

Helpful

To be helpful is to be glad to do useful things for others. Many people are helpful in general terms, there to help if there is a challenge or social crisis, and some people are able to meet precise needs in their willingness to help. A plumber will be happy to fix the leak in your downstairs toilet—for a price; a neighbor will often be glad to help you clean up your gutters, if he has a ladder, has a little experience, and is in good shape. There is a person who will help you—quite a few persons, in fact—if you have a chicken bone in your trachea, and that person is likely to want a serious recompense for his service. Being helpful, in other words, comes in many forms, from helping your son with his math homework to getting a system of micro financing to work in Bangladesh.

Examples

1 Helpful friend

I have a friend and neighbor who has been very helpful to me and my family. He has helped us clean the leaves out of our gutters, set up a TV antenna on our roof, devise a system for getting moles out of the yard, and appreciate fine points of real estate. All this my friend does to be helpful. He gets no reward—except in heaven—and seems to expect none. His help extends beyond these individual acts. He has made me examine my own helpfulness to others, and discover, with no surprise, that I fall far short of my friend's level of helpfulness. I have fewer on target skills than my friend, and am seemingly more preoccupied with a central effort, writing. What I can do, I do as I can—talk and share with friends, on any topic; contribute a little to a few charities that seem trustworthy; help my wife in the house.

2 Helping through writing?

I often ask myself whether the work I do as a writer—many books, many poems—is helpful. I would like to think the answer is yes. I would like to think that others who have shared the planet in my time will read and talk about and carry further what I have written. Some such hope would justify the time I devote to such work, instead, for instance, of volunteering my time in an orphanage. I am, however, unable to evaluate the success of my effort. I have shreds of evidence—approvals here, disapprovals there—and every now and then a secret admirer comes out of the woodwork. Fortunately for me, proof that I am being helpful is not necessary to my dynamic. I seem to be content with the desire to be helpful, though without that desire I would question my undertaking.