



NIEN-HE HSIEH
ANGIE THURSTON
DEREK VAN BEVER

Joy in Service: Nipun Mehta on Designing for Generosity

"Service doesn't start when you have something to give. It blossoms naturally when you have nothing left to take." – Nipun Mehta

Nipun Mehta is the founder of ServiceSpace, a nonprofit ecosystem working at the intersection of technology, volunteerism, and the gift economy. In 1999, with four friends and no budget, he began building free websites for nonprofits – a practice that grew into a global network of more than 400,000 volunteers, projects reaching millions of people, and initiatives including DailyGood, Karma Kitchen, Awakin AI, and Awakin Circles, weekly gatherings of silence, reflection, and shared meals now hosted in cities around the world. ServiceSpace has operated for more than twenty-five years with no paid staff and no fundraising. After graduating from UC Berkeley, Nipun left a career as a software engineer at Sun Microsystems in his mid-twenties and has not charged for his labor since. He has been honored by the Dalai Lama as an Unsung Hero of Compassion and served on President Obama's Council on Poverty and Inequality. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife and longtime collaborator, Guri Mehta.

Becoming Nobody

A wave does not know what an ocean is. It only knows its own rising.

Growing up, I was a great efforter. I could largely out-effort others. To what end, I didn't know, but everyone seemed to think it was a great thing, so I kept going. High school tennis became Division I, then the Challenger circuit. A casual chess challenge at a lunch table became tournaments alongside professionals. Forty semester units in a single semester at junior college – not because any reason demanded it, but because the muscle of striving, once flexed, does not ask why.

Then Silicon Valley, 1999. The dot-com gold rush. My inner drive was wired one way, and here was a context in which everyone around me was racing to become a millionaire. A lethal combination.

At Berkeley, I got a dual degree in computer science and philosophy and landed a job at Sun Microsystems, optimizing C++ compilers alongside some of the most technically accomplished people

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in the field. By any measure, it was a dream. And yet I kept asking myself: Is this my arc? Is this really what makes me come alive?

I had chased enough things to recognize the mathematics. When I was number one in tennis, somebody else was not. The first time we were on TV — half an hour live on CNN, right after Hillary Clinton, in the year 2000 — it was the same arithmetic: if I'm on this screen, you're not.

I wanted to play a different game, where my winning didn't make you a loser.

That instinct had roots I am still uncovering. I was born in Ahmedabad, in the city where Gandhi built his ashram. Though I didn't absorb the Gandhi story until later, I absorbed something older and quieter: a culture of giving. In India, you brought chocolates to school on your birthday. You gave on occasions of joy, not just received. When my family moved to Santa Clara, California, when I was twelve, that reflex traveled with us — the way birds carry seeds to new soil without knowing they are planting anything.

I was wired left-brain, skeptical by training. Yet there were encounters that fit no frame I had.

On a flight back to India as a teenager, a stranger from Japan settled into the seat next to my brother Viral and me at our layover. He was lifting a musical instrument into the overhead bin when he stopped and just stared at us. Twenty-five seconds, maybe. An abnormal amount of time. Finally I said: Can I help you? And then he blew our minds. He knew things about our lives he had no way of knowing. We ended up meditating together for the rest of the flight. He showed us that physical reality is not the only reality.

One afternoon at Berkeley, I was on my way to a midterm, moving fast, going in a straight line the way I always did. Out of the corner of my eye, a man hobbling on the sidewalk, trying to catch a bus he wasn't going to make. And then a sudden, overwhelming movement in my heart: I want to give him my legs. I was going to be late for my midterm. But I sat down right there on the street and sent him love — what you might call prayer, though there are a thousand words for it — in the form of my legs. The bus driver saw the man, stopped at a non-stop location, and waited for him to board.

Late one night, after a lab, I went for a run at 3am. A man appeared ahead of me on the dark street. It seemed like he had a gun. My first instinct was to run. Then a question arrived, quiet and precise: What if that were your brother? If that were my brother, I would have nothing to protect. I wouldn't wait for him to ask. Before he could take, I would give. The fear dissolved. An incredible expansion took its place. I kept walking toward him. Instead of looking away, I looked at him and smiled. He looked at me and smiled right back.

The evidence was accumulating — in the way evidence accumulates for a tree that leans toward light long before it can explain phototropism. Small acts done with a full heart left me more nourished than any achievement I had ever chased. All this trying to stand out, this becoming somebody — it was starting to feel less appealing than becoming less. Becoming nobody.

