STEPHEN G. POST

The HIDDEN GIFTS *of Helping*

How the Power of Giving, Compassion, and Hope Can Get Us Through Hard Times

Praise for *The Hidden Gifts of Helping*

"For over two decades, Stephen Post has produced the most impressive body of work cogently arguing for love's central role at the interface of science, medicine, and spirituality. Most often his books and papers present strong objective arguments, as befits a respected academic, that loving others makes perfect biological, medical, psychological, and social sense. Here in this wonderful new book, he makes the argument 'by acquaintance.' An unsettling separation from a place of attachment and solace becomes an occasion of grace in that he and his family are called to find newly invigorated attachments. They do so with the help of inspiring recollections and encounters with heroes present and past who themselves have found the healing grace of loving others. Dr. Post has given us a heartfelt gift—a modern adventure story steeped in the old wisdom of what it takes to lead a good and healthy life."

—Gregory L. Fricchione, MD, professor of psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, and director of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital

"In reflecting on his life's challenges and transitions, Stephen Post weds solid science with practical wisdom and conveys the resulting truths with inspiring life stories. With graceful prose he points the way to human flourishing—through self-giving love."

—David G. Myers, Hope College, and author, *A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists: Musings on Why God Is Good and Faith Isn't Evil*

"Stephen Post has long championed the simple but sublime truth that by helping others we help ourselves. He has documented this cardinal principle of positive psychology in a long series of authoritative volumes and research projects, including a major project on happiness that he helped lead over the past five years at Emory.

In this engaging new volume, Post combines touching [auto]biography, philosophical reflection, and scientific findings into a compelling narrative on how and why love of God, neighbor, and self converge. This is a book to be read in an evening and savored for a lifetime."

—John Witte, director and distinguished professor,
Center for Law and Religion, Emory University

"In an elegant and thoughtful reflection on his family's move from their settled life in Ohio to their new home in New York, Stephen Post uncovers 'hidden gifts' among life-changing challenges. As one of America's most knowledgeable philosophers and scholars of the interrelated roles of altruism, love, and compassion in spiritual and physical wellness, Dr. Post brings years of scientific inquiry into critical dialogue with his own family crisis of transition, change, and adaptation. The result is an educational and inspirational chronicle that grounds the foundational belief that helping others does heal and transform human life. *The Hidden Gifts of Helping* offers renewed meaning to the biblical maxim that 'a generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed' (Proverbs 11:25)."

—The Rev. Dr. Walter J. Smith, S.J., Ph.D.,
president and CEO, HealthCare Chaplaincy

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CONTENTS

To my son, Drew, who had to recreate his life after leaving his native Cleveland at age thirteen; to my wife, Mitsuko, for helping us plant our roots in our new garden; and to my daughter, Emma, who is always giving and glowing.

And to the people of Cleveland, for being as good as they are.

On the Move

Life can be what we envision it to be, but it is not always what we expect.

In 2008, my old job more or less disappeared out from under me. After twenty years at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, my family—myself; my wife, Mitsuko; and our thirteen-year-old son, Andrew—suddenly found ourselves leaving our beloved home in Cleveland, Ohio, to move to northern Long Island, where I had been offered a challenging new job: I would be leading a newly formed team of researchers at New York's Stony Brook University School of Medicine, studying and teaching about the impact of compassionate care and giving on the well-being and health of those who receive and those who bestow. What a wonderful opportunity, but the unexpected enormity of the move—physically, emotionally, even spiritually—was more than we had anticipated.

We were out of place and uprooted. Constancy of place is so important in life if we are to form lasting relationships

and deep communities, and if we are to avoid abandoning one another in the name of supposedly greater goods. Now we were struggling with placelessness, and part of being out of place is being out of relationship. This was a serious matter after two decades in a city with all the routines of life that familiarity and constancy of place make possible. Fortunately, we had those twenty good years in Ohio under our wings as we struggled to find ourselves in an unfamiliar place, determined to recreate the good life of community and friendships we all keenly missed. The key turned out to be something we knew quite well, but learned to remember daily in our upheaval: the healing power of helping others. If I am correct, we Americans tend to celebrate our independence from place and community, trying to fool ourselves with the myth that we are more detached than we really are. This myth falls apart in a time of crisis when we really need a community to fall back on. There is much more suffering in our uprootedness than the myth of independence allows us to be honest about. This is a book that looks honestly at our family experience of being on the move, and shows that for happiness and health, rebuilding community through purposeful self-giving and service is absolutely essential.

