

# Vimukt Shiksha

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Reclaiming  
the Gift Culture

## Reclaiming the Gift Culture

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## table of contents

welcome	~ manish jain and shilpa jain	- 5
destroying the fable of homo economicus	~ bill ellis	- 10
reconnecting with the gift culture and ourselves	~ amy mall	- 14
a review of marcel mauss	~ david graeber	- 21
solidarity economics	~ ethan milller	- 25
the big circle	~ yuliya filippovska	- 30
<i>dama</i> in mali	~ coumba toure	- 31
the cornucopia of the commons	~ david bollier	- 35
why did you start a free restaurant, anyways?	~ ankur shah	- 45
from necessary evil to necessary good	~ daniel perera	- 52
the gift of the world café	~ amy lenzo, tom hurley and juanita brown	- 58
community transformation is free	~ rick smyre	- 63

cycle yatra	–	shilpa jain	-	66
nature's gifts	–	manish bapna	-	71
remembering a poet of crianza	–	jack herranen	-	73
rediscovering the joy of gifting	–	shetal dandage	-	78
charityfocus: the organization of gift	–	nipun mehta	-	83
institutionalization of gift	–	ivan illich	-	89
helping vs. gifting	–	marianne gronemeyer	-	91
sacred economics 101	–	christopher r. lindstrom	-	94
the king of kindness	–	mark shepard	-	101
my experiments with intimacy	–	nitin paranjape	-	107
gift giving and the public sphere	–	maralena murphy and jenny leis	-	110
healing gifts	–	madhu suri prakash	-	113
you are, therefore i am	–	satish kumar	-	118

# WELCOME

*Sarita kare na paan, vriksh na fal chaakhe kadi  
Khet na khave dhaan, parhit neepjey sekhra*

*The river never drinks its own water. The tree never tastes its own fruit. The field never consumes its own harvest. They selflessly strive for the well-being of all those around them.*

*- Mewari proverb*

Greetings from Mewar!

We are honored to bring forth a booklet exploring the gift culture in our lives. In these challenging times of dominating multinational corporations, collapsing neo-liberal economies, and the commodification of everything, it seems vital to explore a different form of relationship and exchange. 'Gifting', and the culture it draws from as well as evokes, provides a welcome oasis of hope from the hackneyed debates around capitalism vs. communism and the paralysis of TINA (There Is No Alternative). We put this intercultural dialogue together to try to share some of the important concepts, beliefs, practices and dreams around reclaiming the gift culture in our different spaces and places.

This is perhaps our most critical and important work to-date. We have come to understand that the ideas and practices of deep learning, self-organizing learning communities and vibrant learning ecosystems are predicated on a culture of generosity, care, trust and friendship. The gift culture is critical to decommodifying education and the learning process, that is, removing it from the realm of artificial scarcity, monopolized production and distribution, and institutionalized hierarchy and discrimination. It is sad that learning processes that are essential to being human like play, laughter, Nature, storytelling, care, etc. are being commercialized and as a result, are becoming accessible only to the elite. The gift culture inspires us to see our learning resources and relationships as part of the larger commons that is accessible to all and care by all.

The gift culture also fundamentally challenges our perceptions about ourselves. Engaging in the gift culture transforms our self and world understanding by reminding us that we are being given gifts all the time from many known and unknown sources and inviting us back into our sacred role as active gift-givers. This is critical to de-institutionalizing our lives and our communities – to moving beyond Experts, Money, Technology, Nation-states for defining our identity and purpose in life – and for re-asserting ourselves as co-creators of learning and life.

The gift culture also challenges the core underpinnings of the Global Market and the Development Project which are built on extraction and concentration of wealth and power and the spread of monoculture. The gift culture doesn't mean that there are no markets, but rather we need to re-create a healthy set of cultural, spiritual and social values and rituals to limit the space/control of markets in our lives and relationships – a true 'sense of the sacred'. Most importantly, the gift culture is the key to sustainable and real happiness on the planet. By seeing and valuing our own gifts and the gifts of others, we open the possibility for the organic unfolding our whole beings and for accessing our deepest humanity to ensure the collective well-being of all life on the planet.

We should clarify at the outset that the gift culture is not a new fangled concept, rather it is based on ancient and sacred life sustaining principles that can be found in many diverse cultures around the world. When we started to think of examples in our region of Mewar, many inspiring images came to mind:

- Hosting a *pyaoo* is the spiritual practice of sitting on the road and offering drinking water to those passing by - humans and animals alike. It is done in a spirit of *sewa* (selfless service for the benefit of all, performed without any expectation of reward or personal gain). The Sanskrit word, *sewa*, translates directly as 'string', implying that all things are connected in the thread of existence. In India, it is still a cause of great disbelief for many that corporations are charging money to provide clean water to travellers.

- There is also the ritual of *manwar*, which is a cultural act of offering, sharing yourself, your home and food, with your guests, with aspirit of great hospitality and care. No one should leave feeling neglected.

There is saying in Mewari that your guests should be treated with the same affection as you treat your son-in-law. *Manwar* is experienced around weddings and other kinds of gatherings, but it also happens on a small-scale, just when one visits another's home.

- The traditional practice of *gupt daan* literally means 'undisclosed giving'. One used to give donations with the understanding that no one, including the receiver, should know where it came from. This would protect the receiver from humiliation and help the giver retain their sense of humility. It also shields us from the trap of having expectations to receive something in return after giving a gift. *Gupt daan* stands in stark contrast to the modern practices of P.R. campaigns and photo shoots that surrounds donations and voluntary effort.

- The Jain paradigm of *aparigraha* (non-acquisitiveness and non-possessiveness) serves as gentle reminder that we should not hold on to or covet things too tightly since we are not 'owners' of life but rather its trustees. It also encourages us to move beyond unlimited greed and think about what our real needs are. In this way, it creates a healthy field for engaging in a discourse of self-imposed and self-organized limits.

When one actually sits down to think about it, the list is seemingly endless. There are many 'modern' ways that the gift culture is being invoked and experimented with as well. We have been trying to explore these as an essential part of our work in Shikshantar over the past 10 years. This starts with our community learning center where we do not charge any fees for participation. At the same time, we say it is not 'free'. We invite people to come and share whatever talents, knowledge, energy, questions that they have. This had led to many exciting exchanges and innovations such as the cycle yatra.

This spirit extends to all of the activities of Udaipur as a Learning City, where we rely heavily on inviting in volunteer energy — the natural instinct of people to share their time, energy, talents and learning resources with each other — to reclaim and nurture our learning commons. Many 'private' spaces, services and goods have been brought back into the service of the public/community good. Udaipur locals have hosted workshops in their homes; they have opened their art galleries, kitchens and farms to

visitors; they have brought their knowledge and talents to participate in new experiments in rooftop farming, rainwater harvesting, mural-making, etc., with us; they have donated their leftover waste materials (scraps of wood, rubber tire tubes, cloth scraps, old wedding cards, etc.) for workshops with kids — all without one rupee being exchanged or demands for self-promotion in the media. This kind of volunteer spirit has enabled Shikshantar’s budget to go down every year, while the movement expands into new individuals, families, neighborhoods, organizations and places.

We are trying to explore many other ways to reduce our collective dependency on the Global Market and regenerate the local culture of generosity, care and trust. Several children and youth have gotten into this spirit by making useful things out of waste with their hands. One young person who comes to Shikshantar, Ankit, has made and gifted over 200 unique pieces of coconut jewelry to friends and relatives. He has also ‘paid forward’ the art of making jewelry to several hundred children and youth in self-organized workshops. We are also working on reclaiming forms of play from the world of competition and commercialization. We have freely shared lots of cooperative games with thousands of children and families in Udaipur. Many of these games highlight the wise principle that if one person ‘fails’ or is ‘out’, it is the failure of all.

We have also been experimenting with our organic *mela* (a festival or fair) as a vehicle for strengthening local markets. It is a space for both selling organic, local and natural products, as well as for sharing arts and ideas, so people can learn to make their own things. For example, even while the jewelry or pottery is on display, there is simultaneously a workshop happening at no cost, where people can make their own jewelry from natural and waste materials, or a potter’s wheel for trying to throw one’s own pots. We openly share recipes for different healthy foods and herbal treatments and invite others to do so as well. We have been inspired by the sacred practice of many traditional healers in our region, and have moved away from putting a fixed price on the herbal products we make, to inviting people to contribute what they feel is appropriate based on their *shraddha* (faith) and capacity.



