

ServiceSpace Design Principles

[An FAQ of Nipun Mehta, founder of ServiceSpace, from 6 years ago, but nonetheless, it has lot of commonly asked questions.]

Describe ServiceSpace for us.

ServiceSpace is an all volunteer-run organization that leverages technology to inspire greater volunteerism. It's a space to explore our own relationship with service and our interconnection with the rest of the world. ServiceSpace allows our inherent generosity to blossom out into small acts of service for the community around us. It's a space to learn how outer change is closely tied to our own inner transformation. It's about changing ourselves, to change the world.

ServiceSpace was conceived by volunteers, was built by volunteers, and is run by volunteers -- all for the benefit of volunteers. Our projects range from a daily positive news service, to an acts-of-kindness portal, to a gift-economy restaurant. Regardless of the endeavor, we act in concert to create service opportunities for each other and to support each other's service journeys.

When we started in 1999 as CharityFocus (our former name), our work was to empower nonprofits with web-based technological solutions, but that soon expanded into effectively organizing and motivating hundreds of inspired volunteers that came our way. We literally did not want to turn people away so started creating new projects so they could express the generosity that had been sparked. By 2003, we were providing online services ranging from: a platform to create your own fundraising website; to launching a portal to promote acts-of-kindness; to taking on operation of a South Asian non-profit foundation, with satellite offices in several cities, and an online portal that connected 13,000 NGOs in South Asia. In 2006, we launched a gift-economy print magazine, along with KarmaTube -- a portal for uplifting videos. In 2007, Karma Kitchen was born.

Today, the work of ServiceSpace regularly touches thousands of lives in a myriad of different ways. It spans both the inner and outer spheres of people's lives, and connects virtual communities into real gatherings. Awakin, one of ServiceSpace's projects, is a curated repository of secular wisdom that offers people a chance to explore their own life and experiences more deeply via insightful readings and community. Individuals throughout the world read or comment on an inspiring passage of the week, derived from our vast archive that spans all wisdom traditions; they join local groups in 60+ cities around the globe, where folks convene for an hour of group meditation, followed by a circle of sharing and a meal; and they then are invited to dial into our Awakin Calls from wherever they are -- and engage with an inspiring guest speaker.

Despite its unexpected success, ServiceSpace never wavered from its three major organizing principles. First, be volunteer run. Second, serve with what you have, without asking for anything. Third, focus on small acts. It kept us simple and human, raw and authentic. Back in the 1500s, those principles might have made us a bunch of altruistic farmers. But in the 21st century, we became a networked posse of many smaller posses, known as ServiceSpace: A virtual organization with very little operational overhead.

Over the next dozen years, we delivered millions of dollars in free services and organically grew our programs into over a dozen core projects. More than three hundred thousand users joined as members [now at 500,000 members throughout the world]. We never held any intention to grow an organization or create systemic change. We were, and are, just a bunch of Everyday Joe's who are trying to be the change we wish to see in the world.

We just jump and trust that the net will appear, instead of stalling projects until resources are secured. We have passionate be-the-change volunteers, instead of paid employees working 9-to-5. We invite people to sit in silence, instead of holding fundraisers. We have distributed meetings in the living rooms of the world, instead of having centralized headquarters.

From its very inception, the focus of ServiceSpace has been on the inner change that comes when people take the opportunity to act selflessly. No matter what the success of the organization is, our emphasis will always be on the volunteer experience. ServiceSpace strives to be an incubator of compassionate action by enabling everyday heroes with the opportunity to serve.

And that opportunity to serve is always present. Our objective is to foster greater awareness of this potential and to assist each other in being agents of positive change. In that sense, ServiceSpace is nothing more than people acting collectively to enable each other to act on instincts of compassion and altruism.

Tell us about the projects of ServiceSpace.

