

How Does the Flow of the Gift Affect the Gift, the Giver, and the Receiver?

Although more humane business models appear, we find ourselves still in the age-old struggles between the haves and have-nots. How does the notion of generosity, of giving and receiving, at the deepest level, influence how we think about these things?

... A cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead... as it is passed along, the gift may be given back to the original donor, but this is not essential. In fact it is better if the gift is not returned but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: the gift must always move. —LEWIS HYDE

A gift 'economy' is not an oxymoron, but the fundamental transactional model of living systems. We are brought up—in the Western, 'enlightened' tradition—

One of our most cherished cultural archetypes may be termed the zero-sum paradigm: the idea that you can't get something for nothing, expressed in the homily of 'there's no free lunch' as well as the hard science of 'matter/energy can be neither created nor destroyed.' The laws of the land agree with the laws of physics on this point. And indeed these laws appear to be unassailable, except for one tiny detail, the punch line: 'in a closed system.' Which makes it all rather academic, since, in the real world, human-scale, that we inhabit, there isn't any such thing—we don't even know if the universe as a whole is a closed system....

to think quite differently about nature and society, that it is composed of individuals engaged in a mutual contest of each against all over scarce resources which must be hoarded, guarded, and relinquished only for specific advantage, or else pried from one's cold dead fingers....

But life isn't like that, not in the 'natural world' nor even in our supremely acquisitive and competitive society—any one of us, at any given moment on any given day, is much more likely to be engaged in cooperative than competitive activities.

...and our mechanistic civilization could not survive a single day without the 'labors of love,' favors, mutual aid, and unpaid labors of child-rearing, housework, food preparation, etc. Add to this the ferocious rate at which industrialism is engaging in 'resource extraction,' which is a simple matter of taking something which was created by no one and converting it to something which can be privately owned, and our dependence on the gift becomes even more apparent.⁹

Gift economies tend to be largely tribal in nature and emphasize the good of the community over the individual. One's value is not based on what one owns, but on what one gives to the community. One example can be found among the Chinook of the Pacific Northwest; there, during the ceremony of *potlatch*, a chief's reputation is based on how much he is able to give away.¹⁰

The great natural resources of the Pacific Northwest helped to create the sense of abundance at the heart of the Chinook's gift economy. Gifts could be freely shared because there was an

underlying sense that there was enough for all and that the health and well-being of each was linked to and supported by the tribe. In gift economies, the gift itself is not as important as how its exchange or flow from one person to another helps to build and maintain relationships and the health of the community. As gifts move from one person to another through the circle, the gift increases its worth, and the blessings of each gift seem to multiply again and again.

After World War II, my parents spent the first year of their marriage in Europe on the G.I. Bill. My father went to get his master's degree in Geneva while my mother worked as a secretary. After the school year was over, they spent three months hitchhiking across Europe. As hitchhikers they were continually in relationship with strangers, asking for rides in exchange for smiles, thanks, and conversations (long or short, depending on the language). At times, the drivers 'went the extra mile,' taking them farther than requested, helping them to find a place for the night, or offering to share a meal. Though my parents knew they would never be able to directly repay any of these people, they accepted these gifts as they were given (freely) and have spent their lives passing these gifts on by helping others that they meet.

Being raised with this sense of giving and receiving was in itself an expansive gift for me. It gave me the permission to receive with thanks what was given, knowing that I would be able to pass it on to someone else farther down the line. —Megan Scribner

While market economies tend to view gifts as commodities and tend to think of gift exchanges as transactions between two people, in gift economies, gifts often travel in a circle. In India, there is a proverb that describes this flow of the gift. "If money goes, money comes. If money stays, death comes." In a gift economy, the gift must always flow; when it stops flowing, something essential to the community seems to die or disappear.

We can contrast this with traditional Western proverbs such as "A penny saved is a penny earned," and "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." These tend to emphasize holding on to what we have, and never letting it go. Here, wealth may accumulate in great heaps, but fewer people can enjoy it.

Many have proposed that there are areas in Western culture, such as scientific research and the Internet, where the gift economy still reigns. Gifford Pinchot, like many others, has drawn upon Lewis Hyde's description of how the field of scientific research can, at times, function like a gift economy.

The scientists with highest status are not those who possess the most knowledge; they are the ones who have contributed the most to their fields. A scientist of great knowledge but only minor contributions is almost pitied—his or her career is seen as a waste of talent. At a symposium...each scientist hopes his or her paper will provide a large and lasting value...because that is precisely how one wins in science.

Knowledge and information are no different than food.
What matters must be shared and given freely, as is evidenced
in some hunting and gathering cultures.

Antelope meat called for a gift economy because it was perishable and there was too much for any one person to eat. Information also loses value over time and has the capacity to satisfy more than one. In many cases information gains rather than loses value through sharing. While the exchange economy may have been appropriate for the industrial age, the gift economy is coming back as we enter the information age.¹¹

Questions for Reflection

What are our cultural messages and sayings, and how do they affect our views on giving?

Describe a time when you have misperceived the meaning and intent of another's actions.

Describe a time when you felt confused about the right thing to give in a particular situation.

How do we receive the generosity of others?

What's required of the one who receives the gift?

How do we receive freely, trusting that we can pass the gift along to another?

How do we see our success as a gift to the larger whole?

The following stories are particularly relevant to conversations on the themes covered in this section. We encourage you to read them aloud to each other and let the conversations flow! They can be found on www.learningtogive.org and soon in the anthology *Tell These Secrets: Tales of Generosity from Around the World*.

- *The Lord of the Cranes*
- *Nail Soup*
- *A Drum*