

What Will I Give Back?

How to Discover What Your Soul Still Longs to Do

BY JOHN C. ROBINSON



Conscious Aging organizations encourage elders to contribute their time, energy, wisdom, and experience in “giving back” to the world. So when I retired, I was surprised by how much resistance I felt to getting involved.

First of all, it felt like going back to work—and I was done with the work grind. I didn’t want a schedule or obligations. Second, the world’s problems seemed so great, the obstacles so big, the answers so elusive, the possibilities so many, I just threw up my hands. And finally there was the problem of finding something that really spoke to me. This was more difficult than I imagined, but it may be the most important element of all. I have heard this same struggle from many of my older friends and the elders I’ve met at many conferences I’ve spoken at, so I think there is something really important here.

This question of how to “give back” did not resolve for me until I finally accepted who I really was at the deepest level. Why is such a personal search important? Here’s one answer eloquently expressed by theologian Howard Thurman. He said, “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

The journey of discernment. How do you find this work of your soul, this work that brings you alive? The answer often comes somewhere along the journey of *discernment*. As a psychologist, minister, and mystic, I view discernment from a spiritual and depth-oriented perspective. It implies a prolonged and heartfelt search for one’s truest vocation or calling: Why am I here? What did I come here to do? What really lights my fire? To answer these questions, I believe conscious elders need to explore several important discernment factors that will either intensify or diminish our passion and aliveness in giving back. Consider these factors when you’re exploring potential giving-back activities.

True self. This is who you really are inside, your inborn “given” nature. This self is hard wired—you don’t get a choice on this! You may be a high-energy, action-oriented person, a quiet reflective one, a hard-headed or soft-hearted person, a fixer or healer, an artist or intellectual, a mystic or a skeptic, a gardener or academic. You already know a lot about who you really are by how you act naturally and what you love to do. So finding your path is not about what you should do,

it’s about who you really are and what you’ve been given to do by your own nature.

The ego-soul relationship. Soul refers to the spiritual essence of the true self. I use the word soul to emphasize its deep and abiding importance in our life. The ego, on the other hand, is the “me” that’s in charge. (I am writing from the ego’s point of view.) In the long run, the ego’s most important job in discernment is to understand and support the soul so that we can share the inborn gifts with the world. When the soul is taken over by someone else’s ego and its agenda, or when the ego becomes too attached to its own importance or beliefs and becomes inflated, we lose touch with the soul’s vision and purpose. Then we can run busily in endless activities and not really achieve anything truly life changing.

The introversion/extroversion continuum. Some people thrive as extroverts, acting forcefully in the world in leadership roles, social organizing, campaigns, protests, and rallies; they get energy from social connection that feeds them. Others flourish as introverts, working best from their inner life in more solitary roles, one-to-one relationships, small groups, or contemplative forms of activism, such as prayer and visualization; they get energy and inspiration from solitude and deep self-connection. So we need to know whether we are an “out there” or “inside” person, for the spheres and means of our “giving back” will vary accordingly.

The changing experience of age. Aging is a profound experience. It will change your life. It’s also a movement from “doing” to “being.” In general, the young and middle-aged need to be active and goal-oriented. They’re busy in the *doing* mode. Conscious elders, those of us who have spent a lifetime on this journey of awakening, are full to the brim with wisdom, experience, heart, and soul and, as a result, have more access to the being mode. In the being mode, we increasingly act from the richness and depth of our own deeply seasoned nature, trusting the mulch of experience, no longer relying on externally defined goals, strategies, priorities, and authorities. This doing-being shift grows ever more important as we continue to age.

Shifts in gender energies. How we express this new depth of being also differs depending on how we use the inborn masculine and feminine energies and modes of being we all share. We express our archetypal masculine energies in competition, quest, and conquest. We express our archetypal feminine energies in nurturing, caretaking, and nesting,



devoting ourselves to nourishing children, family, hearth, and home. But aging can

change the balance of masculine and feminine energies. Some of us, having depleted our masculine aggressive energies, now need to express our feminine energies through caretaking and deep being. Others, having spent their feminine side, now need to express more aggressive and action-oriented activities out in the world.

The path of spiritual practice. Giving back takes on even greater personal significance when you engage your work from a spiritual perspective. You can integrate spirituality into your “giving back” in three ways. The first is sacred activism, in which the depth of your spirituality moves you to care for the world. The second way is through subtle activism, where a gathering of like-minded people creates a subtle force field to bring healing energies to traumatized places or groups. A third form of spiritual expression arises as you awaken divine consciousness within, transforming yourself and your perception of the world. In this third form, described in my book *The Divine Human*, the experience of our own divine being leads spontaneously to sacred action.

I believe that assessing the five factors noted above can help you find your most natural and meaningful way of “giving back.” To review, ask yourself questions like:

- What are the natural gifts of my true self?
- How well do I, as ego, support my soul in the expression of these gifts?
- Am I acting in alignment with my natural introversion or extroversion?
- Have I appreciated the changing experience of age and archetypal gender energies in this new time? And...
- Does my spirituality add a sixth dimension to my “giving back?”

As you can see, one size does not fit all. We are not meant to be cookie cutter social activists, and imposing the wrong expectations on yourself or another will only generate motivational and interpersonal problems. No one can tell you what kind of work or life you should seek; that job of discernment is yours. So honor these factors and let them guide and enrich your path to love and service. 🌍

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