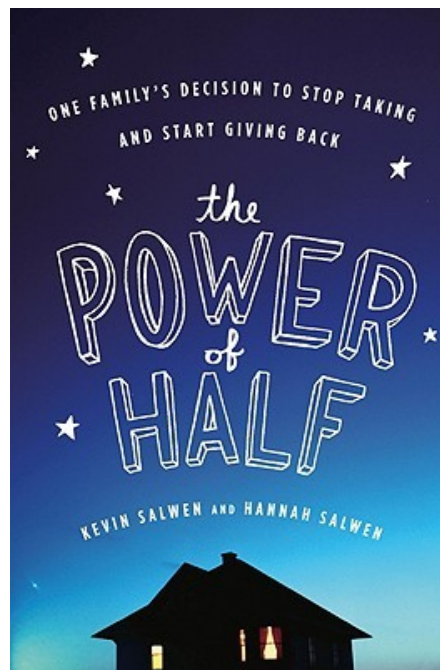




The Power of Half: One Family's Decision to Stop Taking and Start Giving Back

Kevin Salwen , Hannah Salwen

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It all started when fourteen-year old Hannah Salwen had a “eureka” moment. Seeing a homeless man in her neighborhood at the precise second a glistening Mercedes coupe pulled up, she said “You know, Dad, if that man had a less nice car, that man there could have a meal.”

Until that day, the Salwens had been caught up like so many of us in the classic American dream—providing a good life for their children, accumulating more and more stuff, doing their part but not really feeling it. So when Hannah was stopped in her tracks by this glaring disparity, her parents knew they had to act on her urge to do something. As a family, they made the extraordinary decision to sell their Atlanta mansion, downsize to a house half its size, and give half of the sale price to a worthy charity. What began as an outlandish scheme became a remarkable journey that transported them across the globe and well out of their comfort zone. In the end they learned that they had the power to change a little corner of the world—and they found themselves changing, too.

The Power of Half: One Family's Decision to Stop Taking and Start Giving Back Details

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Amy says

On the one hand, it is hard to criticize this book. I mean, a family selling their 2 million dollar house to help their 14-year-old goal of funding schools in Africa? Yay! I'm not heartless.

But on the other hand, this book got seriously irritating. I think it is the author's journalist writing style. He thinks we care that in one random meeting while journaling his daughter uses a *blue* pen, and then a *black* pen when that one runs out. Scintillating details. In fact, these odd details glitter throughout the story (she wore a magenta top, he drank such and such coffee.) Maybe they are supposed to make the book more relatable, but I think it overall just contributed to the biggest flaw in this book:

It is all about Kevin Salwen and his family.

Which would be fine if I cared about Kevin Salwen and his family. But I don't know him. His journey may be interesting, but it is not personally inspiring. I'm glad that he opted to teach his kids about sacrifice in a big way, but honestly, this wasn't a story of sacrifice. It wasn't a story of Africa. It wasn't even really a story about giving.

It is the story of one family and how they got to go to Africa, eat out a lot, and volunteer with Habitat for Humanity.

As a side note, perhaps the reason I found this book so...uncompelling was that the author skirts around *why* we care about helping the poor. It doesn't appear to be religious for him, though perhaps something of his wife's Midwestern values bleeds through. It seems more of a, "I have lots of money and I feel like I should give back" attitude. Which is great! Do whatever you want to do, dude. But without a more compelling reason, I don't find the sacrifice (or in this case, selling a two million dollar home to go live in a one million dollar home) worth writing home about.

Stephanie says

I think you get all you need to get out of this book by reading the summary on the inside of the book jacket. With a 15-year-old daughter as the instigator, a wealthy Atlanta family decides to sell their mansion and downgrade to a house half the size (at 3500 sq. ft. still twice the size of any place I ever lived) and donate half the selling price to charity. This ends up being an \$800k pledge to The Hunger Project.