The gift culture has also been an integral feature of our on-going intercultural dialogues. It has helped create a field for a different depth of conversation. Hundreds of people have shared their thoughts in writing with us (in Mewari, Hindi and English languages) without ever asking for an honorarium. We make all our publications available on-line, free of charge in print, and copyleft (able to be reproduced and shared freely, with authors and sources acknowledged). As we all know, our knowledges, creativities and profound insights come from so many sources: how could we ever put a price tag on them?

In this booklet, we have chosen to present many of the stories, insights and conceptual frameworks around the gift culture. The contributors are responding to questions like:

- Why the gift culture?
- How have we been inspired by the gift culture?
- What are the different traditions of the gift culture around the world?
- What are the possibilities of the gift culture for our troubled times?
- How can we bring the gift culture practically into our lives, communities, organizations?
- What are the challenges to bringing forth the gift culture?
- What do we need to unlearn for the gift culture to manifest?
- What questions do we need to explore more deeply in order to understand the gift culture?

We hope this collection will inspire you to better understand and reclaim the gift culture in your life and community. We invite you to share your experiences and ideas with us.

With gratitude and love,  
Manish, Shilpa and  
the Shikshantar family  
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# DESTROYING THE FABLE OF *HOMO ECONOMICUS*

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Modern Economics and the Euro-American cultures are based on the assumed reality of *homo economicus*. That is, that the only motivation of humans is material self-interest. Dominique Temple and Mireille Chabal's book "La Réciprocité et La Naissance des Valeurs Humaines"<sup>1</sup> examines all cultures throughout history, including our own modern culture, and demonstrates that human motivations and human values have been distorted only in the last couple of hundred years, and more vehemently in the last few decades, to become based on values which are destroying the humanity and life on Earth. Reciprocity is more fundamental and more friendly to both humans and nature.

Reciprocity is the antithesis of exchange or selling. Reciprocity, or 'gifting,' has taken on many forms in different cultures. In some, it is embedded in religion. People produce and distribute goods and services in celebration of their spiritual beliefs. Their work is a gift to the gods, to the Earth, and to humanity, without thought of material return. In other cultures, production is for the common good. That is, people see themselves embedded in their families and communities. They exist only because of their relationships to other people and their bioregion. And these relationships depend on the productive role they play — how much they can support and give to society. In still others, material welfare is paramount; but one gains insurance of her or his material well-being by giving to others.

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<sup>1</sup> Published by *Éditions L'Harmattan*, 5-7 rue de L'école Polytechnique, F-75005 Paris FRANCE, 1995, in French.

“To him who gives shall be given.” Each person gains prestige in society by how much s/he gives. That prestige demands reciprocity to the giver and to the family of the giver. The more one impoverishes himself in betterment of the community, the more the community is beholden to the giver.

This reciprocity, on which almost all cultures are based, is uniquely vilified by neoliberal economic theory, which refuses to recognize that production and distribution can be based on anything but greed and exchange — giving up something only to gain something else. This distorted economic theory of exchange goes well beyond just ‘the market’. Economic reasoning has invaded sociology, education, politics, ethics and the law. *Homo Economicus* is believed to base all values and judgments on economic exchange values, what one can gain materially. It is only in this distorted Western society that reciprocity has been subjugated to the concept of exchange.

Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Levi-Straus, Marcel Mauss, Marshall Sahlins and other anthropologists have shown the deep roots of reciprocity; Aristotle, Homer, Hobbes, and other political philosophers trace reciprocity from the Greeks as the base of our Western society; and Hegel, Adam Smith, Durkheim, Polanyi and other economists, describe reciprocity's relevance to the age we are in. But it's the future which really concerns Temple and Chabal. Money, exchange, and globalism have replaced the human values inherent in reciprocity with motivations which are leading to social, ecological, economic and political destruction.

Reciprocity exists deep in ourselves, our families, and our communities; but it is suppressed by our belief system and its resulting social institutions. We see reciprocity in volunteerism, in our families, in our communities, and in many grassroots social innovations. Our future can be assured only if we release this constructive force of reciprocity. Or as the authors end this book, *“Even a slave is free to act in a gifting (or reciprocity) mode.”*

We all practice reciprocity to some extent. Within our families, we do not ask for 'fair exchange' from others or measure their contributions in terms of money. We all give to friends in a reciprocity mode and contribute to worthy causes. Homesteaders, like myself, give to the community by distributing surplus from our gardens to one another. And often, we extend that sharing with babysitting pools, barn raisings, and other cooperative community actions.

My latest attempt to promote these ideas is in working to get recognition of a two-tiered food system, through a global Food Corps and local programs. They will a) determine what locally-grown crops would provide the minimum diet for existence, b) train all local people how to grow those crops, c) train local volunteers on the horticulture needed, d) train a core of global volunteers to work in local communities around the world to promote local self-reliance in the minimum diets, and e) alert governments and philanthropists to the crying need to stave off starvation now and prevent food shortages for all in the coming future. Much of this is already in place. Peace Corps, 4-H clubs, WWOOF (Willing Workers On Organic Farms), CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), Food Co-ops, and many others should work together to assure an adequate food supply for every person in the world. Anything beyond that minimum could remain in the money market; the rest supported through a local, reciprocal system.

In his book *The Gift: The Erotic Life of Property*, Lewis Hyde expresses the spirit of a gift economy (and its contrast to a market economy) as follows:

*“[W]hatever we have been given is supposed to be given away not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move in its stead... [T]he gift may be given back to its original donor, but this is not essential... The only essential is this: the gift must always move.”*

*He further remarks that a traditional gift economy is based on “the obligation to give, the obligation to accept, and the obligation to reciprocate,” and that it is “at once economic, juridical, moral, aesthetic, religious, and mythological.”*

*Hyde argues that there is a difference between a ‘true’ gift given out of gratitude and a ‘false’ gift given only out of obligation. In Hyde’s view, the ‘true’ gift binds us in a way beyond any commodity transaction, but “we cannot really become bound to those who give us false gifts.”*

# RE-CONNECTING WITH THE GIFT CULTURE AND OURSELVES

Amy Mall <premelamall@yahoo.com>

Earlier this year, there was some discussion amongst friends about the online resource, **The FreeCycle Network** <[www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org)>. The website is an opportunity to network among people who you do not know in order to freely share resources. I value the positive possibilities of a website; however, I am also cautious that we do not *replace* local networks, communities, traditions, and cultural practices that are relationship-based with technologically-mediated ones. This idea led me to try and articulate some of my experiences of direct, relationship-based local networks for practicing gift culture. This process of articulation is parallel to my own reclamation of a gift culture through action.

In my experience, gift culture is motivated by a feeling of connection to humanity and nature. The connectedness associated with gift culture is the core of what it means when I feel alive and healthy. When alienated from these connections, fear has more power, and hope becomes more difficult to grasp. When in touch with these connections, false senses of entitlement wither away, and resources are valued as collective and planetary. Simultaneously, by embracing a view that everyone has gifts to share, definitions of privilege become broader, and a renewed sense of empowerment and possibility can thrive.

As a young child my family had less money than those living around us, but I did not feel 'poor' because the culture within my house was vibrant and rich. My father, with his creative culinary provisions, demonstrated the beauty of transforming scraps into something nourishing. He foraged for greens in the neighborhood, finding things growing wildly in alleys and untended spaces, like midwestern pigweed

(known to us from India as a kind of *butuwa*). Although, at times, we had limited money for food, this foraging was also motivated by a desire not to see good food go to waste. Seeing value in something usually overlooked helped me to look at everyday spaces with a sense of potential.

Our house was always filled with a flow of people living and sharing life with us, many of them international students, scholars, immigrants, or refugees who landed in Chicago for a myriad of reasons. There was always room for everyone, always a sense that food could be stretched and space made, even when the supply was modest. Through the people who flowed through our home, I became connected to experiences, places and cultures that were different from my own; the whole world felt viscerally inter-connected. My parents' extreme hospitality ingrained a value: to share what we had above all things. Now I feel that this is the biggest gift my parents ever gave me. I have received so much through this practice; in this way, I am indebted to them.

One of my fondest childhood memories was my informal experience with what is now being called 'freecycling'. As children, we would go to a 'free store' outside of Chicago, for refugees and community workers. It was set up like a regular department store, allowing each participant to go twice a year and take whatever we wanted. All my clothes, shoes and everything came from that free store, which was kept up by volunteers, who mostly felt like grandmothers. As a kid unable to go to regular stores, having the ability to choose what I wanted from an assortment was really special. We brought our outgrown items there, and then took others back. It helped me to be creative and choose what I really liked, because the collection was never dictated by the fashions of the seasonal market. I wasn't drawn to something because it was popular, but because of color, texture, pattern, inspiration. Not going to regular stores really helped me to be more empowered creatively. "Somebody's trash is another person's treasure", has been true for me.

