

Accepting the Gift—As Is

A Conversation with Molly Stranahan

Based on an interview with Pamela Gerloff

My grandfather and father set up trusts for my generation when we were small, as an estate and income tax avoidance device. When I received my first trust at age 18, my immediate reaction was to find out how much money, in total, would be coming to me. I wanted to know how much I could spend without running out of it before I died. That's when I learned there were other trusts, which I would receive at ages 21, 30, 35, and 40. Knowing this, I financed my college education and gave myself a yearly "allowance."

Receiving money at a young age led me to choose economics as my major, and later, to work in a bank, where I eventually

money well. Finally, around the time of the sale of Champion, we realized that we needed to separate "business" from other family issues, and we agreed to hire some consultants to help us work out our differences.

During our first try at it, we broke into small groups to discuss several questions the consultant had prepared for us. I don't remember what those questions were, but I sure remember one of the answers my grandfather gave in our group. He said, point blank: "I don't think it has been a good thing for your generation to inherit money, so I don't plan to give you any more." When we reported this back to the large group, the



Give thanks for unknown blessings already on their way.

—American Indian saying

Molly Stranahan's great-grandfather co-founded, with his brother, Champion Spark Plug Company, which went public in the 1950s and was sold in 1989. Ms. Stranahan has served on the board of the family's foundation, the Needmor Fund, for more than 20 years. She is also a psychologist and originator of the program, "The Path to Happiness." Her volunteer service to charitable and personal growth organizations includes acting as a coordinator for the Summer Institute, an annual program for inheritors.

became a trust officer. I wanted to know how money worked. In time, I was allowed to read the trust document for my inheritances, which is when I discovered that there had been misinterpretations of one of the trusts. I pointed this out at a family meeting, for which I had prepared a presentation about my generation's trust documents. My uncle (a lawyer and a member of the bank's board of directors), said, "We'll have to have a lawyer look at that to see if you are right."

I interpreted his comment as a lack of respect for my expertise. After all, my employer paid me to interpret trust documents, and I had even testified in court as to what trust language meant.

This was one of a number of incidents in which I felt that I was not considered an equal to my father's generation. I have since learned that when money comes through family connection, there is often some family "baggage" that comes with it. This was part of my baggage.

When I was in my 20s, we began to have two or three family meetings a year to discuss our investments and handle the business of our foundation. After awhile, we began to experience tensions between the generations. The younger generation felt that the administration of the trusts was controlling and infantilizing. The older generation felt the younger generation was greedy and couldn't be trusted to handle the

two members of my father's generation who don't have children echoed his sentiment, saying: "We don't feel a need to pass the money on to our nieces and nephews. We can spend it better than you, so don't expect anything from us either."

This forced a dramatic change in our expectations. The message we had always gotten from the family was not to be so impatient to have control of the money—we would be getting a lot more in the future. So I felt as if I were being disinherited.

I felt hurt and angry, and on the way home from that meeting I cried, as I wrote down my thoughts and feelings: "It is natural to leave your assets to your descendants. Therefore, I must have failed my grandfather in some way for him not to want to leave me money. He thinks I am not responsible or worthy. He must not love me." I discovered that I had the belief that if my grandfather didn't want to leave me money, it was because I had not proved myself worthy and I was not good enough.

When I got home I shared my feelings with my husband and he noted that he could see some validity to my grandfather's view. Some members of my generation were addicted to drugs. Some had never had a full-time job. Some simply were not responsible, perhaps because having money meant they didn't have to be.

At two intense retreats focused on separating "family" from "business" issues, we explored together

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thought we should all just share all that we have with each other. Through Ron's talk, however, I realized that I wanted to work within the capitalist system. I believe that what's lacking in our society is not a different type of economic system, what's lacking is generosity. The prosperous within our system must be generous. Everyone needs to have just *enough*, as Proverbs 30:8 says: "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God."

I decided to work as a fundraiser for Agros because my job with the organization is redistribution of wealth. I give people who have lots of resources the chance to help others increase their resources by earning for themselves. It's not just giving handouts. We loan land to farmers; they pay us back. It's redistributing wealth, at a snail's pace. Statistics show that people who receive a dole end up poorer afterward. (It's the same with the lottery.) The Agros model takes time, but it effectively breaks the cycle of poverty.

Every day, I am grateful for my job. I've been here two years and haven't regretted a moment of it. I like being on staff, because I am part of a team that is transforming lives. As a fundraiser, I'm able to give back from the resources I've been given, and provide ways for others to do the same. Many of my donor contacts are through people my family knows—people I wouldn't have known if I hadn't been born into a family of wealth.

When I was ready to throw all my things out the window, the passion to give was in me. At Agros I found a group of people with

the same passion, and with an effective strategy for redistributing wealth. Agros presented a viable choice that would allow me to actually do what I had originally wanted to do. When I realized this option existed in the world, I realized my hopes.

A woman in an Agros village once said to me, "I used to dream with my eyes closed, but now I dream with my eyes open, because I'm seeing my dreams come true." When I stop and think about my life, I could say the same thing. Her dream was to own land, and my dream was to throw my things out the window like St. Francis. I'm doing that now, but in a way that makes sense for me. My friend was right; sometimes it is best to embrace one's heritage. ■

Problem:

- In Guatemala, five out of 12 million people are living below the poverty line, on one to two U.S. dollars a day.
- A wealthy three percent owns two-thirds of the country's productive land.
- Nine of ten farmers don't have enough land to feed their families.

—The United Nations Development Report, 2000

Solution:

- Agros has helped to establish 17 self-sustaining villages in five countries and expects to increase that number to 50 villages in the next three years.
- Agros has helped 3,700 people break out of a cycle of poverty.