From the reference point of the ego, that nobody feels like a loss. From the reference point of the field, it is like swimming in the ocean.

I quit my job and have not had one since.

The Inner-Net

The mycelium does not issue a press release. It just moves the carbon.

In April 1999, four of us walked into a homeless shelter in San Jose and said: *We want to help. We don't know how. We just want to give, for the love of it.* We ended up building them a website. It felt good in a way that was hard to explain — the way it feels good to carry something heavy for someone, not because it is efficient, but because your arms were free. So we told our friends. They told theirs. Within months, four became forty became four hundred. The organization that eventually became ServiceSpace had assembled itself the way a murmuration assembles: no one calling the meeting to order.

We made three rules, which turned out to be the creative constraints that changed everything.

First, we would be entirely volunteer-run. Instead of five staff working forty hours a week, we would have forty volunteers contributing five hours a week. Same output, radically different energy. What we were unleashing — though we wouldn't have had the vocabulary for it then — was compassion capital: the vast, largely untapped reserve of human goodwill that conventional organizations never think to draw on. It turns out there is an enormous difference between labor you purchase and labor that arrives because it wants to.

Second, we would not fundraise. This was considered naive, even reckless. But we had watched too many beautiful organizations spend their tenth year trapped in grant cycles, their twentieth year photographing their own work before they'd done it. We wanted to focus entirely on adding value, not demonstrating it. A tree does not prepare a quarterly report on its oxygen. We never pitched a story to the media; the CNN appearance found us.

Third, we would honor small acts and trust that when they connected, something larger would emerge. One plus one would be greater than two. That bond — between acts of generosity — we started seeing as what you might call synergistic capital. It is the compound interest of goodwill: invisible, patient, and eventually, formidable.

Over time, ServiceSpace became an ecosystem of projects that went far beyond building websites. All shared a single animating question: *What designs emerge if we assume that people want to behave selflessly?*

DailyGood, which began sending out one piece of good news a day, grew past a hundred thousand subscribers without a single solicitation. Smile Cards, printed in 2004 as an experiment, went on to number over a million in global circulation — small cards bearing a simple instruction to do something kind for a stranger and leave the card behind. Karma Kitchen, which opened in Berkeley in 2007, was conceived as a restaurant where your check reads zero. Your meal is paid forward by a stranger before you, and you can choose to pay forward for the stranger after. We had no idea how long the chain would hold. Four years in, it had served 26,000 meals and spread to cities across the country.

Standard economics is built on the opposite premise — that rational actors maximize self-interest. We were not naive about human nature. But we kept asking: what if the premise is wrong? What if, in the gift economy, it is the circulation of gifts that leads to the vitality of society — not hoarding, not accumulation? What if generosity is not a leakage in the system, but the system itself?

We called this approach "giftivism": the practice of radically generous acts that change the world. The marker of giftivism is that it is for the hundred percent. There is no enemy. There is no opponent. Gandhi practiced it. Vinoba Bhave, Gandhi's successor, walked seventy thousand kilometers across

India appealing to wealthy landowners — not through coercion, but through inner transformation — and redistributed more than five million acres of land to the poor. Bigger than the size of Kuwait. All he carried was his own willingness to change.

A seed does not argue with the soil. It enters it.

Making the Path by Walking

Six months into our marriage, my wife Guri offered a question that rearranged everything.

We had built ServiceSpace into something real — thousands of volunteers, projects reaching millions, a genuine counterculture to the logic of Silicon Valley. And Guri, who had been there from the very beginning, looked at all of it and said:

"These could just be golden handcuffs. Not as bad as the greed ones, but maybe just a different form. Can you renounce all of this — the work, the significance of it? Can you let it all go? And if you can't, it's got you."

The test of whether you hold a thing or a thing holds you: let go. If you can't, you have your answer.

She was right. So in January 2005, we sold everything we owned, bought a one-way ticket to India, and walked. We headed to Gandhi's ashram and walked south. Between the two of us, we budgeted a dollar a day — mostly for incidentals, which meant that for our survival, we had to depend utterly on the kindness of strangers. No exit plan. We ate whatever food was offered and slept wherever a place was found. Our only goal was to be in a space larger than our egos, and to allow compassion to guide us in unscripted acts of service along the way.

We walked 1,000 kilometers over three months. At the peak of summer, in temperatures hovering above 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Sometimes we were hungry, exhausted, frustrated. Our bodies ached for that extra drink of water, a few more moments in the shade, that little spark of human kindness.

I learned things on that walk that I am still learning.