At the events hosted by our organization, Twine <[www.twine.org](http://www.twine.org)>, we have begun a free store of our own. It was partially motivated by Mark Shipley, a friend who consistently shows up at our home with his

hands full of treasures to share. He dives into dumpsters all over the city, finding and recovering amazing and special foods. He would talk about how he wanted a central place to be able to bring the things he wants to share, because it was impractical to deliver each rescued item to its best new home. Now, people bring things to our house, put it all out, and others take what they want from the collection.

The first time, it led to great conversations about cultured foods, because we had a large ceramic vessel that one person thought would be good for *kambucha*, while another said *kimchi*. This led to a decision to have a fermentation skill exchange. From one gift grew many! We will continue to do this, and I hope that it can grow. We can eventually include even passers-by, moving it outside as the weather warms up. I can imagine these all over the city, freeing up useful things from the landfill, inviting others to glean out valuables, and meeting our neighbors in the process.

Giftng is a term that I also heard from my mother-in-law early in my marriage. In my husband's community in Trinidad and Tobago, and among some Caribbean people in the USA, there is a concept of reciprocal funding, called a *susu*. It has its roots in West Africa, where community members would contribute money to a communal pool. The money would assist members of the *susu* with cash flow problems, providing access to a kind of informal banking structure that had been historically denied on a formal level. All members put in an amount that then goes into a pool. The members receive the pool in turns, like a savings account for some, or a no- or low-interest loan for others.

I love the *susu*, because it demonstrates how communities can help to support one another by keeping money within. When we have our money in a big bank, we often have little or no control of what happens to it. Some banks use our money for all types of unsavory purposes. In contrast, people within a *susu* can often know and see what happens to their money, witnessing people use the money to realize all types of needs and aspirations. It can be very positive to feel like a part of that on a public level. Many development groups introduce micro-credit loans that are growing in popularity as new ideas, but the truth is that they have been around for generations in traditions like *susu*. I see it like a reciprocal-funding model, and



sense a huge potential for it to be used creatively for all types of groups and individuals to gain access to funds in a mutually beneficial manner. I can imagine a model like this for artists to make small projects in a twelve-month rotation. Twelve artists, twelve gifts of mutuality each month, twelve art projects? Twine is definitely interested in starting a *susu*!

Gift culture is also about building connections to others, not only about reducing waste and consumption. We need people in our lives — people to help carry heavy things, to feed us when we are ill, etc. We are not 'bothering' people when we are dependent on them. From early ages, we who exist in global capitalist settings are taught by our surroundings that dependence is bad. The 'American Dream' is about accepting an illusion of independence with money. Those who are most monetarily poor in society are equated with weakness, even though their experiences are often places where real strength, courage and wisdom emerge. We must not romanticize poverty and genuine overwhelming hardship and suffering connected to lack of monetary access, but I seek to define 'poverty' differently than mere lack of money, or even lack of food in plenty. Please also remember the many who eat in large amounts and are still malnourished.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am a kind of entrepreneur. I love business, and I love seeing people succeed financially with creative ideas — but not at the sacrifice of all other standards. The fair trade movement should not be so small. We must count the cost of buying conventional goods that is not added to our personal bill, but is added to the bill of the whole society and world, often at the expense of small communities. What we see as affordable and 'cheap' is often the most costly to humanity and nature.

As free trade spreads a version of business, that profits when local systems break down, sharing our resources can also be about resisting that shift. Gift culture resists the separation between people and resources. If I approach interactions with all others as an exchange of gifts, my values must follow that openness, to give as well as to receive. I cannot assume that I am just the giver or just the receiver. When we are gifting, we are also receiving.

And you never know who may be open to gifting! I recently had an unexpected offer from a health worker to trade art for treatment; it was a great surprise! Sharing, exchanging and gifting labor for big projects is a huge way to support one another to do things we find meaningful, but perceive ourselves lacking the time for. Few projects can be maintained completely alone, so inviting others into our doings can create vibrancy and sustainability. It builds community, allows us to experience a more diverse collection of activities, and prevents burnout. It can transform our sense of time.

This seems really simple, but I admit, for me, it has not been an easy process. Without realizing it, I had adopted a very warped view of self-sufficiency that has nothing to do with *true* self-sufficiency. Instead of replacing relationships with consumable goods, I feel we need to navigate personal needs in the context of community. Now I am growing to invite others more fluidly, to ask for help without shame, and to create spaces for co-creation.

On an organizational and business level, many people in 'not-for-profit' work are not able to collaborate because of a sense of competition for resources, profits, and unique 'success'. In reality, with healthier dialogue, gifting can improve our collective access to resources and our effectiveness in fulfilling our 'larger missions'. Many people are turned off by sustainable living practices because they feel that it takes too much work or is too costly. This is certainly true from the standard of the individualistic consumer social paradigm. But when we can form non-competitive alliances, it shifts tremendously. I can, for example, be part of several large gardens, as a mother of a toddler with limited capacity. Healthy community can keep us accountable to the better versions of ourselves.

I feel that taking this risk of involvement is critical to eliminating oppressive ways of being in the world. Both 'privacy' and 'safety' are aggressively marketed to consumers. These interpretations must be dismantled, because they interrupt people's ability to collaborate with neighbors and forge new friendships. Taken to the extreme, when privacy and safety are valued above community, it leaves room for harming someone close to us without our knowledge or notice. In such a climate, the individual, in my mind, loses

her/his power without even realizing it. We as a society become too busy to be sensitive to any collective loss taking place. I mention this, because I feel that it is an obstacle for us in reaching out to people around us.

One may ask, "Why should I engage in gift culture, if I can afford not to?" My question is, "Can you really afford not to?" By not engaging in the gift culture, and instead only using money, don't we stop promoting collective and personal health and happiness? Perhaps, we are desensitized to these losses and are willing to trade them in without much examination. This may be why our basic needs for healthy organic food, warm community and self-expression are viewed as 'luxuries'.

My mother-in-law, a deeply spiritual person, conveys that there is a kind of openness that can emerge when we are gifting. It is often not isolated to just one specific return, but can become an invitation for other 'gifts' or blessings to arrive into our lives. Some days, I see gifting as a truly spiritual flow. Other days, I see it as a way of seeing/noticing in the world. From either view, my life is enriched.

*“Societies have progressed in so far as they themselves, their subgroups, and lastly, the individuals in them, have succeeded in stabilizing relationships, giving, receiving, and finally giving in return. To trade, the first condition was to be able to lay aside the spear. From then onwards, they succeeded in exchanging goods and persons, no longer between clans, but between tribes and nations, and above all, between individuals. Only then did people learn how to create mutual interest, giving mutual satisfaction, and in the end, to defend them without having to resort to arms. Thus the clan, the tribe, and peoples have learnt how to oppose and give to one another without sacrificing themselves to one another. This is what tomorrow, in our so-called civilized world, classes and nations and individuals also, must learn. This is one of the enduring secrets of their wisdom and solidarity.”*

- Marcel Mauss

*The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 1950 (1990 edition/translation)

# A REVIEW OF MARCEL MAUSS (an excerpt)

David Graeber

Marcel Mauss' essay on 'the gift' was, more than anything, his response to events in Russia — particularly Lenin's New Economic Policy of 1921, which abandoned earlier attempts to abolish commerce. If the market could not simply be legislated away, even in Russia, probably the least monetarized European society, then clearly, Mauss concluded, revolutionaries were going to have to start thinking a lot more seriously about what this 'market' actually was, where it came from, and what a viable alternative to it might actually be like. It was time to bring the results of historical and ethnographic research to bear.

Mauss' conclusions were startling. First of all, almost everything that 'economic science' had to say on the subject of economic history turned out to be entirely untrue. The universal assumption of free market enthusiasts, then as now, was that what essentially drives human beings is a desire to maximize their pleasures, comforts and material possessions (their 'utility'), and that all significant human interactions can thus be analyzed in market terms. In the beginning, goes the official version, there was barter. People were forced to get what they wanted by directly trading one thing for another. Since this was inconvenient, they eventually invented money as a universal medium of exchange. The invention of further technologies of exchange (credit, banking, stock exchanges) was simply a logical extension.

