

The Joy of Really Knowing That You Helped

“A dog doesn’t need to know Plato to nurse her puppies. A plum doesn’t need an advanced degree to produce fruit”—John Thorowgood

John Thorowgood’s life was a model for us all. His career of helping people in extraordinary ways began in 1937 when he was a youth of fifteen. After working all weekend washing cars, he was walking home exhausted with a crisp \$10 bill in his hands. A homeless vagrant who asked him for a couple dollars approached him. Looking him over and feeling moved by successive waves of empathy and generosity, John reached in his pocket and gave him all that he had. In his autobiography he would later write: “With a kind of spiritual foreknowledge, I somehow sensed that my mission in life was to help everyone in the same way I helped that old man.”

He didn’t know, however, that the vagrant was an alcoholic. Overjoyed with the money, the man purchased two fifths of vodka and that night accidentally drank himself to death under a nearby bridge.

In college, John decided to study mechanical engineering because he had a knack for inventive thinking. In his senior year, however, he decided that psychology and counseling were more important ways to help people, but he stayed with engineering because he was almost done with his studies. He was one of the brains behind the natural gas turbine engine that, with only five moving parts, was three times more energy efficient than the traditional gas engine. He swelled with pride when he thought of how the engine, developed in 1962, would save hundreds of millions of barrels of oil, making for a cleaner environment and less dependency on an unstable Middle East.

Unfortunately, the owners of the company sold the patent to one of the three big auto manufacturers, who put it on the shelf. When John found out, he was told that the patent would destabilize the American economy and the world, and that the best thing to do would be not to use it.

Fortunately John was well-compensated and he switched to studying counseling. One of his first clients was a woman who was unassertive and had low self-esteem.

With John's help, she learned assertiveness skills and developed a more dynamic self-image. She enrolled in a combined BA-MBA degree and paid far more attention to her personal grooming and attire. The last time she contacted John, she reported that she had just won an internship at a prestigious downtown firm.

Her husband, however, was not handling her new self-esteem well. He became increasingly intimidated, jealous, and withdrawn. He later became depressed and she divorced him. A few years later, from the stress of having a high-powered career and trying to raise three children, her health suffered terribly; she began overeating, rapidly gained weight, developed high blood pressure, and died from a heart attack.

John never knew of her unfortunate fate. He had left counseling and joined the Kindness Corps to do volunteer work overseas. With them he applied his engineering skills to develop a new irrigation system for the Wabibi tribe of the plains of Central Africa. By the time he left after his second year, the Wabibis had had two successful growing seasons, boosting their production of food tenfold! On John's last day in Africa, the chief of the Wabibis made a speech in which he said that John had single-handedly changed the destiny of the approximately five thousand Wabibis forever.

He was right. A week later the Wamebes, the warlike ancestral enemies of the Wabibis, who envied their rivals' newfound prosperity, descended from the hills and massacred every single Wabibi man, woman and child, leaving not even an infant alive.

Of course you—and John—never heard of the massacre because the government of Wongo hushed it up, fearing a loss of government aid from the United States if the massacre made news. Rumors got out, of course; but in the absence of any official confirmation, they were quickly dismissed.

Meanwhile, back in the States, John was setting out on what was to become his greatest contribution to humanity. He realized that if individuals increased their personal effectiveness, they would have greater leverage to do whatever they wished. So he developed an assessment which would help people pinpoint their greatest personal bottleneck, and guide them to supply the missing ingredient to boost their effectiveness. His second great creation was the development of a program of ongoing support because, in his words, "ongoing growth requires ongoing support."

He developed seminars for both live and videotape audiences, that became quite popular among many Fortune 500 companies. John's efforts to spread his message of efficiency and ongoing support were not met with much success in the nonprofit and church communities, unfortunately, because these institutions attracted people who were less aggressive and less open to strategy. Sadly, however, recent research revealed that the people in his initial seminars who applied his principles most effectively included Bob Zelt who, as you may know, now runs a two-billion-dollar porn publishing company, and Doug Caine, the notorious inside trader of commodities.

John never learned of this because he passed away a year after he was diagnosed with colon cancer. Fortunately, he was able to spend his last year rather productively and happily. In 1978, the year he died, he donated a hundred million dollars to the small Latin-American country of Santa Laude, where his wife was born. He lived to see the full hundred million spent on improvements and food, which rapidly boosted the standard of living for everyone in the country. He also wrote his autobiography and lived to see it reach the number one spot on the *New York Times* nonfiction list. Always thinking ahead, he had wisely set up a trust fund for the profits to be invested and the interest donated to the poor in perpetuity.

When he died, he was only fifty-one years old. On his deathbed he gave thanks to God for his life of service. He also was thankful for God's constant guidance, for he said that he honestly could not name one single person whom he had ever harmed.

Now it's 1998, twenty years after the massive infusion of funds into Santa Laude. The boost in the standard of living, unfortunately, caused an immediate increase in the population. The many children born then are now having many children of their own. As a result, Santa Laude is rapidly replacing Ethiopia as the world's most destitute nation. On the good side, John Thorowgood's trust fund from his autobiography has been providing \$200,000 a year in aid to poor countries. On the bad side, however, the funds that generate the interest have been invested in socially irresponsible companies. Notably, one of them is the world's greatest supplier of land mines, and another is the world's third greatest producer of acid waste. Not counting

the loss of life, these companies together do yearly damages estimated at upwards of \$1,000,000 a year. In perpetuity.

Oh, I forgot to mention that the title of John's autobiography is *The Joy Of Really Knowing That You Helped*. It's available at quality bookstores everywhere, and I highly recommend it—because John Thorowgood's life was a model for us all.



I love the story's irony. The main character has harmed every person he's ever come in contact with, as well as people he's never even met. And yet, he goes to his grave so convinced he's helped others that he has written a book about it. He's made many different mistakes in trying to empower others. Answering the following questions will help you grasp the significance of the story.

Discussion Questions

1. Was John just a victim of bad luck, or were there things he could have done to make his attempts to help others more successful?
2. What principles of how best to help others can you derive from this story?
3. Reflect on the situations in which you're currently helping others. Are you now making any mistakes in the way you are giving power or helping others?
4. When you empower someone, you can't be sure how they'll use the power. Is there any way you can ensure that the skills you teach will not be used counterproductively?
5. Some readers of the story feel that it is about "entitlement"—the idea that John as a white male feels that he has the right to interfere in other people's lives. What do you think of this view?
6. When some readers read the story and realize how easy it is for their efforts to backfire, they may become pessimistic and feel like not even trying to do good. But how likely is it for all of our actions to backfire? How likely is it for us to do more harm than good?
7. How much truth is in the lead quote: "A dog doesn't need to know Plato to nurse her puppies. A plum doesn't need an advanced degree to produce fruit"? How is it that some "simple" people seem to do good naturally, while other people who are often more sophisticated and intelligent can err terribly?