Big surprise: they realize they don't miss the bigger house at all. 800k is a totally inconceivable amount of money to the vast majority of us, but to this family it doesn't end up being a sacrifice at all. This, I think, is the big disappointment in this book. Even though their house doesn't actually sell for two years (bad timing with the economy), the family is still left completely unscathed (other than having to temporarily dip into the kids' college fund -- which is paid back when the house sells). Their "sacrifice" isn't much of a sacrifice at all because it has no consequence for them. They have the luxury of making such a huge charitable donation and not even feeling it -- which I think makes them totally disconnected from the average person reading their book. I was not connected to the unrealistic/flawless family in the least.

Overall, I found the book incredibly slow and cheesy. The whole book is them talking about what they want to do. And then when they end up doing it, it's very anticlimactic: they take a trip to Ghana to see what's going to be done with their money -- it's like someone visiting a wing at a University or Museum that was named after them because of a large donation they made.

The only slightly redeeming part of the book was when at the end, the author addressed some of the criticisms that they received via internet posts. He stressed that the real reward of the whole process was how

their family was strengthened as a unit and as individuals. I think that's wonderful. We should all be striving to strengthen our families, and doing that through service is great. The book itself: not so great.

Jen says

What can I say? I powered through this one. Aside from the cheesiness, the writing style was very contrived. Lots of useless details--Hemingway would have ripped it apart.

Amy says

I recently found this book on an airplane.

Years ago I read a book about a sickness called "Affluenza," which is basically a consumer's disease--they just can't stop buying and consuming. I identified with it right away as I abhor stuff, perhaps because I have moved eleven times in the past twenty years and also because I'd rather spend my money on travel, which creates memories, than stuff, which only collects dust.

I thought this book would be in a similar vein, but it really wasn't.

An affluent teenage girl began volunteering at soup kitchen in Atlanta and decided to take the lessons she learned literally. Quite remarkably, she convinced her family to sell their \$2 million home and move into a \$1 million home and give away the other \$1 million. It's hard not to scoff at that, like "Oh, big sacrifice, must be hard living in a million dollar home, how ever do you stand it?" But in terms of pure numbers, they were generous.

At first it seemed so cliché: "Let's give it to Africa!" I kept reading. They built a corn mill so that girls could attend school instead of grind corn by hand all day. I changed my mind: that is a good investment in humanity.

I found some of the material about group decision-making very interesting. They worked as a team to decide how best to donate the money and often disagreed, yet in the end came up with a viable plan. Also interesting was how the family reacted when their plan did not pan out as hoped when the recession hit and their house sat on the market for two years after they already pledged their money. Every person in the family, plus the village they helped, changed remarkably--and it all started with a young girl who would not take no for an answer. I admire her tenacity and her mother and father for listening to her and taking her seriously. I also liked the details about how hard it was to win the son over to their idea, and was impressed with some of his ideas when he finally decided to get on board.

Now, why only 2.5 stars?

Because the book was annoying. The father came off as smug every time he talked about how well he knew his children, as if castigating readers for not knowing their children as well as he did. Furthermore, despite his generosity, he retained his annoying propensity of name dropping. Second, possibly at the publisher's urging, the daughter had chapters that were object lessons, most of which involved taking a stack of index cards....and blah, blah, blah. Way too preachy for my tastes.

The part I found most fascinating and true was the way it dispelled the so-called good that missionaries do in

poverty-stricken areas. The book humorously called them Vacationaries--typically affluent suburban white families who go to church and somehow get all their friends and colleagues to pay for them to go on mission projects to (Fill in any Poor Country, which also happens to have outstanding beaches) where they can do "the Lord's work." (Give them Bibles and build them churches. Fat lot of good that does them when they are illiterate, starving, dying of AIDS, and have seven children.) It ridiculed one church, which for example, sent five "missionary" groups to paint the same church in Mexico five times in one summer. Another ridiculed a church who went to Nicaragua and built a well and pump so the village could have clean water. The next year they returned to find the pump broken and the women collecting water from the polluted rivers. They fixed the pump. The next year they came back to find the pump broken again.