The problem was, as Mauss was quick to note, there is no reason to believe a society based on barter has ever existed. Instead, what anthropologists were discovering were societies where economic life was based on utterly different principles, and most objects moved back and forth as gifts — and almost everything we would call 'economic' behavior was based on a pretense of pure generosity and a refusal to

calculate exactly who had given what to whom. Such 'gift economies' could on occasion become highly competitive, but when they did it was in exactly the opposite way from our own: Instead of vying to see who could accumulate the most, the winners were the ones who managed to give the most away. In some notorious cases, such as the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, this could lead to dramatic contests of liberality, where ambitious chiefs would try to outdo one another by distributing thousands of silver bracelets, Hudson Bay blankets or Singer sewing machines, and even by destroying wealth — sinking famous heirlooms in the ocean, or setting huge piles of wealth on fire and daring their rivals to do the same.

All of this may seem very exotic. But as Mauss also asked: How alien is it, really? Is there not something odd about the very idea of gift-giving, even in our own society? Why is it that, when one receives a gift from a friend (a drink, a dinner invitation, a compliment), one feels somehow obliged to reciprocate in kind? Why is it that a recipient of generosity often somehow feels reduced if he or she cannot? Are these not examples of universal human feelings, which are somehow discounted in our own society — but in others were the very basis of the economic system? And is it not the existence of these very different impulses and moral standards, even in a capitalist system such as our own, that is the real basis for the appeal of alternative visions and socialist policies? Mauss certainly felt so.

In a lot of ways Mauss' analysis bore a marked resemblance to Marxist theories about alienation and reification being developed by figures like György Lukács around the same time. In gift economies, Mauss argued, exchanges do not have the impersonal qualities of the capitalist marketplace: In fact, even when objects of great value change hands, what really matters is the relations between the people; exchange is about creating friendships, or working out rivalries, or obligations, and only incidentally about moving around valuable goods. As a result everything becomes personally charged, even property: In gift economies, the most famous objects of wealth — heirloom necklaces, weapons, feather cloaks — always seem to develop personalities of their own.

In a market economy it's exactly the other way around. Transactions are seen simply as ways of getting one's hands on useful things; the personal qualities of buyer and seller should ideally be completely irrelevant. As a consequence everything, even people, start being treated as if they were things too. (Consider in this light the expression 'goods and services'.) The main difference with Marxism, however, is that while Marxists of his day still insisted on a bottom-line economic determinism, Mauss held that in past market-less societies — and by implication, in any truly humane future one — 'the economy,' in the sense of an autonomous domain of action concerned solely with the creation and distribution of wealth, and which proceeded by its own, impersonal logic, would not even exist.

Mauss was never entirely sure what his practical conclusions were. The Russian experience convinced him that buying and selling could not simply be eliminated in a modern society, at least in the 'foreseeable future,' but a market ethos could. Work could be co-operatized, effective social security guaranteed and, gradually, a new ethos created whereby the only possible excuse for accumulating wealth was the ability to give it all away. The result: a society whose highest values would be "the joy of giving in public, the delight in generous artistic expenditure, the pleasure of hospitality in the public or private feast."

Some of this may seem awfully naïve from today's perspective, but Mauss' core insights have, if anything, become even more relevant now than they were 75 years ago — now that economic 'science' has become, effectively, the revealed religion of the modern age.

Reference: <http://info.interactivist.net/node/1308>

*“If we take an ants’ nest, we not only see that every description of work — rearing of progeny, foraging, building, rearing of aphides, and so on — is performed according to the principles of voluntary mutual aid; we must also recognize that the chief, the fundamental feature of the life of many species of ants is the fact and the obligation for every ant of sharing its food, already swallowed and partly digested, with every member of the community which many apply for it. Two ants belonging to two different species or to two hostile nests, when they occasionally meet together, will avoid each other.*

*But two ants belonging to the same nest or to the same colony of nests will approach each other, exchange a few movements with the antennae, and ‘if one of them is hungry or thirsty, and especially if the other has its crop full... it immediately asks for food.’ The individual thus requested never refuses; it sets apart its mandibles, takes a proper position, and regurgitates a drop of transparent fluid which is licked up by the hungry ant. Regurgitating food for other ants is so prominent a feature in the life of ants (at liberty) and it so constantly recurs both for feeding hungry comrades and for feeding larvae, that Forel [a researcher] considers the digestive tube of the ants as consisting of two different parts, one of which, the posterior, is for the special use of the individual, and the other, the anterior part, is chiefly for the use of the community.”*

- Petr Kropotkin

*Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution, 1914*



# SOLIDARITY ECONOMICS

(an excerpt)

Ethan Miller <ethanmiller@riseup.net>

Let's assume that 'economy' is not just about supply-and-demand markets. In its largest sense, economics is about how we as human beings collectively generate livelihoods in relation to each other and to the Earth. The human economy includes all of the varied social relationships that we create in the course of meeting our needs and pursuing our dreams. Capitalism, with its 'free market economy', its 'jobs' and its 'wages', is only one part of how we actually create and maintain livelihoods in our families and communities.

When we peel away the misleading idea of one giant 'Economic System', we can begin to see the workings of many different kinds of economies that are alive and well, supporting us below the surface. These are not the economies of the stock-brokers and the 'expert' economists. These are our economies, people's economies, the economies that we build with our everyday lives and relationships.

While they are incredibly diverse in their manifestations, many of these life-sustaining 'microeconomies' share a common orientation towards subsistence — towards the ongoing reproduction of healthy and mutually supportive human communities. Maintaining social life, in all of its ugliness and beauty, is the primary goal of these 'people's economies'. This aim, at its core, is fundamentally opposed to the dominant capitalist logic that places accumulation, growth-for-growth's sake (a key characteristic, incidentally, of cancer), at the center of economic life.

Many of these non-capitalist micro-economies are familiar to us, though rarely acknowledged as legitimate economies. While it is crucial to note that not all of these non-capitalist economies are necessarily liberatory, I will highlight here some of the most positive and inspiring forms:

**Householding economies** — meeting basic needs with our own skills and work at home and on or with the land: raising children, offering advice or comfort, resolving relational conflicts, teaching basic life skills (such as how to talk!), cooking, sewing, cleaning the house, building the house, balancing the checkbook, fixing the car, gardening, farming, raising animals. Many types of work that have often been rendered invisible or devalued by patriarchy as ‘women’s work’.

**Barter economies** — trading services with our friends or neighbors, swapping one useful thing for another: ‘Returning a favor’, exchanging plants or seeds, time-based local currencies.

**Collective economies** — in their simple form these economies are about pooling our resources together (sharing): bringing food to a potluck supper, carpooling, lending and borrowing, consumer co-ops; in their most ‘radical’ form, collective economies are based on common ownership and/or control of resources: collective communities, health care collectives, community land trusts, and more.

**Scavenging economies** — living on the abundance of Earth’s own gift economy: hunting, fishing, and foraging. Also living on the abundance of human wastefulness— ‘one person’s trash is another one’s treasure’: salvaging from demolition sites, using old car parts, dumpster-diving...

**Gift economies** — giving some of our resources to other people and to our communities: volunteer fire companies, community food banks, giving rides to hitch-hikers, having neighbors over for dinner.

**Worker-controlled economies** — workers deciding the terms and conditions of their own work: self-employment, family farms, worker-owned companies and cooperatives.

**‘Pirate’ economies** — various activities that might be labeled ‘theft’ by those in power, but would be called ‘rightful re-appropriation’ by those who have been robbed of power: re-incarnations of Robin Hood or Pretty Boy Floyd, squatters.

**Subsistence market economies** — thousands of very small businesses survive (and sometimes thrive) with little or no imperative to grow and accumulate wealth. These are subsistence-based businesses, created and run for the purpose of providing healthy livelihood to the owners (who are often the workers) and providing a basic service to the larger community (sometimes in the indirect form of creating a community gathering space).

These categories name only some of the many diverse, non-capitalist economic relationships that are interwoven throughout our lives. The project of identifying these relationships is a project of hope, one that allows us to begin de-colonizing ourselves from the devaluing and degrading ways-of-seeing that have been imposed on us by the Economics of Empire. We can begin to see, instead, the powerful spaces of freedom that already exist in our midst.

In the context of uncovering the diversity of our economic relationships, we can begin to re-frame our understanding of capitalism itself. Instead of viewing capitalism as The Economy, we can view it instead as an ongoing project to colonize economic space. Capitalism, with its drive for accumulation and hence its need for endless expansion into 'new markets', would like to become The Economy. Fortunately for us, the capitalists have not succeeded in turning every relationship into an opportunity to make profit. Capitalism is an ongoing, but never fully successful, project of colonization.

In fact, the dominant economy would fall apart if the people's economy — these basic forms of cooperation and solidarity — did not exist 'below the surface'. These are the things that keep us alive when the factories close down, when the ice storm comes, when our houses burn down, or when the paycheck is just not enough. These are, indeed, the relationships that hold the very fabric of our society together, the relationships that make us human and that meet our most basic needs of love, care, and mutual support. It sure isn't capitalism that's providing these things for us!