I learned that a walking pace is the speed of community. At sixty miles an hour, peripheral vision collapses to forty degrees. On foot, it opens to nearly 180 — and with it, the world. We noticed the sunrise every day. At sunset, the birds would congregate for a little party of their own. Instead of adding friends online, we were making friends in person, over a cup of hot chai. Life came alive in a way that speed had made impossible.

I learned what the villagers already knew. A farmer explained it simply: *You cannot make the clouds rain more, you cannot make the sun shine less. They are just nature's gifts to take or leave.* When the things around you are seen as gifts, they are no longer a means to an end. They are the means and the end.

I learned what love looks like without the apparatus of wealth. Extremely poor villagers who couldn't afford their own meals would borrow food from neighbors to feed us. When we tried to refuse, they would say: *To us, the guest is God. This is our offering to the divine in you that connects us to each other.* Street vendors gifted us vegetables. An armless fruit-seller insisted on giving us a slice of watermelon. I still remember the woman who generously gave us water when we were extremely thirsty — only to later discover she had to walk ten kilometers at four in the morning to get that one bucket.

There is a kind of wealth that accounting cannot touch. We kept stumbling into it.

I learned what acceptance actually costs. One evening, exhausted and hungry, we approached a rest house along a barren highway. A sign announced that guests were hosted at no charge. I stepped inside eagerly. The man behind the desk asked: *Are you here to see the temple?* A simple yes would have granted us a full meal and a room for the night. But it wouldn't have been the truth. So instead I said: *Well, technically, no sir. We're on a walking pilgrimage to become better people. But we would be glad to visit the temple.*

Sorry. We can't host you.

Something about his curt arrogance triggered a cascade of negative emotions. I wanted to make a snide remark and slam the door. Instead, I held my bruised ego in check — and in that state of physical and mental exhaustion, it felt like holding a live wire. But through the inner turmoil, a voice surfaced: accept the reality of this moment. I let go of my defenses. I turned to leave.

Perhaps the man sensed this shift, because he called out: *So what exactly are you doing again?* After my explanation, he said: *I can't feed you or host you, because rules are rules. But there are restrooms out back. You could sleep outside the male restroom, and your wife can sleep outside the female restroom.*

That night we fasted and slept by the bathrooms — Guri on one side of the wall, me on the other.

As I went to sleep, a vision arrived unannounced: a couple climbing to the top of a mountain from two different sides. Midway through the difficult ascent, as the man contemplated giving up, a small sparrow flew by with this counsel: *Don't quit now, friend. Your wife is eager to see you at the top.* He kept climbing. A few days later, when the wife found herself on the brink of quitting, the little sparrow showed up with the same message. Step by step, their love sustained the journey all the way to the mountaintop. Visited by the timely grace of this vision, I shed a few grateful tears.

Three months later, the walk complete, we arrived at a monastery and sat in meditation for three months more.

When I finally sat, it was like nothing I had known. I sat like a mountain. I was the mountain. All the sensations in my body, all the thoughts — they were just little streams. And it was because I was rooted, paradoxically, in impermanence itself. The permanence that had weighed me down just started to flow.

The Spirit of Service

The two pillars of my life are meditation and service. They are the inhale and the exhale of the same breath.

Any time I'm still, I see reality more clearly. Meditation gives me insight into the nature of clinging — my deep habit of holding on. Service helps me flip that habit pattern. Any time I practice the smallest act of service — even holding a door, but with full heart, *may I be of use to this person* — that giving changes the deep architecture of my mind from everything being me-centered. In that brief moment, there is other-centeredness. Over time, all of those small moments lead to a different state of being where, ultimately, it becomes effortless. It becomes who I am.

Service is not something I do. It is an expression of inner transformation.

There is a distinction I return to often: grit and grace. I had over-indexed on grit. When you over-index on grit, you over-index on your ego, because you are indexing on the known and the controllable. Grace is the idea that when conditions ripen, you receive — even when you aren't there to control the

whole line of causation. That letting go, that leaning into grace rather than over-indexing on grit, is what allows you to reconnect with the ocean and discern with wisdom.

For anyone navigating leadership, this has direct implications. As an individual actor in your own finite world, you might have clarity: this is right, this is wrong. But in leadership, you constantly navigate between two rights. This is right, and this is right, and you must decide. So what is your algorithm? If you use only your big data analysis — all the cognition you're capable of, all your opportunity-cost analysis — you will have a certain kind of discernment. But that discernment will not hold the wider arcs of causation.