When this family visited Africa, they received tremendous mentoring from a woman who really knows what the difference between "Give me a fish" and "Teach me to fish."

I felt the book helped me make better decisions about charitable giving.

Lia says

Just to start off, I want to be clear that I think the idea of a family moving into a less expensive home and using half the money from the sale of the larger house to do good in impoverished areas of Africa is a great idea. Really. I think it's a wonderful thing. That's why I picked up the book at the library.

However ... oh man. This book ... it just turned my stomach. Why? Because they were so eager (read: wanted instant gratification) to go out and do good, flying to Africa and showing these people just how much good they could do for the have-nots; yes, they were SO eager they didn't even wait until they had sold their house to start spending their money (800 thousand dollars). Let me spell this out just a little. A family decides to sell a \$2 million home to buy a \$1 million home so they can put about a million dollars toward charity. But then, instead, they end up owning a \$1 million home AND their original \$2 million home, paying for both of them, while at the same time going to Africa and spending almost another million. Then they come home, and man, if the economy isn't saggy and their big ol' house still hasn't sold. That's not the power of half. That's the power of double.

It just made me sick. What is the REAL message they are sending to their kids? It seems like this: When you have as much money as we do, you can pretty much do anything and still live in luxury; you don't have to be responsible or wait for anything. You can have anything you want anytime you want it.

To add to this amazing lack of understanding about financial responsibility, the tone of the book is smug and condescending. I don't know how many times the dad boasts about how they are just the most normal family in the world and that you couldn't pick them out from anyone else. Um ... just how insulated are they? When is the last time they had a meaningful relationship with someone who made 30 thousand dollars a year? It seems like they have completely lost sight of what "normal" might be.

So, did they do a good thing? Yeah, I think they probably did. They helped some communities and they drew together as a family working toward a common goal. Does it show The Power of Half? Nope. It shows the power of shifting instant gratification from buying for their own pleasure to buying for others. And then going on to do TV interviews and touring and books and all ... you know, because they're just so darn humble.

Here's the weirdest thing. The book that I checked out from my library, it cost, according to the back cover, \$26. Yeah, twenty-six actual dollars for a poorly-written book about a project that was badly planned. Oh, but the outrageous price is "redeemed" by a logo saying that \$1 of the proceeds from each book will go to a certain charity. Woot. A buck, huh? Sounds to me like they're trying to make some money off this book. Maybe they're still "suffering financially" from the power of double?

Marianna says

This book was a mixed bag for me. On one hand I admire the family for taking the initiative at the behest of their 14-year old daughter to attempt to make a difference in the world. On the other hand, the tone of sacrifice was annoying. The Salwens made the decision to leave behind their 6,500 sf, 2 million dollar house for a "smaller", "non-descript" house. In doing a little research I discovered that this new home was valued at nearly 1 million dollars with nearly 3,000 sf., and I don't know if wood floors, granite tops and a separate TV/game room actually qualifies a house as non-descript. This family continued to have their children in very expensive private schools, take family vacations that the average person can only dream of and have the children participate in expensive club sports leagues all while carrying two houses because the first one takes two years to sell. To my mind there wasn't a whole lot of actual sacrifice. Did they do something a little non-traditional (not only moving, but giving away \$800,000)? Yes. Did they do something that most people of their ilk wouldn't do? Maybe and probably. My only wish is that this story had been told in a less self-serving way because really it is a great, inspirational story.

The whole saga begins to unfold when Hannah, the 14-year old daughter, notices the juxtaposition of a street corner panhandler on the streets of Atlanta and an obviously wealthy man driving a Mercedes. She queries her father about how the presumably homeless man might be better off if the Mercedes driver drove a less expensive car. A valid question. Joan, the matriarch of the family, poses the question of sacrificing something from Hannah's own life, perhaps their large, stately home, at dinner one night, with the idea being they would use part of the proceeds to fund a charitable project. Hannah is eager and eventually the entire family is on board. The story unfolds as they move, make decisions about how and where to use their \$800,000 and travel to Ghana to offer "support" to the people there.

