



Gifts Large and Small

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The Advent season has become a time of frenzied shopping for gifts. While driven primarily by marketers looking for profits and thus doing harm to both the natural environment and the human spirit, the custom itself is rooted in a positive human quality.

Aggressive marketing fosters consumerism, harming the planet by depleting natural resources and producing pollution. Plastic, of course, comes from oil and its large scale manufacture worsens our dependence on this fossil fuel, for the sake of which we go to war. What a birthday tribute to the Prince of Peace! But even items not made of plastic require energy in their manufacture and so have a similar effect, besides producing water and air pollution. Finally, there is the inevitable transformation into solid waste so as to make room for next year's accumulation.

What is positive about gift-giving behavior? For one thing, its origin is found in pre-human species, in the form of sharing food, first with siblings and later with other individuals of the same species. This sharing is a breakthrough on the path toward altruism. It is the beginning of an insight that as much as selfishness seems the best way to achieve personal survival, altruistic behavior is more adaptive for survival of the species. So it is a form of self-sacrifice, a sublime virtue rooted early in animal behavior.

So human beings have the potential to understand that it is better to give than to receive, a potential which has been heroically realized by the saints and gurus and which is

growing in all of us. And with our species having achieved such a high level of technology and potential destructive power, self-centeredness would be a disaster.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of a gift-giving culture is the opportunity for gratitude. We may begin by a formal acknowledgment of a material gift and experience a bit of warm feeling for the giver. It is the beginning of compassion. Then we may be moved to give thanks for our daily blessings and cultivate the habit of gratitude. Compassion deepens and opens the way for joy.



Then there are the big gifts, things we usually don't even think about. There is our magnificent body, a beautiful-spirit-in-machine that performs amazing feats without needing any conscious intervention. Our heart pumps out the right volume of blood on each compression, coordinating with tiny muscles in the arteries to keep the pressure optimized. Our lungs contract to expel the depleted air (not fully depleted, of course, having extracted a relatively small portion of the oxygen) and then relax to allow fresh air to enter. They increase their effort, breathing faster when we are exercising and slower when we are asleep. And the heart follows in the same pattern. How do they know to cooperate? Is there some kind of anatomical cell phone to keep them in touch? Whether or not, it is a marvelous communication system invented for us animals as a gift from the evolving universe.



How about the numberless enzymes, those bits of protein that trigger our body chemistry in its wonderful variety. For example, they have an effective strategy for digesting our food, beginning right in the mouth with the breaking down of some starches, a relatively easy task. In the stomach their coworkers break down more starch and some protein. Other enzymes tell the stomach there is a meal coming and begin the churning that emulsifies the fats, complementing the preparative work of mastication. Then into the small intestine, where more enzymes finish the task of breaking down and begin the task of absorbing into the blood. Whoever thought this up? It must have been a genius. Again, it was the evolving universe.

How about the planet itself? Mercury and Venus are much too hot. Jupiter and Saturn, besides being big balls of gas, are too cold. But Earth, as in Goldilocks, is just right. Its axis of rotation is tilted just so, exactly right to give us changes of season, not too little nor too much. Who thought up this way of bringing variety into our experience?

How about the hydrologic cycle? Temperatures on the planet are just right to allow water to evaporate, not too fast or too slow, and then to condense into droplets. So we have morning dew, so beautiful on rose petals. We have big puffy clouds, ever changing, fascinating to watch, their shapes even suggesting grotesque animals, expressive faces. The rain washes down the atmosphere and sinks into the ground, bringing nutrients to trees and rosebushes, giving rise to mighty rivers. Wearing down the hardest rocks, it brings us the Grand Canyon. What a gift!

And then there is the universe itself, bursting forth out of nothing, neither matter nor energy, neither space nor

time, 13.7 billion years ago. Within the first tiny fraction of a second, the force of gravity took form. It needed to be exactly right within a small fraction of a percent. A little bit stronger and the universe would have expanded to a certain limit and then collapsed again into a “big crunch.” A little bit weaker, and there would not have been enough attraction to form galaxies, let alone stars and planets. In either case there could not have been life nor humans nor ourselves. What a spectacular feat of engineering! Did we do it? No, it was total gift.

Finally, there is the remarkable property of our earthly rocky portion, the lithosphere, to crack into tectonic plates which press down on the rocky substrate enough to make it slightly fluid. The plates, then, can float and move. Like the bumping cars of amusement parks, they collide, slowly but forcefully, with other plates. Sometimes one of the plates simply concedes defeat and slips down below the other, sliding down toward the molten zone where it can be recycled, forcing new growth out of ocean ridges. In other cases, the two plates continue to crunch one another, creating enormous folds evolving into craggy mountains. So we have the Himalayas.

We usually don't think about these things, let alone give thanks for them. We may have intellectual curiosity about them, along with countless other fascinations of our existence, but our knowledge tends to stay in our heads. If we open up our hearts to it, our understanding can bring forth gratitude.

All is gift. All is worthy of gratitude. Out of gratitude flows love. Let's love our bodies, love Earth, love the universe. Let's love one another.

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