We started with building websites for nonprofits and grew into creating more complex web solutions. Along the side, we had started bunch of small efforts to keep ourselves (as volunteers) motivated -- stuff like [DailyGood](#), an email with a little bit of good news everyday. Then, at one point, we took on a web portal called [PledgePage](#) that allowed individuals to raise money for their favorite causes and a NGO portal for SouthAsia called [ProPoor](#) that networked 13,000 NGOs in the region. And all of sudden, it dawned on us that we didn't just have to limit ourselves to volunteering at other organizations, that even without the usual structures or resources, ServiceSpace was actually an organization! So we started launching our own projects, and in the process, engaged in a new paradigm of "organizing without organizations" and mid-wifed the rebirth of the gift-economy revolution. None of this was planned; it has all emerged.

What is the significance of your three guiding principles?

We started with the idea of "giving without any strings attached", and have never compromised our three simple guiding principles. Courtesy of the Internet era, these principles ended up empowering us in unexpected ways.

- **Be volunteer run.** None of us had ever started an organization – there were no experts in the room. If there were a slogan for our meetings, it probably would've read two simple words: "Let's see." How will you scale? How will you fundraise? How will you measure progress? We didn't know. No clue. And so our response was always, "Let's see." It was the rocket-model: instead of ready-steady-go, we would just blast off, steady eventually, and become ready, if even necessary. Our first pressing question was about hiring staff. Initially, we were six people and we could self-organize, but we were aware that the

industry “best practices” were to have one staff member for every fifty volunteers. Let’s see. When six volunteers became sixty in a month, we surprisingly found that we had enough help if we distributed the work into small enough pieces and connected them through an online portal. In place of 5 hired staff working 40 hours a week, we had 40 volunteers coming alive for 5 hours every week. Sixty became six hundred volunteers and our wheels kept spinning just fine. As we scaled up, sticking to our first principle meant that we had to distribute tasks, decentralize governance, and loosely connect all the pieces through an efficient and effective online portal. Rather serendipitously, this allowed us to tap into the nascent “power of many” that the Internet was birthing

Research [shows](#) that the more you pay people, the harder they work; however, the hardest work is done by those who weren't paid at all. Furthermore, as [Edward Deci's](#) research points out, mixing up different types of incentives can actually negate all productivity. So our idea to operate solely on non-financial incentives. Interestingly, the Internet was dis-intermediating everything, so we wondered if we could do that with volunteering? If CD's were turning into iTunes songs, billboards were turning into Google Adwords, could volunteering at a beach clean-up turn into editing a page on Wikipedia? It turns out that volunteers gave 100 million hours on Wikipedia alone last. In a world where we spend 9 billion hours playing solitaire each year, we certainly have [ample time](#) to give but could we creatively balance incentives, freedom and constraints to create an organization based on that? That was our challenge. Instead of 100 staff working 40 hours a week, we were going to operate on 400 volunteers giving 10 hrs/week. Through that infrastructure, today we are able to sustain an ecosystem of 285 thousand members [now 500,000 members], send 50 million emails annually [now more than double], and operate more than a dozen portals with 18 million lines of code [now more than double].

You can't throw stock options to get someone to work harder; you have to inspire them by example. You can't fire someone if they are under performing; you have to be flexible enough to find the right job for the right person (because ultimately, everyone is good at something). You can't be anyone's boss; you have to become their brother and sister in service. The whole system requires a deep and patient commitment to blossoming one's own humanity.

[More: networks, communities of practice, organization -- but now platforms like YouTube, Flickr, Meetup. Organizing without organizations. Clay Shirky.]

- **Don't fundraise.** When you serve unconditionally, you make a lot of friends. Having a lot of friends gives you a lot of influence and power. And that power tends to corrupt the spirit of service. To counteract that typical pattern of organizational decay, we decided that we wouldn't ask for anything. No cashing out. Instead, our journey would be to humbly accept whatever arrangements fell in our laps and serve to the best of our abilities. Initially, it was easy. We didn't have money, we didn't need money, and we didn't ask for money. But then, as we delivered quality outcomes and gained credibility in the world, some wondered if we would be able to do more and scale rapidly if we had