Hannah sounds like a fine young woman, however I can't help but wonder if she really answered her initial question. Her life is still pretty fantastic compared to the majority of Atlantians and I can't help but wonder if she and her family couldn't make an even bigger difference by making some real sacrifices. Perhaps it isn't fair of me to ask this of the Salwen's since I'm not doing it myself, but then again they did write the book claiming major sacrifice on their part.

Oh, and I can't help but ask what was up with the constant references to product names: Land's End polo, Hamilton Beach coffee maker, Under Armour shirt, Eggo waffle, Scion, REI wicking pants?? Was it a way of saying "look, no BMW or Ralph Lauren or Miele here? Or did they get paid for putting these names in? It was a little odd.

Beth says

This motivational tale of a family who, spurred on by their teen daughter Hannah's altruistic desires, sold their McMansion in Atlanta GA and donated half of the proceeds to the Hunger Project is meant to

demonstrate a relatable way to make a difference: choose a number, like 50%, and commit to donating or cutting that amount from your life. There are going to be some who just can't relate to what the Salwens were are to sacrifice, or having generous neighbors who agree to slash the price on a property they are selling and donate an additional \$100,000 to a charitable endeavor.

Dad Kevin shares getting caught up in the rat race to improve/upgrade with each promotion, and how being more "successful" served to fragment the family in ways they weren't even really aware until they made changes. I read through the first half of the book, which covers the background of the family, incorporates facts about everything from world hunger to how much people donate to charity, and includes the details of what may be, to some parents, a unique and visionary decision-making process for making immense lifestyle changes: letting the votes of the children count as much of that of the parents.

High schooler Hannah lends her voice in suggesting activities for readers at regular intervals, to help them begin to make a difference in the world around them. Sharing that the son Joseph used the project to enter a documentary competition (that he won) and then squandered the majority of the prize money on a new guitar (with the agreement of the rest of the family) doesn't sit well with me - their reasoning was it was his money, and their project was about the money from the house.

I think this could have used stronger editing. I found it repetitive in details and slow moving, and the parts by Hannah didn't seem strategically placed, often breaking up the narrative. I don't think her enthusiasm comes through, and she is the driving force behind the project. Tighter editing and more Hannah would make this more appealing, and convinced me to see it through all the way to the end, but I'm setting it aside.

Jess says

I'm a firm believer of "if you're not enjoying the book that you're reading, stop reading it." I read about half of this book and decided it wasn't worth my time or energy to continue reading it.

I think it's great that this family was willing to change their lifestyle in order to help others, but they really annoyed me. Kevin, the author and father of the family, was always referring to poor people as "these people," which for some reason I find really offensive and it seems like they're unable to relate to those that they wanted to help provide assistance to. In addition, it always seemed like they were focusing on what they had and it came across as if they were bragging. For example, the author would describe his house or possessions as "the mahogany mantel" or "the white linen chair covers with gold trimming" or "Joesph's Macbook." Obviously you're wealthy, we understand that!

Although the book was annoying, I liked how the daughter Hannah, had written some suggestions as to how to give back, etc. It felt slightly more down to Earth. However, I shut the book when the family was trying to narrow down their decision as to where to donate their money to and they were watching a video about malnourished kids in Africa. Hannah was outraged because there were flies flying around a child and she wanted the people who filmed the video to swat the flies away from him. I didn't even know how to respond to that sentence in the book!

Jack Granath says

The inspiring story of a family who sells their house, moves into one that's half as expensive, and gives the entire difference to a charitable project in Africa. The book documents the family's decision-making process

and the many unlooked-for, positive transformations that resulted.

Why do so many people recoil when they hear this story? The authors assume that others feel criticized in the face of such a generous act, and I'm sure that's part of it. Readers gasp at the lavishly appointed house for sale, which goes on the market at almost two million dollars. (One of the kids can take an elevator to her room.) It becomes easy to dismiss the project as a freak of the rich instead of adapting it to the probably different scale of our own lives.

