

Then, one night, something unexpected happened—something that changed the course of my life. I was driving home from yet another church conference, the forty-fifth or forty-sixth. My mind was drifting over the evening's events when an epiphany, like a racing electric shock, jolted me to the core. No one else was in the car, but I exclaimed aloud, "Oh my God, *what if it is actually true?*"

What if everything I had been preaching about a divine economy of abundance triggered by human generosity *was true*? Yet, it was not the question, rather it was the implications of the answer that left me breathless. For you see, *I knew it was true*. Others might doubt or be skeptical, but not me. I encountered it every time I stepped into the Free Store, careful not to trip over the bags of donations piled up around me. I encountered it each week, sorting mounds of clothing, placing items on hangers, and helping unload the church vans and the pick-up trucks that pulled up out back bringing even more to share with shoppers. I encountered it in the stories Sharon Allen told of shoppers seeking a particular item such as a toaster or a pair of size 14 men's work boots, which we did not have. Then miraculously, while they were in the store, the toaster or a pair of size 14 boots arrive through the back door. I encountered it as I witnessed shoppers overwhelmed by the showers of blessings they received one day, come back the next bringing baby clothes or toys their children had outgrown. I encountered it as others, after shopping for a few months, became volunteers themselves, ensuring we never lacked sufficient hands to do this holy work.

Whenever we give forward what we have received, no matter how meager it may appear, God takes our offerings and multiples them. For me this question had been asked and fully answered—no mystery, no surprise. This much had become self-evident. The epiphany struck as I considered the quality of what we, more specifically what I, was offering forward for multiplication.

The Free Store was then and remains now an amazing ministry. So many lives have been touched and improved. Yet, when you peel back the veneer, the Free Store is simply people trading used clothes. The entire premise of the venture is an invitation for caring people to give forward the clothes, shoes, linens, and housewares they no longer want. These gifts require little to no sacrifice on the part of the donors. Yet, God keeps

using even these minor acts of generosity. In fact, there are now close to one hundred Free Stores scattered across the nation, all based on the Columbus model. It is astounding how much God can do with our feeble efforts.

However, when you come to know you are living inside a divine economy of abundance, is trading used clothes enough? What more could I, or should we, do next? What if we began to give *the best* of what we have received, instead of the leftovers we really didn't want? This electrifying sequence of inquiry followed me home. It haunted my dreams that night.

Over the next several weeks, related questions claimed more and more of my attention. What might happen if I gave forward the best gifts I had? What might God do with these treasures? And ultimately, *which gift was the best I had ever received?*