more money. On several occasions, philanthropists would ask us, “People like you should never have to worry about money. Tell me what you need.” A metaphorical blank check like that is flattering but our response was consistent – “Perhaps you’d like to volunteer?” That response baffled some and endeared us to others, and almost always resulted in unexpected outcomes. To solicit resources, one ends up making promises for a future that is impossible to predict. Often, it ends up being a game of pleasing and appeasing donors and showing them what they want to see. On the other hand, not asking for resources more accurately implies, “We can’t guarantee anything. If you like our work in the past, if you like our values, let’s work together.” Departing from the replicable patterns of the past opened us to the unknown, a place of natural innovation and untapped potential. Instead of scarcity and fear for an uncertain future, our second principle rooted us in abundance and trust.

The Internet is all about abundance. The scarcity of videos at Blockbuster was now abundant indi-flicks on Netflix; the scarcity of music albums at Tower Records was now abundant songs on iTunes; the scarcity of programming on NBC was now abundant videos on YouTube. Unlike physical space, the Internet could sustain a “long tail” – products that are in low demand can collectively make up a market share that rivals the relatively few bestsellers and blockbusters, if the distribution channel is large enough. If, then, generosity was in low demand in our current world context, we could survive if we amplified the distribution channel. So, if the going got tough, our initial response was to simply amplify the generosity. Serve more. So long as our work was relevant, so long as it was touching lives, we would be useful and continue to exist meaningfully. Instead of supply push, it was a demand pull. And the downside wasn’t so bad either. If we failed, we would’ve been happy to have our epitaph read: “CharityFocus died trying to be unconditionally generous.”

Not being afraid of our “death” gave us a unique kind of audacity and confidence. It allowed us to serve without asking for anything. Of course, not asking doesn’t mean not receiving. When your work delivers value to the community, people will inevitably support that work. But when you are able to keep serving the community without asking for anything, it paves the way for an even richer form of giving and receiving. Over time, people’s cups of gratitude overflow; they don’t give to fulfill a need, they give as an expression of their own solidarity and joy.

One of our simplest (and oldest) projects is DailyGood. Every day, we email about 50,000 people with a small quote-pack: an inspiring quotation, a little bit of good news, and a small be-the-change suggestion. At one point, we needed a high-end computer server to handle the massive email traffic, but had no budget for it. “Let’s email everyone and inform them about our need,” someone suggested. After having delivered that service for a decade, without any charge or advertising, and after having received so many “DailyGood has changed my life” messages, we knew that we could raise the money within minutes of sending out the email. But that didn’t feel right. The problem with it was the greed in trying to exercise the power of our goodwill -- “What if everyone gave

\$10? Imagine what we could do with that money.” Surely, it makes sense to be transparent about our needs, but a subtle element of greed was clouding our decision. So we decided to wait until the dust had settled.

Two weeks later, unbeknownst to the DailyGood team, we got an email asking for our mailing address. “I’d like to make a small donation to CharityFocus,” the email said. We wrote back, assuming that “small” really meant small by our definition. The following week, we got a \$10,000 check from a person, who had no clue about our financial situation and who had never previously donated to CharityFocus. We often joke with our business-school friends, “Corporations have venture capital, but CharityFocus has serendipity capital.” Our conviction in our second principle – serve without asking – created room for such serendipities.

Media coverage is another illustrative example. We didn’t pitch stories, didn’t have any PR strategy or media kit, and none of us had ever been written about in a feature story. But the word on CharityFocus kept spreading and dozens of newspapers and magazines and TV shows – including a half hour, live interview on CNN International – carried major stories. Those mentions were great, but what was even more inspiring was that practically all of the reporters would end up saying, “I’d love to help too. Let me know how.” Liz Garone, who wrote for newspapers like The Washington Times and San Jose Mercury News, volunteered to write “everyday hero” profiles for our website. Joel Engardio, who did a 12-page cover story about us for SF Weekly, became a partner in service. Paul Van Slambrouck, the former editor of The Christian Science Monitor who first broke the story of CharityFocus, joined as a coordinator of our KarmaTube project. Now we have some of the world’s leading journalists, academics, thinkers, entertainers, and public figures as part of our small-scale service teams.