But I can't really blame those readers. Kevin Salwen doesn't seem to understand that we're not like him, when he writes, "Almost imperceptibly we rushed into our Accumulation Years. You know them, don't you? You earn more, you live larger. The bigger house, the more spacious apartment. Then, of course, the stuff to adorn that growing space. There were nicer vacations--travel to Alaska, Bermuda, Italy. We bought our first pieces of original art, cashmere sweaters at Christmas."

Actually, we don't know them, most of us, and it's this tone that gets in the way of connecting with such a cool message. Particularly hard to swallow were the pages about feeling "the pinch" of their new quarters, which, by my math, must have been around a million-dollar house. It's a shame. The book could have done a lot more good with a different touch.

Melissa Lee-Tammeus says

I read the first 30 pages of this book before going to bed and went to bed pissed off. This morning I figured out why. This book is ridiculous. I can't even take it seriously nor can I finish it. This author and his family are so out of touch with what is happening under their very noses. I literally had to read twice how they were going to sacrifice their 6000 square foot home for something half that and that they pledged to spend 800,000 dollars on work for someone else. Are you fricking kidding me? And we are supposed to praise them for it? I am sorry but I don't know anyone with a 6000 square foot house or 800,000 dollars to spare. They should not be cutting their consumerism by half but by about 7/8th and then I'll take their advice. I get that they earned it, yada yada. But you don't need to brag about it, really. I skimmed the rest of the book looking for a nugget of something I could relate to. When I got to the paragraph that "downsizing" was a problem for them because they no longer had a walk in closet for all their clothes and their treadmill had to be put in the cold garage now, I shook my head in disgust. I refuse to praise those who believe they are transforming by "downsizing" to what most of us can only dream about it. This author has no idea what true downsizing is that is forced on so many right now. Try living in a real neighborhood and sparing your last five bucks for a stranger's meal and going without diapers for a week and then I'll read your book. Thank goodness I borrowed this and didn't contribute to their downsizing fund.

Barb says

While on the whole I thought that this was a worthwhile book with an important message, there were things in it that didn't sit well with me. Maybe I am being overly critical, which is more than likely, but the order of events in the story of the Salwen's adventure to make a difference in the world seem backward to me.

I admire this family for what they set out to do but for some reason it's difficult for me to understand why they did it the way they did. They decided to sell their two million dollar home and give half of the proceeds to an effort of charitable relief. Wow, that is amazing, Kudos to them.

They did extensive research and deliberating on what organization they would support and where they wanted to their funds to be spent. Yet they pledged \$800,000 based on the asking price of their home, not the selling price. They also visited the place where they would be helping long before their house ever sold or they ever gave any money.

As it turned out the economy went into a recession and their house sat on the market for two years before selling at a substantially lower price than their asking price. At the time their first payment was supposed to be paid to the relief organization they had not yet sold their home and decided to take funds from their daughter's college fund. I guess maybe it doesn't matter the particulars of their generosity but for some reason I just couldn't get past what seemed to me like the horse before the cart.

The other issue that didn't sit well with me was Kevin Salwen's repeatedly mentioning the brand name of many different items in the narrative of their story; Land's End polo shirt, Hamilton Beach coffee maker, Eggo waffles. I wondered if those companies were going to be paying him for endorsements? I also wondered if this book was written primarily as a vehicle for making up the difference between their estimated half and the real half of the proceeds from the sale of their home.

While I do think that this was a huge and wonderful thing the Salwen family has done and they learned and gained so much along the way, it still seemed to me that they hadn't really quite stepped off that consumerism tread mill they talked so much about. They come from a position of wealth and privilege and yet by the end of the book they still seem somewhat unaware of their relative wealth compared to others.

I also thought the Salwen's seemed to be distancing themselves from the people they wanted to help. There isn't one anecdotal story about a single individual who was or will be helped by the Salwen's money.