Solidarity Economics begins here, with the realization that alternative economies already exist; that we as creative and skilled people have already created different kinds of economic relationships in the very belly of the capitalist system. We have our own forms of wealth and value that are not defined by money. Instead of prioritizing competition and profit-making, these economies place human needs and relationships at the center. They are the already-planted seeds of a new economy, an economy of cooperation, equality, diversity, and self-determination: a 'solidarity economy'.

Though the capitalist economy has devalued or hidden these seeds from us, we can use them as starting points for our alternative economic organizing. The project of solidarity economics is to water these seeds — to identify and expand the spaces of solidarity that already exist and, in the process, create new and larger ones.

Solidarity is a powerful word that names the dynamic, collective process of taking active responsibility for our inter-relationships on both a local and global level. When we practice solidarity, we recognize that our fates are bound up with the fates of others, both human and non-human; that our interconnections — sometimes profoundly unequal and oppressive — demand conscious action and transformation. Through solidarity, we recognize the diversity, autonomy, power, and dignity of others. We come to understand that our struggles to be free and joyful are not as separate or distant from one another as we may have thought. We begin to develop an ethical practice of shared struggle.

I often hear people commenting that 'it is easy to be against things; much harder to be for positive alternatives.' If we believe the dominant story about 'the economy' or fall for the trap of having to name 'the' alternative or describe 'the' new economic system in technical detail, then this observation may be true. With another story in hand, however, we can see that the seeds of alternative worlds are already planted — even growing — below the surface of the capitalist economy. Our burden is not to develop a new abstract blueprint or scheme that we must then convince (or force) everyone to follow; it is rather

to identify the spaces of hope and creation that surround us, name them, celebrate them, organize to strengthen and connect them, and in so doing create new possibilities and relationships.

The creative projects that can emerge from this way of seeing must be, of course, connected to many other kinds of transformative work. Just as it is not enough to be 'against', it is also not enough to create. We must build social movements that encompass and connect many forms of action: defensive action to protect ourselves and our communities from immediate harm; offensive action to challenge the current structures of oppression and exploitation in all of their racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, and otherwise exclusionary forms; healing action to work through and recover from the pain and brokenness that has been imposed upon us in so many ways; and creative action to build alternative structures that meet our daily needs and help us secede from the oppressions of the dominant society and economy.

To conclude, then: We are all 'solidarity economists'. Together, we can take back our economies from those who have stolen them. The word 'economics' comes from the Greek *oikos* (home) *nomos* (rules/management). The management of the home. Whose home? Our home! Whose management? Collective self-management! Together, we can reclaim our homes as spaces of safety, care, love, healing, growth, and solidarity.

# THE BIG CIRCLE

Yuliya Filippovska <yoolka@gmail.com>

I believe in the Big Circle, where people's small and big, non-material and tangible gifts circulate... Those who want to step up on this circle – need to learn to give gracefully and to accept gratefully (no less important), and to give and to take – to keep this n-kilometers chain going and moving around. There is one important term: to give from the heart, or else – step out, for it won't work. I don't believe in altruism, but in giving and sharing, thus multiplying. Those who are generous know this secret: it returns back, and this is good and rewarding. Isn't that a win-win-win?

The difference between market economy and gift economy, is that the latter makes it naturally, without effort. Also natural is the rule that without vacuum in life one can't accept anything new... so, without giving, there is no space for new.

In the Russian Empire there used to be merchants who helped artists in need financially, and said there was no need to return money back to him directly, however if God granted a chance, the merchant would ask the artist to support others who would need help. Thus, the ten-rouble banknote traveled around, helping people who would need it most. When I was a kid in the 'pioneer camps' (in the ex-Soviet Union), we had a game in the team of teens: Angel the Keeper. For some period of time someone chooses another person to be the Angel the Keeper for him/her, without him/her knowing who this person is. And during a week or even longer the Angel sends small gifts, postcards with warm words, cares by giving without expecting 'thank you' from another side. These were not big gifts, but important that taught us gestures of genuine caring and giving. It was important that the Angels were cared by other Angels... and there was also this Big Circle.

# DAMA IN MALI: KEEPING VALUES ALIVE

Coumba Toure <kuumbati@orange.sn>

(excerpted from a longer interview by Beverly Bell, February 2005, Bamako)

*Q: Tell me about the gift economy and its values in Mali.*

A word that we use a lot in *Bamana* [one of the languages of West Africa] is *maaya*. When you say that somebody has *maaya*, you mean they are human, they have some humanity. To be human for us is to be able to give, is to be able to recognize each other as human beings. That concept also incorporates the idea that our humanity is one. I am human because we are all human. There is a link. There is a song that says that what makes us human is a thread that we all pull on. It is in the link that we have with other people that we measure our humanity. Each of us has to make sure that it doesn't break in your name. Instead, what builds those links is what we give.

We can call the gift economy *dama*. *Dama* is about giving, passing the gift on, moving it forward. Here, we judge people by how much they give. Even if the person doesn't have much, someone will say, "That is a good person, an extraordinary person." In other countries, the measure is that the person has a lot, not gives a lot. But for us, if you have a lot and you don't give it, what is it good for?

In all the places I have been in West Africa, I have seen this gift economy at work. I have seen it most with people and places that are less in touch with the global model. I have seen people considered poor give much more than people who have much more, and they do it with ease.

Who you are is very much defined by what you do in relationship with other people. It's how much you give to others. And when you say give, that means everything. We give objects, but they are only symbols. They are just to materialize the links. The highest gift is recognizing people, giving consideration for who they are, and accepting to be linked to them.

The gift economy is a way of life, practiced here by very ordinary and very regular people everyday. It is based on the recognition that there is another way of relating to each other. If you go into any family here in Mali, you would find that most of the time, one person works and feeds twenty people. If there was not a working gift economy moving, we would have a lot of people dead on the streets through hunger. It is not like we have governmental systems to take care of people. It is not like we have a high rate of employment, or like everyone has some money. There is nothing. So if you interviewed any number of persons and ask them how they live, what they eat, where they get what they wear, you would easily notice that most of it has been given by someone.

You don't give based on what you have. The idea of giving is that someone has something that they are willing to part with, and it could be for different reasons. It could be just to maintain relations. Like when I travel I get small gifts, and when I come back I give them to people. Or I could be thinking of someone, and I could cook some food and send it to them. And then there is the relationship with people who are younger to me. They don't ask, but it is one of our tasks. Because they are younger: I have clothes, I give it to them. I have money, I give it to them.

You would never give something that you don't want yourself. What is a gift if you yourself don't want it? The idea of giving old clothes that you wouldn't wear anymore, what kind of giving is that? You have to be able to give things that you want, things that you need, or things that you would want someone to give you.



When you don't give is when people really start worrying about you, when people start wondering about what kind of person you have become. Being rich here means that the person has lost the value, that there is something wrong with him or her, that he or she is not giving enough to the needs around. If anyone here lived in a big house by himself, people would wonder what was wrong with him or her, too. Mothers would send their sons and daughters to go live with him, because they would feel sorry that he is lonely.

Gift-giving is practiced to a point that some people see it as an impediment to development. For someone like me, if there were not this practice of giving, I would be rich. I would be able — at least for the little money that I make — to invest in something and grow money. But the only way you get to be rich is by disassociating yourself from other people because you cannot live in community, have family in the way that we understand family, and still be rich.

Just one example of gift-giving is remittances sent home by emigrants. The amount of money that they send back home is incredible. People can wonder sometimes: what is wrong with these people? They work so much, they are so tired, they get so little. And they send this money to cousins, to nieces — people you feel are not even close family?!? But the model that they know of is the gift economy. It is something that is rooted, that is so strong, among many people, and it is difficult to take away.

One of our beliefs is what we do always comes back to us. Everything you do makes you who you are.

It's exciting to me that there are so many people who live by these values, there are so many people who are working to make a difference. Maybe I'm just very lucky, but for the time of living that I have had, I have met some pretty incredible people. Part of my thinking is that, if I know so many, there are so many more that I don't know. It's a very big source of hope and joy and of imagination, what will come out of all of this.

In the face of the various challenges and insecurities thrown up by the spread of globalization, we have to find ways of maintaining a way of thinking that you take care of other people, and trust that you will be taken care of. A way of thinking that who you are is important and is recognized by others, and that other people will look out for your needs. That frees you, makes you very free to take care of other people and their needs. You don't spend as much time protecting yourself and taking care of yourself. It's a dangerous way of living, now. But it's a beautiful way of living.