Things just happened like that. And after a while, we counted on it. Trusting the self-organizing arrangements of the universe hardly guarantees any outcomes; being rooted in your values, though, guarantees a meaningful experience and rich friendships with people trying to similarly be that change in the world. The security of ServiceSpace (formerly CharityFocus), then, isn’t in its material resources, but in its deep relationships cultivated through a resonance with selfless service.

All fundraisers and philanthropists agree that current mode of operation is manipulative and inefficient; it lacks trust and authenticity. So we just ignored "best practices" and figured we'll deal with the "money thing" when we absolutely needed to. And we never got there. We didn't boast any plans for the future and yet had tons of projects; we never pitched ourselves to the media, and yet we've been [covered](#) everywhere from CNN to Wall Street Journal; we didn't have any staff and yet we had tons of energy. Curiously, we discovered that instead of a supply-push model, we were engaged in a demand-pull cycle. We deliver value to our constituents, and if they were sufficiently moved, they would carry forth our work in a word-of-mouth sort of way; except that the Internet, once again, accelerated this serendipity by "word of mouse". Like a tree, if you are delivering value, the community will take notice and water your roots. And that's been the case for

ServiceSpace.

[More: generative nature of gifting, vibe at KK, synergistic value, Gandhi's soul force, Fukuoka do-nothing farming: no plowing, fertilizer, pesticides, weeding.]

- **Think small.** Just as every tiny bit of the hologram contains information of the whole, every small act holds the potential to deepen our connection within the network. That shift in our awareness forever alters the lens through which we view the world and our role in it. Perhaps that is the greatest, immeasurable gift each person can offer. Mother Teresa eloquently said, “We can do no great things -- only small things with great love.” That, in a way, captures the third principle of ServiceSpace. Our projects are designed to ensure success in the base-case scenarios. If we just empowered one nonprofit organization with a website, if we just sent one DailyGood email for one day, if only one person created a PledgePage, if only one person watched a KarmaTube “Do Something” video, our projects would’ve been a success. There is no threshold of critical mass to reach before we can accomplish our goal. Each step was the goal, each step was the reward.

With such a design principle, we never get caught up in making future-based projections, nor do we seek any kind of marketing help. Instead we use the information available at the moment to organically lead us to the future. Our job is simply to serve Right Now.

Every small change we make creates a ripple in the universe without a measurable end. It is easy for an individual to understand this, but it is hard to scale organizations with this principle. The Internet, though, changes this paradigm. Growth came very naturally for us because in a networked economy, scale doesn't come from doing big things but rather creating empty spaces that allows the network to virally spread niche products. While the 1800s were about a farming economy and the 1900s were about factory economy, we are currently in an idea economy. It's no longer “profitable” to find one big idea, patent it and scale it with a one-to-many distribution model. The leaders in this economy are the ones that hold the space for small ideas to emerge with a many-to-many networked distribution. Consider the most recent innovators -- Wikipedia didn't write the world's largest encyclopedia; YouTube didn't create videos that get 100 million views a day; Flickr didn't take any of the photos that are posted every second. And just so, the Gandhis, Mother Teresas and Martin Luther Kings of the next generation will not simply publish a newspaper, write letters or give talks. Instead, the next revolution will be led by a distributed network of everyday heroes who create spaces for meaningful, many-to-many connections to manifest organically. Small is in. Free is in. Collective is in. Instead of going from big to bigger, we are now going from micro to nano. Everything is being disintermediated: albums are being sold as songs, newspapers are read as blogs, radio shows are being heard as pod-casts, and movies are made as online clips.

The ServiceSpace challenge, then, is to dis-intermediate social change actions itself. If Time magazine's ‘Person of the Year’ actually was ‘YOU’, then it is time for everyday

people to stop feeling powerless about doing some grand things in the world and be empowered to see the impact of their small actions, all adding up collectively. A focus on small acts, then, is our third guiding principle. It allows us to see problems in a new light, find innovative solutions, and sustain the spirit of service. It translates to building empty containers that authentically encourage small actions; in proportion to its relevance and value to its constituents, the many-to-many network takes care of the scale. And we've learned that when we do small things in the world with great love, there's a sense that we're just instruments supporting the matrix of connections. We travel light.

