

TED Speech 2019

0:12

So, I have a pretty fun job,

0:15

which is to figure out what makes people happy.

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It's so fun, it might almost seem a little frivolous,

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especially at a time where we're being confronted

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with some pretty depressing headlines.

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But it turns out that studying happiness might provide a key

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to solving some of the toughest problems we're facing.

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It's taken me almost a decade to figure this out.

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Pretty early on in my career,

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I published a paper in "Science" with my collaborators,

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entitled, "Spending Money on Others Promotes Happiness."

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I was very confident in this conclusion,

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except for one thing:

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it didn't seem to apply to me.

1:00

(Laughter)

1:01

I hardly ever gave money to charity,

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and when I did,

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I didn't feel that warm glow I was expecting.

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So I started to wonder if maybe there was something wrong with my research

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or something wrong with me.

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My own lackluster emotional response to giving was especially puzzling

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because my follow-up studies revealed that even toddlers exhibited joy

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from giving to others.

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In one experiment, my colleagues Kiley Hamlin, Lara Aknin and I

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brought kids just under the age of two into the lab.

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Now, as you might imagine,

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we had to work with a resource that toddlers really care about,

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so we used the toddler equivalent of gold,

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namely, Goldfish crackers.

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(Laughter)

1:53

We gave kids this windfall of Goldfish for themselves

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and a chance to give some of their Goldfish away

1:59

to a puppet named Monkey.

2:02

(Video) Researcher: I found even more treats,

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and I'm going to give them all to you.

2:06

Toddler: Ooh. Thank you.

2:10

Researcher: But, you know, I don't see any more treats.

2:13

Will you give one to Monkey?

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Toddler: Yeah. Researcher: Yeah?

2:18

Toddler: Yeah.

2:24

Here.

2:26

Researcher: Ooh, yummy. Mmmm.

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Toddler: All gone, he ate it.

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Elizabeth Dunn: Now, we trained research assistants to watch these videos

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and code toddlers' emotional reactions.

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Of course, we didn't tell them our hypotheses.

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The data revealed that toddlers were pretty happy

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when they got this pile of Goldfish for themselves,

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but they were actually even happier

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when they got to give some of their Goldfish away.

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And this warm glow of giving persists into adulthood.

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When we analyzed surveys from more than 200,000 adults

3:03

across the globe,

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we saw that nearly a third of the world's population

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reported giving at least some money to charity in the past month.

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Remarkably, in every major region of the world,

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people who gave money to charity were happier than those who did not,

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even after taking into account their own personal financial situation.

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And this correlation wasn't trivial.

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It looked like giving to charity

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made about the same difference for happiness

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as having twice as much income.

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Now, as a researcher,

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if you're lucky enough to stumble on an effect

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that replicates around the world in children and adults alike,

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you start to wonder:

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Could this be part of human nature?

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We know that pleasure reinforces adaptive behaviors

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like eating and sex

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that help perpetuate our species,

4:01

and it looked to me like giving might be one of those behaviors.

4:06

I was really excited about these ideas,

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and I wrote about them in the "New York Times."

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One of the people who read this article

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was my accountant.

4:16

(Laughter)

4:19

Yeah.

4:20

At tax time, I found myself seated across from him,

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watching as he slowly tapped his pen

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on the charitable giving line of my tax return

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with this look of, like,

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poorly concealed disapproval.

4:34

(Laughter)

4:36

Despite building my career by showing how great giving can feel,

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I actually wasn't doing very much of it.

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So I resolved to give more.

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Around that time,

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devastating stories about the Syrian refugee crisis

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were everywhere.

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I really wanted to help,

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so I pulled out my credit card.

5:01

I knew my donations would probably make a difference for someone somewhere,

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but going to the website of an effective charity

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and entering my Visa number

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still just didn't feel like enough.

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That's when I learned about the Group of Five.

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The Canadian government allows any five Canadians

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to privately sponsor a family of refugees.

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You have to raise enough money to support the family

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for their first year in Canada,

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and then they literally get on a plane to your city.

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One of the things that I think is so cool about this program

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is that no one is allowed to do it alone.

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And instead of a Group of Five,

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we ended up partnering with a community organization

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and forming a group of 25.

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After almost two years of paperwork and waiting,

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we learned that our family would be arriving in Vancouver

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in less than six weeks.

6:00

They had four sons and a daughter,

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so we raced to find them a place to live.

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We were very lucky to find them a house,

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but it needed quite a bit of work.

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So my friends came out on evenings and weekends

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and painted and cleaned and assembled furniture.

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When the big day came,

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we filled their fridge with milk and fresh fruit

6:22

and headed to the airport to meet our family.

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It was a little overwhelming for everyone,

6:30

especially the four-year-old.

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His mother was reunited with her sister

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who had come to Canada earlier through the same program.

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They hadn't seen each other in 15 years.

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When you hear that more than 5.6 million refugees have fled Syria,

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you're faced with this tragedy

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that the human brain hasn't really evolved to comprehend.

6:57

It's so abstract.

7:00

Before, if any of us had been asked to donate 15 hours a month

7:03

to help out with the refugee crisis,

7:06

we probably would have said no.

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But as soon as we took our family to their new home in Vancouver,

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we all had the same realization:

7:15

we were just going to do whatever it took to help them be happy.

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This experience made me think a little more deeply about my research.

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Back in my lab,

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we'd seen the benefits of giving spike

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when people felt a real sense of connection with those they were helping

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and could easily envision the difference they were making

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in those individuals' lives.