We believe that each human being has a rhythm inside them that defines who he or she is. We believe that when people go crazy, it's because the rhythm is off. That's why in traditional healing practices for people who have become mentally sick, we use drums and music, to find that rhythm that was lost and help the person to get it back. Our cultural work comes from those old beliefs that there is always a way in which you can touch people, there is always a doorway to people —as closed as they might look or as damaged as they might be. It could be through words, through images, through music, through movement. You have to find it.

# THE CORNUCOPIA OF THE COMMONS

David Bollier

A few years ago, the newspapers of New York City were ablaze with a controversy about dozens of plots of derelict land that had been slowly turned into urban oases. Should these beautiful community gardens that neighborhoods had created on trash-filled lots be allowed to stay in the public domain? Or should the mayor and city government, heeding the call of developers, try to generate new tax revenues on the reclaimed sites by selling them to private investors?

The community gardens emerged in a realm that the market had written off as worthless. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the New York City real estate market had abandoned hundreds of buildings and city lots as unprofitable. Investors stopped paying taxes on the sites, and the City became the legal owner of some 11,000 nontaxable vacant lots. Many became rubble-strewn magnets for trash, junked cars, drug dealing, and prostitution, with predictable effects on neighborhoods.

Distressed at this deterioration, a group of self-styled 'green guerillas' began to assert control over the sites. "We cut fences open with wire cutters and took sledgehammers to sidewalks to plant trees," said Tom Fox, an early activist. Soon, the City of New York began formally to allow residents to use the sites as community gardens, with the understanding that the property might eventually be sold.

In the Lower East Side and Harlem, Coney Island and Brooklyn, neighborhoods came together to clean up the discarded tires and trash, and plant dogwood trees and vegetable gardens. Over time, hundreds of cool, green oases in the asphalt cityscape emerged — places that helped local communities see themselves as communities. Families would gather in some gardens for baptisms, birthday parties, and weddings.

Other gardens were sites of poetry readings and performances, mentoring programs and organic gardening classes.

Over 800 community gardens sprang up throughout the five boroughs, and with them, an economic and social revival of the neighborhoods. “Ten years ago, this community had gone to ashes,” said community advocate Astin Jacobo. “But now there is a return to green. We’re emerging. We’re seeing things return to the way it should be!”

Perhaps most importantly, the gardens gave neighborhood residents a chance to govern a segment of their lives. A city bureaucracy was not needed to ‘administer’ the sites; self-selected neighborhood groups shouldered the burden, and the sites became organic expressions and possessions of their communities.

By the 1990s, greenery and social vitality were boosting the rents of storefronts and apartments, which, ironically, alerted the city to the growing economic value of the sites. In 1997, Mayor Giuliani proposed auctioning 115 of the gardens to raise \$3.5 to \$10 million. For the mayor, the sites were vacant lots: underutilized sources of tax revenue that should be sold to private investors.

“These properties should go for some useful purpose, rather than lying fallow,” said a city official, in support of the mayor. The mayor’s plan ignited an uproar, as hundreds of citizens demonstrated — some through civil disobedience — in numerous attempts to save the gardens. Determined to eke maximum revenue from the sites, the city rejected an offer by the Trust for Public Land to buy 112 garden lots for \$2 million. Then, one day before a planned auction of the sites in May 1999, actress Bette Midler donated \$1 million to help the TPL and other organizations consummate a purchase of the lots for \$3 million.

### **The gift economy**

How you interpret the story of New York City’s community gardens depends a great deal upon the

narrative you choose. Under the narrative favored by Mayor Giuliani, the sale of the garden sites is a case of using the market to maximize wealth and exploit underutilized resources more efficiently: an open-and-shut case of neoclassical economics. But to a large segment of the city's residents, the community gardens exemplify the power of the gift economy.

New York City's community gardens are robust precisely because they are not governed by either the market or government. Unlike the market, which revolves around trade and money, or government, which is based on law and police powers, the gift economy is driven by people voluntarily coming together. Eventually that process can create a commons.

No one paid or forced thousands of New Yorkers — not a famously altruistic group — to clean up the abandoned lots and create lively, attractive urban gardens. They chose to do so. It was in their 'self-interest,' but not in the rational, calculating sense meant by most market theorists. While the community gardens have economic value, as Mayor Giuliani keenly recognized, that is not the primary meaning of the resource to its creators. Members of a gift economy prize particular individuals, places, and shared experiences; they value such nonmonetary benefits as the after-school gardening program for junior high school children that Janus Barton started at the Bushwick garden across the street from a brothel and crack house, and the greenhouse in a Harlem garden where unemployed women learned how to can tomatoes and dry flowers and herbs as part of a small business.

The power of a gift economy is difficult for the empiricists of our market culture to understand. We are accustomed to assigning value to things we can measure — corporate bottom lines, Nielsen ratings, cost-benefit analyses. We have trouble valuing intangibles that are not traded in the market and which therefore have no price. How is something of value created by giving away one's time, commitment, and property? Traditional economic theory and property law cannot explain how a social matrix as intangible and seemingly ephemeral as gift economies can be so powerful.

Yet the effects are hard to deny. Gift economies are potent systems for eliciting and developing behaviors that the market cannot — sharing, collaboration, honor, trust, sociability, loyalty. In this capacity, gift economies are an important force in creating wealth, both the material kind prized by the market and the social and spiritual kind needed by any happy, integrated human being.

The vitality of gift exchange, writes Lewis Hyde, one of the most eloquent students of the subject, comes from the passage of a gift through one person to another and yet another. As a circle of gift exchange increases in size, an increase in value materializes.

As Hyde puts it: “Scarcity and abundance have as much to do with the form of exchange as with how much material wealth is at hand. Scarcity appears when wealth cannot flow. ... Wealth ceases to move freely when all things are counted and priced. It may accumulate in great heaps, but fewer and fewer people can afford to enjoy it. ... Under the assumptions of exchange trade, property is plagued by entropy, and wealth can become scarce even as it increases.”

When anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski studied the Trobriand Islanders in the western Pacific, he was stunned to discover that ritual gifts such as shell necklaces made a steady progression around an archipelago of islands over the course of 10 years. People ‘owned’ the cherished gift object for a year or two, but were socially obliged to pass it on. This is the same sentiment that apprentices feel after leaving their masters — an obligation to honor the gift that was freely given to them by passing it along to deserving successors. Several fairy tales — as well as a biblical parable — warn that a gift that is hoarded loses its generative powers, withers, and dies.

What’s remarkable about gift economies is that they can flourish in the most unlikely places — in rundown neighborhoods, on the Internet, in scientific communities, in blood donation systems, in drug and alcohol rehab groups.

## **The hacker economy**

In the early days of computing, a great deal of software was developed through a gift economy in university settings. Hackers shared; that was the sacred ethic. As cerebral fanatics who followed their passions to create the most ingenious software, hackers took pleasure in creating cool things for one another's delight.

The social and ethical norms of the hacker community at this early stage of the computer revolution were strikingly similar to those of the scientific method or Jeffersonian democracy. All procedures and outcomes were subject to the scrutiny of all. Openness allowed error to be more rapidly identified and corrected. Openness also built in accountability to the process of change and allowed innovation and improvement to be more readily embraced.

The commercialization of computing in the 1970s and 1980s introduced a very different dynamic to software development. As software programming moved from universities to the marketplace, a closed, proprietary process arose.

Yet lurking in the shadow of this mighty new industry, the free software movement has quietly persisted and grown, exemplifying the stubborn vitality of the gift economy. Empowered by the Internet, a global corps of computer aficionados arose to develop, improve, and freely share software. This process has generated hundreds of top-quality software programs, many of which have become critical operating components of the Internet.

What most distinguishes free software from off-the-shelf proprietary software is the openness of the source code, and thus the user's freedom to use and distribute the software in whatever ways desired. Anyone with the expertise can 'look under the hood' of the software and modify the engine, change the carburetor or install turbochargers. Inelegant designs can be changed, and bugs can be fixed. Sellers cannot coerce users into buying 'bloatware' (overblown, inefficient packages with gratuitous features),

Windows-compatible applications, or gratuitous upgrades made necessary by planned obsolescence. Free software also allows its users to avoid the constant upgrades in computer hardware.

This is where Richard Stallman, an MIT programming legend, entered the scene. Stallman realized that anyone could make minor changes in a free software program and then copyright it. Without some new legal vehicle, the benefits of free software could be privatized and withheld from the community of users. The commons would collapse.