And so we focus on doing those small, invisible things that may not get public recognition, but which create a ripple in the world and shift the "seventh generation" cultural ethos of a community. Because we were doing small things, we did lots of experiments -- and with a rocket model of go-steady-go. In the Internet paradigm, the cost of failure was so low that we can try umpteen experiments and move from plan-and-execute model to search-and-amplify patterns of positive deviance. None of these experiments had a threshold for success; the base case, the smallest step had value embedded in it. If it was just one DailyGood email, or one website built for a nonprofit, or one Smile Card, that could've been enough. And because we were doing small things, it was "too expensive to charge" for it -- so we just gifted it away. Once again, the Internet allowed us to create "social capital" around those small gifts, and that social capital turned into an auto-catalytic engine that organically scaled up those small acts into "gift economy" projects.

[More: Black Swan, Tipping Point and related books show that we don't know what tiny thing will spark a revolution, just as a butterfly flapping its wing in Brazil might create a toranado.]

[More in [Tao of ServiceSpace](#), [conversation notes](#)]

What are some of the gift-economy projects of ServiceSpace?

ServiceSpace itself is gift-economy, and all our projects are gift-economy. Our good-news portal, [DailyGood.org](#), sends out a quote, a good news story from around the world, and a small be-the-change action; started more than 10 years ago, it now goes out to more than 100 thousand people everyday [now more than double that] and yet, we have never solicited anything nor hosted any ads. Just pure giving. Like that, we started with gifting information, which organically built up some social capital and allowed us to venture into offline domains too. Today, ServiceSpace has grown into an incubator of "gift-economy" [projects](#) ranging from web services to a film production company to a print magazine to a restaurant. In a way, all these projects are strands of an invisible quilt that provides a resilient warmth when our dominant paradigm runs amok.

What is Gift Economy?

In a gift economy, goods and services are given without any strings attached; it is an economic system where it is the circulation of the gifts within the community that leads to increase -- increase in connections, increase in relationship strength; in this context, hoarding actually

decreases wealth. At its core, gift-economy is a shift from consumption to contribution, transaction to trust, scarcity to abundance, and isolation to community.

How is that different from just philanthropy?

Gift economy is a ecosystem of sustenance where you are taken care, not by earning your keep, but by doing small acts of kindness and trusting that what goes around will eventually come around. Philanthropy, kindness and compassion are some of the values of that ecosystem.

How does it actually work?

Imagine a [restaurant](#) where there are no prices on the menu and where the check reads \$0.00 with only this footnote: "Your meal was a gift from someone who came before you. We hope you will pay-it-forward however you wish." That's gift economy. Our initial response might be, "Wait, that can't work. People will just take and not give anything." In practice, though, it's quite the opposite -- such restaurants actually work. If you have the commitment to give long enough, inevitably there's comes a point in time when the recipient's cup of gratitude overflows and a pay-it-forward spirit arises naturally.

You can also look at this from a pricing perspective. Decades ago, businesses used cost-based pricing: it costs me a buck to make this sandwich and I have a 50% markup and I'll sell it to you for \$1.50. Now-a-days, they use value-based pricing: I'm delivering \$5 of value by delivering you this sandwich at the airport, so it's going to cost you \$6. Some of that pricing is driven by markets, but often it is driven by greed of profit and ignorance of externalities. So gift-economy turns that around and ask the "customers" to figure out the value.

Is this is a new idea?

Not at all. In fact, it's an ancient idea. Native Americans in the West, Bushmen tribes of the Kalahari desert in Africa, monastic traditions of the East, and perhaps all indigenous cultures around the world were rooted in the gift-economy. In 1950, Marcel Mauss first reflected on this in short French essay called the "Gift" in 1970, Richard Tittmus in the UK published 'Gift Relationship' that explored why [gifting blood](#) was more effective than paying people for it; Genevieve Vaughan traced the history of [women and gift-economy](#); and about about 25 years ago, Lewis Hyde perhaps wrote the most popular book to date, also called *The Gift*; and there have been many fringe thoughts, reflections and conferences about it. But until the advent of the Internet, it didn't have any practical applications to go mainstream.