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For example, in one experiment,

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we gave participants an opportunity to donate a bit of money

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to either UNICEF or Spread the Net.

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We chose these charities intentionally,

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because they were partners and shared the same critically important goal

7:52

of promoting children's health.

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But I think UNICEF is just such a big, broad charity

8:00

that it can be a little hard to envision

8:02

how your own small donation will make a difference.

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In contrast, Spread the Net offers donors a concrete promise:

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for every 10 dollars donated,

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they provide one bed net to protect a child from malaria.

8:17

We saw that the more money people gave to Spread the Net,

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the happier they reported feeling afterward.

8:24

In contrast, this emotional return on investment

8:28

was completely eliminated when people gave money to UNICEF.

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So this suggests that just giving money to a worthwhile charity

8:38

isn't always enough.

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You need to be able to envision

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how, exactly, your dollars are going to make a difference.

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Of course, the Group of Five program takes this idea to a whole new level.

8:51

When we first took on this project,

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we would talk about when the refugees would arrive.

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Now, we just refer to them as our family.

9:00

Recently, we took the kids ice skating,

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and later that day, my six-year-old, Oliver, asked me,

9:07

"Mommy, who is the oldest kid in our family?"

9:10

I assumed he was talking about his plethora of cousins,

9:14

and he was talking about them,

9:16

but also about our Syrian family.

9:19

Since our family arrived,

9:21

so many people and organizations have offered to help,

9:25

providing everything from free dental fillings

9:29

to summer camps.



9:32

It's made me see the goodness that exists in our community.

9:36

Thanks to one donation,

9:38

the kids got to go to bike camp,

9:41

and every day of the week,

9:42

some member of our group tried to be there to cheer for them.

9:46

I happened to be there

9:47

the day the training wheels were supposed to come off,

9:50

and let me tell you, the four-year-old did not think this was a good idea.

9:55

So I went over and talked to him

9:57

about the long-term benefits of riding without training wheels.

10:01

(Laughter)

10:03

Then I remembered that he was four and barely spoke English.

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So I reverted to two words he definitely knew:

10:11

ice cream.

10:13

You try without training wheels, I'll buy you ice cream.

10:17

Here's what happened next.

10:19

(Video) ED: Yes. Yeah!

10:22

Kid: I'm gonna try.

10:23

ED: Oh my God! Look at you go!

10:25

(Squealing) Look at you go! You're doing it all by yourself!

10:28

(Audience) (Laughter)

10:29

(Video) ED: Good job!

10:32

(Audience) (Laughter)

10:33

(Applause)

10:38

ED: So this is the kind of helping that human beings evolved to enjoy,

10:44

but for 40 years,

10:46

Canada was the only country in the world

10:48

that allowed private citizens to sponsor refugees.

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Now -- Canada!

10:54

(Applause)

10:56

It's pretty great.

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Now Australia and the UK are starting up similar programs.

11:03

Just imagine how different the refugee crisis could look

11:07

if more countries made this possible.

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Creating these kinds of meaningful connections between individuals

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provides an opportunity to deal with challenges

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that feel overwhelming.

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One of those challenges lies just blocks from where I'm standing right now,

11:25

in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver.

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By some measures, it's the poorest urban postal code in Canada.

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We actually debated whether to bring over a family of refugees,

11:35

because there are so many people right here already struggling.

11:39

My friend Evan told me that when he was a kid

11:42

and his parents drove through this neighborhood,

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he would duck down in the back seat.

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But Evan's parents never would have guessed

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that when he grew up,

11:52

he would open up the doors of a local restaurant

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and invite this community inside to enjoy three-course dinners.

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The program that Evan helped build is called "Plenty of Plates,"

12:03

and the goal is not just to provide free meals

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but to create moments of connection

12:08

between people who otherwise might never make eye contact.

12:12

Each night, a local business sponsors the dinner

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and sends a team of volunteers

12:17

who help make and serve the meal.

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Afterward, the leftovers get distributed to people who are out on the street,

12:24

and importantly, there's enough money left

12:26

to provide a thousand free lunches for this community

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in the days that follow.

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But the benefits of this program extend beyond food.

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For the volunteers, it provides an opportunity to engage with people,

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to sit down and hear their stories.

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After this experience, one volunteer changed his commute

12:47

so that instead of avoiding this neighborhood,

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he walks through it,

12:52

smiling or making eye contact as he passes familiar faces.

12:57

All of us are capable of finding joy in giving.

13:01

But we shouldn't expect this to happen automatically.

13:05

Spending money helping others doesn't necessarily promote happiness.

13:09

Instead, it matters how we do it.

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And if we want people to give more,

13:15

we need to subvert the way we think about charitable giving.

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We need to create opportunities to give

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that enable us to appreciate our shared humanity.

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If any of you work for a charity,

13:29

don't reward your donors with pens or calendars.

13:33

(Applause)

13:37

Reward them with the opportunity

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to see the specific impact that their generosity is having

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and to connect with the individuals and communities they're helping.

13:49

We're used to thinking about giving as something we should do.

13:54

And it is.

13:56

But in thinking about it this way,

13:59

we're missing out on one of the best parts of being human:

14:03

that we have evolved to find joy in helping others.

14:09

Let's stop thinking about giving as just this moral obligation

14:14

and start thinking of it as a source of pleasure.

14:18

Thank you.

14:20

(Applause)