Stallman's brilliant innovation was the General Public License (GPL), sometimes known as 'copyleft,' which is essentially a form of copyright protection achieved through contract law. "To copyleft a program," writes Stallman, "first we copyright it; then we add distribution terms, which are a legal instrument that gives everyone the rights to use, modify, and redistribute the program's code or any program derived from it, but only if the distribution terms are unchanged." The GPL creates a commons in software development "to which anyone may add, but from which no one may subtract."

"Users of GPL'd code know that future improvements and repairs will be accessible from the commons, and need not fear either the disappearance of their supplier or that someone will use a particularly attractive improvement or a desperately needed repair as leverage for 'taking the program private,'" writes attorney Eben Moglen.

The GPL, in short, prevents enclosure of the free software commons and creates a legally protected space for it to flourish. Because no one can seize the surplus value created within the commons, programmers are willing to contribute their time and energy to improving it. The commons is protected and stays protected.

The crowning achievement of the GPL may be the success of the Linux operating system. The program was begun as a kernel by Finnish graduate student Linus Torvalds, and within months, a community of



programmers began to improve and extend the Unix-based operating system, incorporating many programs written by Stallman and friends. Despite having no bureaucratic organization, corporate structure, or market incentives — only cheap and easy communication via the Internet — tens of thousands of computer programmers around the globe volunteered their time throughout the 1990s to develop a remarkably stable and robust operating system. The program, which is considered superior to Microsoft's NT server system, now commands a phenomenal 27 percent of the server market. The GPL is the chief reason that Linux and dozens of other programs have been able to flourish without being privatized.

### **The gift economy of blood and science**

One of the most vivid case studies comparing the performance of market and gift economies is Richard Titmuss's examination of British and American blood banks in the 1960s. Drawing upon extensive empirical data, Titmuss concluded that commercial blood systems generally produce blood supplies of less safety, purity, and potency than volunteer systems; are more hazardous to the health of donors; and over the long run produce greater shortages of blood.

What can possibly account for these counter-intuitive deviations from market theory, which holds that the price system produces the most efficient outcomes and highest quality product? It turns out that the introduction of money into the blood transaction encourages doctors to skirt prescribed safety rules and tends to attract more drug addicts, alcoholics, prisoners, and derelicts than altruistic appeals do.

According to Titmuss, Britain's National Blood Transfusion Service "has allowed and encouraged sentiments of altruism, reciprocity, and societal duty to express themselves; to be made explicit and identifiable in measurable patterns of behavior by all social groups and classes." In this context, the gift economy regime is not simply 'nice'. It is actually more efficient, cheaper, and safer.

It is not widely appreciated that much of the power and creativity of scientific inquiry stems from a gift economy. While researchers are of course dependent upon grants and other sources of money, historically

their work has not been shaped by market pressures. The organizing principle of scientific research has been gift-giving relationships with other members of the scholarly community. A scientist's achievements are measured by recognition in academic societies and journals, and the naming of discoveries. Papers submitted to scientific journals are considered 'contributions'. There is a presumption that work will be openly shared and scrutinized, and that everyone will be free to build on a communal body of scientific work.

The gift economy is now under siege as never before. As Jennifer Washburn and Exal Press have shown in their Atlantic Monthly article on the 'kept university', corporate money is introducing new proprietary controls over the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

Why should anyone want to protect the gift economy of academic research when the market promises to be more efficient and rational?

The answer, says Warren O. Hagstrom, a sociologist of science, is that a gift economy is a superior system for maintaining a group's commitment to certain (extra-market) values. In science, it is considered indispensable that researchers be objective and open-minded in assessing evidence. They must be willing to publish their results and subject them to open scrutiny. They must respect the collective body of research upon which everyone depends — by crediting noteworthy predecessors, for example, and not 'polluting' the common knowledge with phony or skewed research. The long-term integrity and creative power of scientific inquiry depends upon these shared values. Market forces are ill-suited to sustaining these values, however, because monetary punishment and reward are a problematic tool for nurturing moral commitment. By contrast, a gift economy is particularly effective in cultivating deep and unswerving values.

### **The cornucopia of the commons**

Gift exchange is a powerful force in creating and sustaining the commons. It offers a surprisingly effective

means of preserving certain values from the imperialism of the market and the coercions of the state. It may be tempting to patronize the gift economy as archaic or 'soft', but the evidence is too strong to ignore: gift exchange is a powerful force for social reconstruction and a more civilized, competitive market.

It is a mistake, also, to regard the gift economy simply as a high-minded preserve for altruism. It is, rather, a different way of pursuing self-interest. In a gift economy, one's 'self-interest' has a much broader, more humanistic feel than the utilitarian rationalism of economic theory. Furthermore, the positive externalities of gift exchanges can feed on each other and expand.

This points to the folly of talking about 'social capital', as so many sociologists and political scientists do. Capital is something that is depleted as it is used. But a gift economy has an inherently expansionary dynamic, growing the more that it is used. While it needs material goods to function, the gift economy's real wealth-generating capacity derives from a social commerce of the human spirit.

*Reference: This article was published in the Summer 2001 edition of YES Magazine  
<[www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=431](http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=431)>.*

*“We are all bundles of potential that manifest only in relationship.*

*Thus, when we’re in good relationships, based on a generosity of spirit and not ‘what’s in it for me’ we discover new potentials and create new potentials together. The narrow sense of self, where we focus only on our needs, keeps us and all from realizing new potentials.*

*So life is all about relationships which then gift us with new discoveries. Being in good relationships is the only way to release this energy of life, which always wants to move toward the new and does so with great flair and abundance.”*

- Margaret Wheatley  
<mjw@berkana.org>

# WHY DID YOU START A FREE RESTAURANT, ANYWAYS?

Ankur Shah <mangolandia@gmail.com>

i first got interested in the gift economy stuff through examining the differences between native peoples' concept of the potlatch and the gita's 'yoga of disinterested action'; what drew me further was this notion of giving without expectation of receiving, acting without expectation of the 'fruit' of one's actions.

some elementary research led me to a book called 'the gift', by a french anthropologist, marcel mauss. the essay presented marcel's examinations of gift economies in so-called primitive societies. the book made quite a stir when published (1923), mainly i think because of the similarities in the role of the gift in our cultures and their 'primitive' ones. like having to give a bottle of wine when you go to someone's house.

the upshot, of course, was that the role of the gift in these societies was not the role of the gift in the society we are working to create — it was deeply associated with power, respect, authority, and positioning. it had very little to do with disinterested action, agape, or total faith in universal abundance. you bring a bottle of wine (not too cheap, mind you) to some other middle-class house not because you are excited about the gift or even the wine, but because somebody had once brought a bottle of wine to your house, and, well, it's just the right and proper thing to do. this is the notion of the gift as status — either holding steady, or, in the potlatch culture, gaining it.

it's worth noting, and being amazed at, that the native potlatches were based on the principle that they who bankrupted themselves were the winners. that is, rather than package money and power together like we do these days, they were commodities to be traded *against* each other.

truly remarkable. but no kropotkin about it, as far as i could tell.

so, when I somehow arrived at the concept for The Brazilian Solution (which originally came to me in a dream, the idea that i would run a vegetarian restaurant in a country to which i had never traveled), all i knew is that i wanted it to be different, beautiful, and the future. i wrote up the ideas in a white paper that I presented at the 2004 world social forum in mumbai, trying to see if other people had similar ideas, wanted to come help, or could share their stories. there were none. but the paper is worth reading i think, if you're interested in these topics. it's short and available on the internet ([www.somethingconstructive.net/brazil](http://www.somethingconstructive.net/brazil)) along with updates from the actual project.

the restaurant eventually came to be known as O Bigode. we introduced the concept as an 'economy of the gift' restaurant to the local villagers and fishermen who came by, where the food was served with love and without charge, and people were free to leave whatever they wanted.

at each meal we served a lunch plate ('prato feito', like a *thali* equivalent) as well as veggie burgers (with egg and cheese optional) and empanadas (like samosas, but baked). we also had juice and of course, beer.

brazil.

as a compromise to local culture, the empanadas had a fixed price. the idea was that people could start with the empanadas, something they could understand, and get drawn into the space, the conversation, and then eventually feel comfortable eating the food without reservation. the notion of "going to people where they're at". also, the beer you had to pay for. i definitely did not have, and continue to not to have, faith in the cocktail of moral experiments and alcohol.

every day the restaurant operated — it started as daily and then quickly shifted to weekends based on slow flow of traffic during the weekday — i would take money from the register to buy groceries from the market, using whatever was there from the previous day. we put in some cash in the beginning — not much — and i told myself we would just experiment until the money ran out and then have a little meeting (three or four of us were working together) to see what next. but the money never ran out. over the course of the five months the restaurant was open, everybody paid. everybody paid more than i would have normally charged. everybody loved the food, and, in fact, every one who came once, came again. even people who were just there for the weekend from the mainland. so that was nice.