Why is it relevant now?

In one word -- Internet. People have always put together birthday parties, just for the love of it. But now, people are writing entire encyclopedias in that spirit! Throw in some collaboration tools, and unpaid engineers are producing an operating system to rival a \$400 billion company. Add the power of self-publishing, and volunteer-citizens are able to topple lobbyists and bring radical policy changes. With trillion web pages online, and 5 billion anticipated mobile phones by 2011, we live in different times. In the past, we could do little things as gifts, but big things required money, power and influence. Not anymore. The web is increasingly becoming a land of the free. Now, the Internet is able to aggregate non-financial motivations of "amateurs" to

organize into significant social movements, purely for the sake of goodness. That's what the gift-economy is all about.

What is the scope of this kind of organizing?

Instead of one person giving a million dollars, what if we had a million people donating a dollar? Internet practically eliminates the transaction cost of coordinating, allows us to tap into the wisdom of collective intelligence, and there's a different kind of capital that is created -- that energy of a million people giving, that can't be captured so neatly into a spreadsheet. It's now possible. Obama's campaign in 2008 understood this fully and that's why they had 3 million online donors who gave small amounts, more than 6.5 million times ... which is all unprecedented. What we have on our hands is a movement machine. Everyone really can be a change-maker now. The question is what values will guide our change? That's really upto us. I, for one, want to see more trust and abundance in the world, so I'm standing up for the gift-economy.

Volunteerism has existed forever. Is Internet creating new possibilities or shining the light on what's already there?

First, the Internet allows us to share -- and we are seeing that people love to share, whether it is photos on Flickr or billions of blog entries or 6 billion videos that YouTube serves up every month. Most of this starts with shining the light on what already exists, but when everyone is empowered to be a producer, we see a whole lot more of what already exists. It's no longer just the news that a few "experts" in power think is worthy of making prime-time news; it's the birth of amateurs who are publishing and consuming 24/7.

Second, the Internet allows us to [cooperate and collaborate](#) such that we can create synergistic value, where 1 plus 1 is more than 2. This starts to create new value, exciting projects, and radical innovations. The entire [crowd-sourcing](#) phenomena is rooted in that. A new [effort](#), for example, is now saying that if we had applications where people could volunteer from their mobile phones during their 2-3 minutes of spare time on the Bart station, and if millions of people started doing that, we could start solving some very significant problems.

Before the Internet, the manifestations of the “power of many” were significant but few. Twenty years ago, for example, Nepal's infant-mortality rate was 133 for every 1,000 births, with most of the babies claimed by pneumonia and diarrhea. By the 1980s, they had found the culprit – lack of Vitamin A in the Nepalese diet. But no one could implement an effective program to deliver a low-cost vitamin-A capsule that could be taken as infrequently as twice a year. That was until Ram Shrestha hit upon a brilliant insight – get grandmothers to volunteer! As of 2005, the infant mortality rate had been halved, thanks to 49,000 grandmothers distributing Vitamin A to 3.5 million Nepalese children. With the advent of the Internet, everything changed. A band of volunteer engineers, distributed across the world, working on Linux proved to be the biggest challenge for multi-billion-dollar Microsoft Corporation.

Isn't internet-driven gifting more impersonal?

In a small scale network, like a family or a local community, there is higher trust and giving flows much more easily. In older times of such decentralized communities, gift-economies

flourished; however, as we lost that infrastructure, we lost the gift culture too. As the Internet came along, though, we started to see a rebirth of the gift culture, because it re-created small-scale online communities. But then the question arises: how much of the offline gifting experience is lost online? I don't know if we have an definite answer to that yet.

