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In giving, we receive



It's a problem I've never had, and I'll bet you haven't either.

Imagine you are unthinkable rich. You've got the summer home on the Cape. You spend winters in St. Thomas. A platoon of accountants and financial wizards dotes on you.

How would you spend your money? How much would you give away?

How gratifying would it be to write checks that fulfill dreams, chase away worry, glisten the eyes of grateful recipients?

I was thinking about that a couple weeks ago when I ran across a small story in this newspaper that noted Don Rodman, the founder of Rodman Ford in Foxborough, was notching his 25th Rodman Ride for Kids, a charity bike event that over that time has raised \$100 million for nonprofit groups that help at-risk children.

That's a stunning figure. So I went to see Rodman at his office where he runs his philanthropic ventures near the auto dealership empire that he built and is now run by his sons.

What followed was nothing less than a tutorial in philanthropy taught by a man who knows how to tell a good story.

Here's one: How did the Jewish kid who was raised by a single mom in Dorchester, never finished high school, and joined the Army to master auto mechanics become lauded by a pope and assume the chairmanship of Catholic Charities?

"Oh, that's a funny story," Rodman said. "Monsignor McNamara. He was beautiful. Talk about people skills."

It seems Catholic Charities was holding its annual big fund-raiser at Woods Hole. Monsignor Eugene McNamara was head of Catholic Charities then and needed passenger vans to shuttle guests to a venue with limited parking. Rodman donated the vans and struck up a relationship with Monsignor McNamara, who asked what the car magnate thought of the gala.

"I said, 'It's all right,' and he said, 'What do you mean all right?' And I said, 'Truthfully, you can do better than this.'" Next thing you know, Rodman is running the event, something he did for the following 20 years.

The lesson? It's all about relationships. And Don Rodman has struck up dozens over the years he built his Ford franchise into a colossus. Larry Bird. Bobby Orr. Jim Brett. Jack Connors. And Cardinal Sean O'Malley, who wrote the forward in a new book that chronicles Rodman's rag-to-riches story and that is a how-to book on the art of giving.

"Don has given thousands of people the means to travel the road to a new start in life, and, above all, the ability to be treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve," O'Malley wrote in "Rodman's Ride."

It's a telling volume. "I'd say there's a good amount of people who are generous, but not enough," Rodman said. "There's room for improvement."

I asked him what he would tell would-be philanthropists.

His pitch? "Scientific research has confirmed that giving people are happier, healthier, more successful, and live longer," he said. "So how much more motivation do you need to get involved than to know that you're just going to be a better person?"

The season of giving is on the horizon. The season of offering thanks for what we have is a calendar-page flip away.

Not a bad time to thank the Don Rodmans among us. A better time to remember their admonition — stripped of all cliché — that it's vastly more rewarding to give than get. And that gift need not be subtracted from your bank account. "The problem is most people think that giving is only for wealthy people," Rodman told me. "You can give your time. You can give your shoulder. You can give your heart. You can mentor somebody."

Shovel a walk. Bake a cake. Volunteer at a hospital. Visit an elderly neighbor. Deliver a meal. Donate blood. If possible, open your wallet. But give.

Don Rodman is 84 now. In the end, this kid from Dorchester — the self-described grease monkey who made it big — has learned that is the one true lesson that really matters.

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