What is the discernment that can bridge the narrow with the broad, with the infinite? That is wisdom. And this is why the inner life is so critical in leadership. How you cultivate inside shapes how you discern, which shapes how you lean into the infinite game, which shapes everything you do and touch.

How do you live with a decision? How do you live with the ripple effects of that decision? How do you not have all of that weigh you down? I can only say what I've found: find something that gives you an inner compass, and commit to it through daily practice.

As a personal practice, I haven't charged for my labor for twenty-six years. Can you imagine what that does to one's mind? Without price tags, the idea of transaction loses its grip on you. When there's nothing to gain, you stop negotiating with your likes, dislikes, and biases. *Is this grunt work? Is this beneath me?* Those questions dissolve. It's all just work. Or it's all just joy — and you can't tell the difference.

Gandhi put it in two words: renounce and enjoy. It doesn't work the other way — you can't enjoy and renounce. Renounce means to let go. Stop trying to stand out as an individuated self. Stop trying to be a wave, and trust in the ocean. The ocean is always going to do its dance, always forming different waves in different patterns. Our job is not to control the wave but to ride it. When you start riding the wave, you stop negotiating with nature. And when you stop negotiating with nature, you're much more yourself in your natural state — and that's joy.

The metric is simple: how joyous am I making tea for my wife twice a day? Do I do the dishes and pull weeds in the backyard with the same fervor that I give a talk in front of five thousand people? If I forget about that inner quality, I'm just a manager of transactions. And transactions are a very small bucket of water from the pool of the ocean.

Designing for Generosity

The gift economy, as I have come to understand it, is a series of inner shifts.

From consumption to contribution — instead of opening each door asking *What can I get?* you open it asking *What can I give?* From transaction to trust — you can't shake hands with a clenched fist. From isolation to community — not just people coming together, but how they come together, through bonds rooted in mutual transformation. And underneath it all, a shift from scarcity to abundance — the discovery that wealth has infinite forms, and most of them aren't scarce at all.

Around the same time we started ServiceSpace, a few of us began sitting in silence together every Wednesday evening in my parents' living room. No teachers, no agenda, no cost. Just an hour of collective silence, followed by a circle of sharing, followed by a home-cooked meal, open to all. We called it simply "Wednesdays." Over the first decade, more than twenty thousand people walked

through that living room door. Friends wanted to start their own. Today, Awakin Circles meet in hundreds of locations around the world, each one volunteer-run, each one a living expression of a single principle: when you change within, the world changes.

My parents became the keepers of the original circle. My father tinkering with the sound system, my mother moving pots in the kitchen — all very ordinary. What is extraordinary is that twenty-five years into hosting sixty-three strangers every single week — that was the magic limit we settled on — they never burned out. If you thanked them, you'd hear their secret in the reply: *Oh, thank you for the opportunity to serve*. They meant it. Giving so void of transaction that it fills rather than depletes. In all these years, ServiceSpace has never had a volunteer of the month award. We figure that nature will fund the movement. You just have to develop the patience to trust in its pace.

And that patience is rewarded with a deeper reveal: the ripple didn't start with you, and it doesn't end with you. You are holding a thread, and your job is to hold it well before passing it on.

Years ago, traveling across India, a saffron-robed monk knocked on my car window in stop-and-go traffic. Someone had just given me a piece of precious sweet that I absolutely loved. In the spirit of sacrifice, I offered him my treasured piece. As the car pulled away, I turned around, hoping to see him enjoy it. Much to my surprise, he threw it on the ground. My jaw dropped. I felt betrayed. But as the dust settled, a startling realization arrived: that sweet was never mine. I was just a temporary steward. And what if the monk was also a temporary steward? What if the real transaction was between the original giver and the ants on the ground who would feast on what the monk discarded?

How wide is my heart willing to go? The wider it goes, the less of me — and the more of everything else.

My great-grandfather used to go on a walk every morning, where he stopped at the ant hills along his path and fed them small pinches of wheat flour. An act of micro-generosity so small it might seem negligible. But it changed him inside. His goodness shaped my grandparents. Their values shaped my parents. When I was born, my mother chose to surround me with prayer — chanting the whole time, holding me in a cocoon of sacred vibration.

I am sometimes asked what I would say to young people who imagine that service is what you do after you have succeeded. I say: don't wait. Hold a door with your full heart. Feed the ants. Just see what changes inside you. That might open up a more infinite game that ceaselessly regenerates joy.

Those ant hills are long gone. That spirit is not.