What we do know is that if they're used in conjunction, the outcome is much more effective; that is, when people follow ServiceSpace on Twitter and then eat at [Karma Kitchen](#), it's certainly adds more context and people have a deeper experience in giving. But what is the experience of sending a virtual gift to someone whom I've only known on Facebook? I think there is a real experience there, for an increasing number of people who are able to embrace that platform. And yet, I think there is a more powerful, synergistic response to an in-person exchange of gifts -- there is information there that can't be reduced to 1-and-0 bits in a computer. Most of our physical interactions don't go all that deep, so we often tend to be seduced by effectiveness of online interactions; but what we lose out on is the potential to go deeper.

So ultimately, we need a balance that recognizes the deep upswing of offline gifting and marries it with the effectiveness of online connecting.

Can a gift-economy replace the current economy?

We don't know. Gift-economies are predicated on a certain systemic infrastructure and set of cultural values. We're so far away from it, that's it's hard to imagine what a full out gift-economy looks like. And to start debating on such topic is a fruitless exercise. Instead, we should just use the flash light principle -- take the next most obvious step, from point A to point B, and allow new possibilities to emerge. Far too often, we shine the light from point A to point Z, and we even lose sight of B and become arm-chair explorers! The folly of our arrogance is that we tend to think we're in control when we really don't know much; if Microsoft would've been able to predict its nemesis in Google, they would've crushed it when it was small. And in fact, in his best selling book, [Black Swan](#), Nassim Taleb points out that human beings have never been able to predict anything of significant social impact!

At this point in our history, the "Can a gift economy replace market economy?" question should be replaced with "How can we practice more gifting?" Gift culture is rooted in trust, abundance and contribution; as we talk about how we can encourage more of that, I have no doubt that newer, previously "impossible" possibilities will start to emerge.

What is your personal background?

I'm from the software world, originally. I graduated from UC Berkeley in Computer Science ... and Philosophy. I grew up with the technology of the Silicon Valley, but my heart longed to be with the ancient values of the Himalayas. :) So my [experiment](#) was to combine the two. In April 1999, four of us helped a homeless shelter build a website; in that context of dot-com greed, giving with "no strings attached" seemed like a radical idea. Much to our surprise, dozens of people joined in and we called ourselves [ServiceSpace](#). Being technically savvy, we organized efficiently and didn't have much operational overhead. We stayed volunteer run, decided not to fundraise, and worked without any expectations or agendas. Today, we've got 295 thousand

members, we send out 50 million emails per year, and we've got a vast online presence -- but we still stick to those three principles of no staff, no fundraising, and no expectations. For me, those principles are the definition of true gift-economy work.

How do you sustain yourself?

That's a loaded question, because in it are embedded many presumptions. Most people's curiosity only extend as far as "How do you pay your electricity bill?" Sure, we need material capital, but that's not enough to sustain ourselves. We also need social capital and even more importantly, spiritual capital. If you want the honest answer to this question, it is this: giving sustains me. For those focused so singularly on material capital, I often feel like asking them the counter question -- how do YOU sustain yourself? Money and things are not enough. So yes, according to the IRS, I'm definitely poor, but anyone who knows me will tell you that I live like a king. :)

But how do you pay your electricity bill?

Think of it like a tree. If a tree produces wholesome fruits, provides shade, adds unconditional value to the passerbys, then surely the community will take care of it. Similarly, when you serve others sincerely, you create a certain affinity and over time, those affinities sustain you. In a very real way, my material capital exists because of the kindness of others -- my family, friends, well wishers. It is service, social capital and surrender that [sustains](#) my simple lifestyle. It seems like a novel idea in our current paradigm, but this is how people lived in indigenous times. On some days, I will wake up from meditation and start tearing up with immense gratitude at the realization that my whole life is a gift! And ultimately, isn't that true for all of us?

What does it mean to live gift-economy?

All of us, ultimately, are living off the kindness of others -- starting from the gift of life that our mothers gave us. Living gift-economy is to first become aware of that kindness we're constantly receiving, then to hold gratitude for those gifts, and finally to pay it forward by opening each door with the humble question, "How can I contribute?"

Should I quit my job and trust that the gift economy will meet my needs if I am generous to others?