Rx: help others. This little prescription has the side effect of benefiting the helper, so long as one does not become

overwhelmed. Research in the field of health psychology, and all the great spiritual traditions, tells us that one of the best ways to get rid of anger or grief is to actively contribute to the lives of those around us. Science supports this assertion: giving help to others measurably reduces the giver's stress; improves health and well-being in surprising and powerful ways; renews our optimism about what is possible; helps us connect to family, friends, place, and lots of amazing people; allows the deep, profound joy of our humanity to flow through us and out into the world; and improves our sense of self-worth. These are valuable gifts anytime, and particularly when we have lost a valued place and community in hard times. If there is one great secret to a resilient life of growth, well-being, and good health, it is in never giving up on giving.[1]

Eventually, of course, everyone stumbles on hard times. After all, no one gets out of life alive. Today, even those who had considered themselves protected from hardship are being tested and having their lives changed by volatile economic markets, job insecurity, forced moves, and the sudden isolation of placelessness. When we are tested, a deeper kind of learning goes on. This learning is experiential, not intellectual. I like to say that hard lessons are learned hard. In fact, there is no other way to learn life's big lessons than through experience and hard knocks. Even if some wisdom comes from avoiding other people's mistakes as we observe them, most of it comes from all the things that life just naturally throws at us. I have learned a lot about the importance of

constancy of place and of the community of relationships that place makes possible.

Americans have been a people on the move since the early days of our history. When the insightful French observer Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1831, he was amazed to see how easily and often Amercians change residences: "In the United States, a man will carefully construct a home in which to spend his old age and sell it before the roof is on. . . . He will settle in one place only to go off elsewhere shortly afterwards with a new set of desires."[2] Being on the move is very American. The "pursuit of happiness" by moving someplace else in search of something better is part of the American ethos. But there is a cost. Researchers have shown that in general, children who frequently move tend to do less well in school and have more behavioral problems; adolescents who move too frequently tend to consume alcohol and have a higher suicide rate; among middle-aged adults, higher numbers of lifetime moves are strongly associated with lower life satisfaction and self-rated global and mental health; in later adult years, residential moves are clearly associated with great risk of death. Introverts have to work a lot harder than extroverts at recreating a social world in a new place because doing so does not come naturally to them, and they suffer more from the loss of connectedness.[3]

Of course there are many for whom moving turns out well. Some children and adolescents flourish in a new place with new friends, and they have a chance to reinvent themselves in positive and resilient ways. Certainly experiences of big moves vary based on age, on the duration and degree of rootedness in the previous community, on the hospitality shown in the new place, and on many other factors that we still need to learn about. But there is no controversy over this reality: in general, loss of community and social capital predicts stress and is associated with elevated mental and physical illness. We need to take Tocqueville's admonition a little more to heart. How we approach moves in life is really very important because the consequences are so significant, and this is why I wanted to write this book. I wanted to help others who are going through similar adjustments.

Americans are on the move in these economic times, and often less because they want to than because they have to! It is so easy to embrace self-pity and get caught up in a spiral of rumination or indifference to others. A first impulse may be to lash out or to hide under the covers until things get better. But when we demonstrate sincere concern for others—whether it's empathizing with a friend's loss, doing grocery shopping for an elderly neighbor, clearing trash from a local park or beach, or volunteering to work one-on-one at a hospice or homeless shelter—we can more quickly improve our well-being and give voice to our deeper identity and dignity as human beings.

The serious study of giving, goodness, and love—the kind of love enshrined in the Golden Rule; the kind championed

for centuries by the world's great moral and spiritual traditions, East and West—has been central to my life for many years. As director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care, and Bioethics at New York's Stony Brook University, I study and teach about the ways in which compassionate medical care benefits professionals as well as patients. And in my weekend volunteer role as president of the nonprofit Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, I am interested in the astonishing number of people in America and elsewhere who self-report experiences or intuitions of a higher love in the universe, and who feel that this enlivens and extends their natural benevolence.

In the six short chapters of this book, I share my family's reaffirmation of the healing power of helping others, as well as my passion about how this simple activity—expressed in an infinite number of small or large ways—can help us survive and thrive despite the curveballs life throws at us. We never seek these challenges, but they seem to seek us, and we have to accept them in faith and creativity. Along the way, I'll share other inspiring stories of hardship, helping, and the resurrection of hope and confidence in the essential goodness of humanity. Interwoven with supporting scientific research and spiritual understanding, this book is offered to you as a gift: a true companion and guide to the power of giving, forgiving, and compassion in hard times. I hope you will carry its message close to your heart as the light begins to shine in your life once again, as it eventually will with the passage of time.

Dr. Gregory Fricchione, director of the Benson-Henry Mind Body Institute at Harvard University, tells me that big moves and the anxiety of placelessness involve the slow process of overcoming separation through new attachments to people and objects in our environment. He also tells me that we always underestimate just how much those old attachments and familiarities mean to us. The healing powers of time, of growing familiarity with environment, of self-giving, of spirituality, and, for those so inclined, of a faith community, all can work together as they did for me and my family.

We need to think more carefully about moving on and on again, as though there were no deep costs. Serial movers have fewer "quality" relationships, and children who move a lot in general report somewhat lower levels of happiness as adults. Outgoingness is one great defense against rootlessness, and especially reaching out to help others in a new place. This is what we did, and it worked well. These days, as so many American families have to hit the highways as castaways, we need helper therapy more than ever. The idea of this book is to weave together story, science, spirituality, and practice in a way that will help others who suddenly find that they have to say good-bye to a good place, especially under pressure.

And we Americans need to stop thinking so much about the hidden costs of self-giving and embrace the hidden gifts!

The HIDDEN GIFTS *of Helping*

1

Learning to Travel on Life's Mysterious Journey

For most of my early life, all I knew about Cleveland, Ohio, was its nickname: the "mistake by the lake," the place so polluted that in 1969 the city's Cuyahoga River caught fire. In all the years I had driven happily from Chicago or Ann Arbor along Route 80, heading for New York City's George Washington Bridge, I always thought of Cleveland as a strange black dot on the map, stuck up there north of Route 80 on the edge of Lake Erie, a place to be avoided at all costs. But in 1988, the job market called. I was offered a stable salaried position at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. So on June 7, 1988, I piled my family's furnishings into a small U-Haul trailer and drove from Tarrytown, New York, where we were quite happy and I had a good job as a college teacher. I headed for the Coventry neighborhood of Cleveland Heights, wondering just what I had done.

My wife, Mitsuko, and our five-year-old daughter, Emma, were visiting relatives in Japan until August, so I spent that supremely hot and humid summer sleeping on a mat on the

floor of a sweltering top-floor apartment, the refrigerator door wide open in a failed attempt to cool off. I consoled myself with the knowledge that on a good day, with light traffic, it was only an eight-hour drive to New York City.

But I needn't have agonized: our twenty years in Cleveland were great ones. We soon discovered that Cleveland's unique combination of Midwestern hospitality, great culture, and immense creativity suited us perfectly. And we lived a full life there, in the inner-ring suburb of Shaker Heights. Over two decades, bonds of affection grew naturally in a part of the country where community is genuine. We had no tall fences on our block, just low ones that allowed for lots of conversation between neighbors. Sidewalks and neighborhood schools, lively churches and synagogues, block parties and neighborly warmth made love apparent. When new folks move in around the neighborhood, just about everyone pops by with baked goods and a warm hello. There are lots of neighborly places like Cleveland, where friendly greetings like "Hi Jan," "Howdy Ray," and "What's up, Mike?" point to the connectedness that makes people flourish and stay healthy. Clevelanders defend the quality of their community for a reason. It is an exceptionally giving place, and "love thy neighbor" still means something. For twenty years, we were lucky to call it home. We were a family in place, with all the familiarities, routines, and supportive relationships that follow from being in place. Then, regrettably, our comfortable city—where our son, Andrew, had been born; where my mother, who moved to be near us after Dad passed away, had died; and where I had enjoyed a fruitful

career and great local church—was unceremoniously pulled out from under us, like an old rug.

THE BIG MOVE

A few years earlier, I had gotten a new department head, an ardently secular psychiatrist who I could laugh with but whose ideas for the direction of our ethics program in the medical school ran differently than mine. In fact, we were very different in every way—spiritually, intellectually, ethically, temperamentally. But I loved Cleveland, and my life there. Although I was a tenured professor, my job more or less evaporated. It was like sand passing through a big hour glass until it stops. When my boss told me that I could only stick around if I paid 100 percent of my own salary, it seemed like a good time to call it quits. Being an American, I don't work for free and don't think anyone should. It was pointless to stay where I was not wanted. This sort of thing happens in life, and it happens to a lot of people. It just is what it is. My situation was not unique, and life is not ever quite fair. Anyway, I was offered several new jobs, one of which was at New York's Stony Brook University: visiting professor of preventive medicine and director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care, and Bioethics—with the freedom to stay and hire new faculty. It was a challenge I was looking forward to. There is something to be said for experimentation with a new environment and new colleagues. Stony Brook has always been known for astonishingly accomplished professors, so I would

feel like a small fish in a big pond and interact with a lot of great folks in New York City. In these ways, a move can be a really creative adventure.

Despite all my good intentions, however, those first months away were by far the worst that my family had ever experienced. Without question, Stony Brook University is a great place, and I had landed in the perfect position. And the setting is beautiful: the north shore of Long Island is lovely, with rocky beaches and hills much like New England, and with the waves and sunsets of the Long Island Sound. But despite the university's many charming qualities and professional advantages, for almost a year following the move I had days when I felt that my life had gotten off track, that maybe I had dropped the ball somehow. At some level, I still wished that I could have done more for Cleveland. Everyone confirmed that I was doing a splendid job in my new position, but I no longer had the rich social fabric and assumed familiarities of two decades—a gift we so often take for granted until we lose it. I felt some natural anxiety about the whole move because that is how humans who have connected well with a former place and community should feel. My wife and son, like me, were struggling with the adjustment. At work, of course, it was my duty to excel and to view my new situation as an opportunity for learning and growth. That was the easy part.

We had sold our house in Shaker Heights before leaving, but we did not do as well as we might have because the market was slowing a lot. No one could have guessed that it

would slow as much as it did a few months later. We jumped into a home near the campus in Setauket, where—like much of New York State—real estate costs are about four times what they are around Ohio. I figured that we had timed the market well and bought at a low, but from August 2008, prices went straight downhill, and nothing had prepared us for the sky-high real estate taxes in New York. Of course one knows about these high costs intellectually, but only with experience does this really sink in. So financial concerns added to our stress, as they do for so many Americans these days. Maybe someday the housing market will come all the way back, but not for a long while. Like many Americans in their fifties who thought they were more or less past any financial worries, I found myself anxious for the first times in years.

Andrew was happy with his life in the Shaker Middle School. He had some good friends, and a first girlfriend. He resented this move deeply, and he let us know through his attitude and behavior. I couldn't blame him. I worried about how the move would affect him, and for the first few months we drove back to Ohio together every four or five weeks so he could visit his friends and take his girlfriend to the movies. This was a good thing because it eased the loss for him and, incidentally, for me. I looked forward to getting off Long Island and out onto Route 80 and the heartlands. I would be singing by the time we hit the Delaware Water Gap where New Jersey ends and Pennsylvania begins. I felt free again. There was good father-and-son chat all the way.