This book touched on some really important points about philanthropic efforts. You can't just throw money at complex problems and expect simple results. Poverty, hunger and homelessness are complex issues. I liked that this book addressed that.

That notwithstanding I found this story to have it's heart in the right place. I think that Hannah Salwen is an amazing and special girl and I won't be surprised to learn that she grows up to be the kind of person who focuses her life on making a difference in the world, just like the amazing people peppered throughout this book who are doing wonderful things to make a difference in the lives of others; Joan Holmes, Carol and John Coonrod, Dr. Naana Agyemang-Mensah, and Dr. Speciosa Wandira just to name a few. They inspire me to do better and more.

Anita says

I loved the concept of the book, and the process this family went through. It is challenging to think about and apply in your own life. The reason I didn't give it a higher rating was twofold--although inspirational, the family's plan comes off as not very well thought out when they commit money they don't have (the house doesn't sell initially), which feels irresponsible. The other irritant throughout the book is the constant name-brand-dropping--mentioning food brands, clothing brands, car brands, etc pervasively. It got to the point where you wondered about corporate sponsorship--I hope, however, that it was just to show that they were normal (albeit millionaire) Americans like the reader. And it was interesting to see how their service and goals ended up full circle, realizing that writing checks has its own worth :-)

Anne says

I liked the idea of this book more than I liked actually reading the book. The family made a dramatic and admirable choice, but the book itself fell flat and the style of the writing wasn't appealing to me. Both father and daughter use at least one inspirational quote per chapter with the same construction: "As Joe Schmoe said, 'Inspirational quote here.'" Surely at least the father, an experienced journalist, could do a little better than that. Still, kudos to the Salwens for committing themselves to making a difference in such a big way.

Sarah says

Should be titled great parenting skills 101.

Mr. and Mrs. Salweh, both from humble backgrounds have become affluent business people/teachers/journalists. They live in a \$2 million home, and buy their son a new \$200 bat each baseball season. But they also work with Habitat for Humanity and donate a small % of their income to charity each year, and they're happy with that. That is until their teen daughter, Hannah, decides that their family needs to do more to help heal some of the inequality she sees after volunteering at a homeless shelter.

The family embarks on a journey to sell their house, move to a smaller one, and donate half the profits to helping the less fortunate. But that's the easy part. How to help becomes the big question. Its not as simple as handing out a million hamburgers to the hungry. They search for a lasting way to enhance peoples' lives.

Along the way is a wonderful undertone of a family growing up and growing together. Parents give the now-old-enough kids more authority in the family dynamic, lead them through real world values and budgeting, and watch their social skills expand as they give speeches or learn the handshake of people in a small African village.

Written by journalist/father Kevin Salweh, the book maintains a positive attitude and encourages readers to give half-- maybe not half their house, but half their time or half their 'treasure' -- to helping others. At the end of each chapter is a short "Hannah's take" segment, targeting charitable activities teens can do alone or with their family.

Melissa says

I feel responsible for encouraging all of you to pick up this book!! I expected an unrealistic, preaching story about a wealthy family that gave up everything they had to live in a tent with little food and no electronics. But it wasn't. They worked hard for their money and they like nice things. They continued a realistic lifestyle while giving more. Their example is totally doable for me and for anyone - to whatever extent you want. (Volunteer, donate, research causes, put down devices at dinner, walk instead of drive, explore politics, expand education, etc.) The Salwens found a project that they were excited about and saw it through to the end. Their point is not that everyone should do the same - but that everyone can do something. And it can make a difference in someone's life. It's on the high school summer reading list so I hope it inspires a few DG teens to think about how much they have and what they could do without. For my life, I signed up for the July Literacy DuPage training session. Can't wait to start giving my time as a tutor! "What family wouldn't trade stuff for togetherness? In a world where we often have excess, what would happen if we all chose just one thing in our lives that we have enough of and gave away half? Magic. Think about it: cutting

in half the number of weekly lattes, the hours spent online, the excess blood in our bodies."