If you're asking the question of "Should I quit my job?", you aren't ready to quit. When the internal commitment to service becomes choiceless, there will be no question.

To [survive in a gift-economy](#), you need three things: (a) service -- you have to be useful and deliver value that people care to receive; (b) social capital -- the services you offer will create affinities with people and as those people get connected to each other, that cocoon of social capital will sustain you; (c) surrender -- conditions take their own time to ripen, so you have to cultivate a strong sense of equanimity to accept all that manifests along your giving journey.

The ever-so-often asked "How will I have pay my bills?" question should really be replaced with "How can I practice more generosity?" Lynne Twist, who has raised close to 900 million dollars, shares a story of how a homeless man gave her spare change once to feed the hungry in a developing country. No matter what position we're in, we have the capacity to be kind, caring

and compassionate. And so the real question is, "How can I practice more generosity, right here and right now?" Once we make that shift from consumption to contribution, we will inevitably generate social capital of people whose cup of gratitude will overflow sooner or later and whose ripple will flow back to sustain you. But by that time, you will no longer have the question of your sustenance; the overwhelming joy of giving is in itself such a reward that everything else pales in comparison. The key is to experience that joy of giving.

Do you think everyone can live in this "gift economy" way?

I definitely think it's possible, but it takes work. This is not something you see on TV, buy it the next day and start using in the third day. It takes time to create deep affinities, to develop equanimity for enduring the trying episodes, to generate love from a deep place within. I am myself still just learning, but if you ask me, it's a worthy endeavor. All this, though, starts with a simple thing -- be kind today. Even if it is just for a moment, that's how the whole pattern emerges, and then one fine day, you wake up and realize that you're swimming in the spirit of gift-economy. The path is unpredictable, but beautiful.

If I gave money to the needy, is that considered a part of the "gift economy"?

Absolutely. Whenever someone taps into the mindset of giving, it supports the birth, rebirth and/or possibility of a gift-economy. Like I [did once](#) in New York, I often use money so that the homeless are offered the opportunity give.

Who inspires you?

I tend to believe that we're all disciples of our experience. Many larger-than-life inspirations from Gandhi to Krishnamurti to Vivekananda to Goenka have impacted my thinking, but on a regular basis, it is my brother and my wife who always hold up a higher road for me. In terms of life experiences, perhaps my [walking pilgrimage](#) in 2005, where my wife and I walked 1000 kilometres while eating whatever food was offered and sleeping wherever place was offered, was truly paradigm bending. Our soundbyte was that we used our hands to do small acts of kindness, our heads to write stories of everyday heroes, and our hearts to cultivate truth. But really it was a process of renunciation through the deep abyss of our minds, and a process that is still in progress, without an end in sight. :)

What is your favorite project?

It's hard to pick one project but I love the Smile Card project on [HelpOthers.org](#). It's the simplest thing -- do a kind act for someone and leave a Smile Card behind that instructs them to pay it forward. It could be anything from a conversation with a homeless person to paying for the person behind you in line to [trading](#) your first-class seat in an airplane with a stranger in economy-class to thanking the local janitor to even just listening to a friend or calling up your elders. In search of the big ideas that will change the world, we often forget the small, invisible acts that are the backbone of humanity. Anyone can get these cards online, as a gift that they pay forward with a random act of kindness. And then, you can share stories online, see what other people are doing, or engage in all kinds of other activities. We [started](#) by printing 100 cards, without the foggiest idea of how we'd sustain ourselves and today, there are close to a million smile cards in distribution and the website is full of ideas, inspiration and stories that keep this

pay-it-forward ripple going. It's such a small thing, but it never fails to reinvigorate my faith in humanity.

What would you like the readers to do?

I would suggest three things: subscribe to DailyGood.org so you can be soaked with inspiration, get a [Smile Card](#) and start a ripple of kindness with a kind act, and spend some time in silence to deepen your awareness, perhaps through our [Awakin](#) world-wide community. Oh, and smile. As Thich Nhat Hanh once said, "Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy."