly, enabling them to live life in all its fullness. Possibly, it could be an individual who sees value in everyone and treats people with love and compassion.

Well, if you're like me, you see them possessing those same qualities too, and so much more. Simply stated, Big-Hearted People are just *ordinary* people with an *extraordinary* desire to bless others.

I can think of many wonderful Big-Hearted People I've met along the way and some I've known well for a long time. It warms my heart and puts a smile on my face when they come to mind—special people who have sown good

things into my life. They have always been there to love me unconditionally and help me through some of my most difficult times. They saw my potential and encouraged me to look beyond what I could see with my eyes—into the realm of faith and possibility. It's because of them and God's grace that I have achieved what I never imagined possible. These Big-Hearted People became the greatest influences in my life.

I readily think of two couples, Jerry and Shirley and Doug and Mary, who showed acceptance, love, and kindness to me when I was a headstrong, rebellious teenager. Their Big-Heartedness enabled me to change my life's direction. There was Walter, a master calligrapher, who mentored me for many years in the lettering arts and manuscript illumination. He never asked anything from me, except to share the same passion for the art of beautiful writing.

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However, there are kind souls who blessed me in ways that some people would consider insignificant, yet they inspired my life greatly. A greeting card sent from a friend who told me how much they loved and appreciated me when I needed it most. A phone call from a kindred spirit who sensed I was in need of comfort and encouragement. I vividly remember how generous friends from our church brought home-cooked meals to us when my wife was in the hospital. There also were those who blessed us financially during times of unemployment.

You probably know Big-Hearted People who made a difference in your life as well, or maybe you are a Big-Hearted Person making a difference in the lives of others; and if so, I wholeheartedly salute you!

The truth is, it doesn't take a college education, great wisdom, or even extraordinary abilities to be a Big-Hearted Person. William Wordsworth so eloquently wrote in his lines composed "a few miles above" Tintern Abbey, "That best portion of a good man's life, His little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love."¹

CREATING THE GOOD

If only we would take a moment to reflect on life and ask ourselves, What's life all about, and why are we here on this little planet? Is it just about how many possessions we can amass and personal pleasures fulfill? If that were the sum total of our existence, life would be so empty. God created us not only to obtain fulfillment from receiving but, even more, from giving. Some people constantly

seek self-gratification, because they think it satisfies, but find the more they fill themselves, the emptier their lives become. What a sobering dilemma this reveals. Continuously poured into like the Dead Sea but never pouring out, they become reservoirs instead of channels.

The truth is, it doesn't take a college education, great wisdom, or even extraordinary abilities to be a Big-Hearted Person.

Helen Keller once said, "Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose."² Personally, I can't think of a more worthy purpose than being Big-Hearted to my fellow human beings. In retrospect, when I think about the

former years of my life, I can truthfully say the most memorable events were times when I gave to others. Surprisingly, some would consider most of what I did to be little and simple at best. Yet it made a difference when sowed into the lives of others. Maybe you've seen people blessed because of your Big-Heartedness, and if so, you know exactly what I mean.

God grants gifts to each of us that we can use for the good of mankind, regardless of our situation in life. It is up to us to ask for His guidance and enabling to fulfill this awesome and wonderful commission. Winston Churchill simply but wisely stated, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."³ What we get may only offer us temporary pleasure, but what we give has the capacity to live forever. Of course, our motives shouldn't be to give just to receive. However, there exists an immutable law that God established, known as the law of reciprocity. It works simply by giving. Jesus confirmed this principle by saying, "Give, and it will be given to you. You will have more than enough. It can be pushed down and shaken together and it will still run over as it is given to you. The way you give to others is the way you will receive in return" (Luke 6:38, NEW LIFE). If you give love, you will receive love; if you sow kindness, you will reap kindness; if you show compassion, you will receive compassion. Do you see this? Think about what a major impact we could make in this world for good if we understood and practiced this principle.

MANKIND IS OUR BUSINESS

Most of us are familiar with the classic novel *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Jacob Marley's ghost speaks one of the most moving statements in this story while grieving because of life's misused opportunities. Scrooge, with faltering speech, begins to identify with Marley's regret and says, "But you were

always a good man of business, Jacob.” Upon hearing his words, the tormented ghost cries out, “Business! Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”⁴

Who are the people who mobilize to help and offer aid in the aftermath of natural disasters? Big-Hearted People! Who are the first individuals to show compassion and love to those suffering from a personal tragedy? Big-Hearted People! Who are the selfless ones providing hope and comfort to those with desperate needs regardless of societal status? Big-Hearted People! These are the kind souls who often ask, “How are you?” with genuine concern. Why? Because they’re just looking for an opportunity to do good for someone.

I realize that not everyone naturally shows Big-Heartedness. It’s obvious; just watch the evening news. It’s also evident that some people do possess a natural tendency to help others. Nevertheless, each of us has the capacity to love and act with Big-Heartedness. I’m not a naturally Big-Hearted Person but rather quite selfish. However, through heart-changing experiences that started with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, I began to view life differently. Now, I’m not where I want to be—yet; but thankfully I’m not what I used to be. As I exercise Big-Heartedness, I find that it’s progressively becoming a part of my nature. I want to be someone who sows good things into people’s lives instead of taking something from them. Do you know people who just drain the energy from you when you’re with them? You leave feeling emotionally and sometimes even physically exhausted.

Maybe you don’t show Big-Heartedness as often as you would like. Well there’s good news for you, my friend. I believe you can experience a change of heart. First, make the deliberate decision to become Big-Hearted. Second, pray that God will give you the grace and wisdom to make a difference in people’s lives. Third, put it into practice—right now. Once you do this, you will begin to see opportunities unfold at work, at school, in your neighborhood, in your church, or wherever your footsteps take you. Find out what people need and help to meet it. The more you perform Big-Heartedness, the more the desire will grow in you, especially when you see lives changed.

What we *get* may only offer us temporary pleasure, but what we *give* has the capacity to live forever.