

## Making Sense of the Generosity Equation

### *Thomas H. Lake Lecture Reflections*

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Last week, Dr. Christian Smith of Notre Dame, delivered the 12th Annual Thomas H. Lake Lecture entitled “The Generosity Equation: Donors, Faith, & Avenues to Giving.” To help us solve the equation, Smith offered a simple answer: it’s complicated. If some social psychologists are convinced that we humans are naturally selfish, others hold out hope that we are naturally self-giving. Refusing the either/or, Smith posited it as a both/and. It should not surprise us that we most often are a mix of selfish and selfless motives.

For fundraisers, philanthropists, and faith leaders, Smith made it clear that there is a lot we do not know. A large number of survey respondents often grossly over-report or under-report their giving. A majority admit that giving is a topic they rarely discussed. If many were eager to answer questions, others were anxious that such questions seemed a bit too personal. It continues to be clear that questions of faith and giving often remain a taboo topic that many find difficult to discuss.

There is a lot we don’t know, but despite that fact, we can take heart that there is also plenty that we do know and can be certain about, in reference to factors shaping generosity. Smith identified a number of factors associated with cultivating generosity. While avoiding explicit language of causation or correlation, it is clear that there are a number of factors in play. No one factor can predict generosity alone. Instead, these factors serve more like ingredients in a recipe that together influences the likelihood of generosity.

Through what we have learned at Lake Institute, several of these ingredients stand out:

1. **Personal Identity:** Understanding oneself as a giver
2. **Parental Modeling:** Having been taught and involved in giving from childhood
3. **Social Networks:** Alignment and influences of spouses/partners; friends; and social networks (Religious communities are particularly important here)
4. **Perception of Plenty:** Seeing one’s life and circumstances through an outlook of abundance over scarcity (often tied to less interest in materialism and acquiring things)
5. **Routinization:** Taking steps to make one’s giving as regular practice



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Again, we must remember Smith's caveat: it's complicated. Not all individuals or communities are the same. (Something that is also highlighted in an important new study: [Diversity in Giving](#))

We may know some of the ingredients that make up various recipes for generosity, but we must remember there is no exact recipe to follow. Rather it is a little of this, a pinch of that. Much less science, and much more conversations in the kitchen and around the table. For those interested in fostering generosity, Smith does leave us with some questions and action steps to consider:

1. Do you see yourself as a generous person? Have you asked yourself the question? 2) How do you talk about or model giving within your family or among friends?
2. How important are social networks in considering your giving (particularly faith communities)?
3. Is your giving a part of your regular practices?
4. Do you talk opening about why you give?

In solving the Generosity Equation, it seems that we are looking less for proof of generosity. Instead, our assignment, is to begin conversations, form communities, and shape practices that allow us to cultivate generous giving in the world around us.

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Christian Smith delivered the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Thomas H. Lake Lecture on March 12, 2015. The title of his lecture is "The Generosity Equation: Donors, Faith, & Avenues to Giving." A video of the lecture will be available on [Lake Institute's website](#) in April, 2015.



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