



by Stephen King

What You Pass On

A couple of years ago I found out what “you can’t take it with you” means. I found out while I was lying in a ditch at the side of a country road, covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans like the branch of a tree taken down in a thunderstorm. I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you’re lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard.

We all know that life is ephemeral, but on that particular day and in the months that followed, I got a painful but extremely valuable look at life’s simple backstage truths. We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we’re just as broke. Warren Buffet? Going to go out broke. Bill Gates? Going out broke. Tom Hanks? Going out broke. Steve King? Broke. Not a crying dime.

All the money you earn, all the stocks you buy, all the mutual funds you trade—all of that is mostly smoke and mirrors. It’s still going to be a quarter-past getting late whether you tell the time on a Timex or a Rolex. No matter how large your bank account, no matter how many credit cards you have, sooner or later things will begin to go wrong with the only three things you have that you can really call your own: your body, your spirit and your mind.

So I want you to consider making your life one long gift to others. And why not? All you have is on loan anyway. All that lasts is what you pass on.

Yes—charity begins at home. Those of you who pay for the college educations of your sons and daughters do a wonderful thing. If you’re able to give them a further start in life—a place in business, help with a home—so much the better. Because charity begins at home. Because—up to a certain point, at least—we are all responsible for the lives we add to the world.

But I think the most chilling thing a young man or woman can hear is, “Someday all this will be yours.” I think what a lot would like to hear is some version of, “You’re on your own. Good luck. Call if you need help—and reverse the charges.”

Now imagine a nice little backyard, surrounded by a board fence. Dad—a pleasant fellow, a little plump—is

tending the barbeque. Mom and the kids are setting the picnic table: fried chicken, coleslaw, potato salad, a chocolate cake for dessert. And standing around the fence, looking in, are emaciated men and women, starving children. They are silent. They only watch. That family at the picnic is us; that backyard is America, and those hungry people on the other side of the fence, watching us sit down to eat, include far too much of the rest of the world: Asia and the subcontinent; countries in Central Europe, where people live on the edge from one harvest to the next; South America, where they’re burning down the rain forests; and most of all, Africa, where AIDS is pandemic and starvation is a fact of life.

It’s not a pretty picture, but we have the power to help, the power to change. And why should we refuse? Because we’re going to take it with us? Please.

Giving isn’t about the receiver or the gift but the giver. It’s for the giver. One doesn’t open one’s wallet to improve the world, although it’s nice when that happens; one does it to improve one’s self. I give because it’s the only concrete way I have of saying that I’m glad to be alive and that I can earn my daily bread doing what I love. Giving is a way of taking the focus off the money we make and putting it back where it belongs—on the lives we lead, the families we raise, the communities that nurture us.

A life of giving—not just money, but time and spirit—repays. It helps us remember that we may be going out broke, but right now we’re doing O.K. Right now we have the power to do great good for others and for ourselves.

So I ask you to begin the giving, and to continue as you begin. I think you’ll find in the end that you got far more than you ever had, and did more than you ever dreamed.



Stephen King, a Heifer supporter, is the author of such renowned and popular books as “Carrie,” “The Shining” and “Cujo.” King continues to write bestsellers, most recently “Everything’s Eventual” and “Dreamcatcher.”