and also, for me, a failure. i wanted to serve awesome gourmet love-soaked vegetarian food to the local villagers we were quickly befriending, have them feel comfortable coming in and eating a plate of food and walking out leaving nothing but a smile. that was the goal for me. just to enjoy and be with other people enjoying. and while there was a lot of lip-smacking good times, everybody always paid, and nobody came in who felt they couldn't pay. of course, you know, a lot of these barriers were cultural. we didn't speak very good portuguese at first, and it's hard to communicate the idea of a vegetarian restaurant, much less a 'post-capitalist' one.

which is another term we had for ourselves, and one i like even now. so i was very excited when i came to ahmedabad, about a year after leaving the Bigode in march of 2005, and met Manav Sadhna and their Seva Cafe. the Seva Cafe is in a beautiful space, a permanent space (they bought it), incredible, professional design, and a perfect location.

our design was wonderful — though a different aesthetic — and all hand-crafted and hand-painted by artisan friends from argentina and france. but the Seva Cafe was a whole new level for me. it's a lot more professional in many respects. and it's just excruciatingly beautiful. and it's been around for years. there are a handful of people who work there full-time and sustain themselves from it, which is quite different then our experiment. one might even say: successful.

and it's so very Indian, based on this principle of 'the guest is god' which is at once so humbling and overbearing in Indian culture. we were cavalier about the whole post-capitalist thing, but at the Seva Cafe, they sit down with you and give you a serious speech about the goodness in people's hearts and service and how you should consider this your home and all of that. it's really very Indian, with all the weight and beauty being part of a multi-thousand culture entails.

in terms of the gift economy, they give you an envelope to make your donation at the end of your meal, which is a pretty direct indication that you're expected to contribute something, the amount being up to you. we also gave people the ticket from the meal so they knew what they had ordered, and used that as another opportunity to clarify the concept — they didn't have to give anything, but if they wanted to, they could give whatever they wanted. i think at the Seva Cafe it's a more serious implication that you're giving something and just the amount is up to you.

which is a big difference philosophically, i think. there are many approaches to this of course, and i've found that very subtle differences in tone, form, and technique make big impressions on the "feel" of the gift economy experiment. for example, at the WSF in brazil (2005), Amanda told me they had a gift economy organic juice cafe where there was a big basket of money on the counter and you just gave what you wanted and took whatever change you need. so nobody actually knows how much you paid (though the accounting would be easy enough at the end to find out the total take; an interesting encryption scheme actually). that anonymity is very powerful — at both Bigode and Seva Cafe, you know how much each table paid, which leaves open the possibility for evaluation and judgment (and also statistics) in your heart. both of which (leaving the statistics aside for the moment) i would venture are challenges to the agape/detachment/service goals of the gift economy.

another aspect of this juice cafe Amanda had gone to was they had recommended prices. recommended prices help deal with the number one problem of the gift economy concept — confusion. people get



confused, flustered, and lost. making people feel lost as part of a process can be really helpful for growth, but i've also seen people just stranded there.

which is no kind of revolution. i think the combination of the anonymity of the offering with the recommendation of price is quite powerful — there is a notion of how much one needs to cover cost, and yet a sense that nobody really cares how much you give. whereas, with the Seva Cafe and our Bigode model, you might say the opposite is in effect — you have no idea how much you should give, but you know you will be judged regardless of what happens.

i later visited another experiment, the Karma Kitchen in berkeley. run by the good people people from Charity Focus, associated with Manav Sadhana and perhaps inspired by the Seva Cafe. i had the pleasure of meeting and befriending them before eating at the restaurant, and have been able to share experiences and copies of my cookbook throughout this process. when you go into the Karma Kitchen (which operated, at the time, on saturdays in an Indian restaurant), they sit you down, give you the day's menu and tell you that, thanks to some other anonymous party, your meal has already been paid for.

it's not free. it's not by donation. it's not up to you. it has, very simply, *already been paid for*. it's a simple turn of phrase and, in effect, gets the same idea across — you don't have to pay for dinner, it's been given out of love — but, through the power of language, it displaces the burden of responsibility onto some random Person Like You. a subtle and powerful technique, efficient as blackmail, that i thought very clever in taking ego and reaction out of the process.

i'm not giving you the gift, the universe is. so don't even think of taking it up with me. just eat.

expectation is deftly removed from the field of possibility because the Karma Kitchen is not giving you anything: the universe is. see? it's nice. it can also be a little heavy in terms of being quite obviously that

it's up to you if you want to pay for somebody else's meal (this starts implicitly and then gets explicit at the end, at which one is generally frothing at the mouth for an opportunity to give).

one of the biggest palpable differences in these restaurant experiences has to do with the attitude, of course, of the chefs. chefs are notorious for their mercurial nature of course, but the difference between volunteers, business-owners, experiment-owners, paid partners, and employees is huge. you can taste pressure, heaviness, wage labor, and oppression quite easily in the food, when present. this is an issue of will and consciousness and present regardless of the organizational form, but i think we can and should develop structures to support the kind of consciousness that prevents bad energy from getting into the food. that's a whole other conversation of course, and quite apart from the gift economy issue. that is: there are gift economy restaurants with disgruntled chefs, and school cafeterias where the lunch ladies are singing. nothing, strictly speaking, is anything other than what it is.

another, ancillary and hopefully closing, note: flexibility. the idea of an experiment in language, economics, and culture has to do with, for me, a sense of flexibility. so the food should be equally flexible. at the Karma Kitchen, they had these awesome Mango Lassis that they offered to make vegan for anybody who wanted (it was Berkeley after all) , and we at the Bigode had all of our dishes vegetarian and vegan. the next restaurant i run will definitely have everything available in vegetarian, vegan, no oil, jain-ahimsa-style, and raw options.

all of this, for me, runs in the vein of material manifestations of spiritual research. we're all here Being the best of who we are; the intersection of gifts, food, and agape is yet another avenue we explore, in the world, to better reveal who we are, in the self.

dig?

*“I have been a lucky man. To feel the intimacy of brothers is a marvelous thing in life. To feel the love of people which we love is a fire that feeds our life. But to feel the affection that comes from those whom we do not know, from those unknown to us, who are watching over our sleep and solitude, over our dangers and our weaknesses — that is something still greater and more beautiful because it widens out the boundaries of our being, and unites all living things. That [gift] exchange brought home to me the first time a precious idea: that all humanity is somehow together...”*

- Pablo Neruda  
quoted in Lewis Hyde, The Gift, 1975

# FROM NECESSARY EVIL TO NECESSARY GOOD: REGENERATING TEQUIO IN (SUB)URBAN OAXACA

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In 2006, the state of Oaxaca in southeastern Mexico gave birth to an unprecedented social movement that mobilized hundreds of thousands of people in a sustained five-month effort to oust a corrupt government. What made this profound, horizontal, decentralized and spontaneous popular uprising possible were the interrelated institutions of *reciprocidad* (reciprocity), *apoyo mutuo* (mutual support), and *tequio* (voluntary collective work for the common good) that still prevail in the city, despite years of ruthless modernization campaigns led by state governments and private interests. These ancient traditions have been inherited from the indigenous cultures of southeastern Mexico and the broader Mesoamerica. For many people, the main success of the popular uprising was the collective realization—through a deep, shared experience of crisis—that the common good does not depend on the government, the state, the police, or even the money that has overwhelmed most social interactions; but rather, on the vigor, breadth, intensity, and overall health of interpersonal relationships. In Oaxaca, this communal spirit has been called *comunalidad* (communality), and it primarily rests on the deep awareness that my personal well-being depends on your personal well-being, and that it is the generosity of selfless giving, hospitality, and a radically pluralist attitude toward the other that allows our communities to survive, subsist, and ultimately thrive.

But surely, one may say, not everyone participated in the seemingly chaotic and violent uprising we saw on TV! How did other people experience the turmoil?

### *(Sub)urban communalism*

El Diamante neighborhood in the valley of Etna, Oaxaca seems like a typical spontaneous urban outgrowth in the periphery of any growing city. It is gray, dusty, and completely treeless, giving it the eerie sheen of a desert settlement in what used to be, not so long ago, a lush river valley. Its settlers are a very diverse group of people. Most of them are first or second generation urbanites who have only recently migrated to the city from the countryside. They represent the different language groups and cultures that make Oaxaca the single-most culturally diverse state in all of Mexico. Today, they cannot help but feel frustrated, even betrayed. For years, they were taught to *desire* the many goods, services, and cultural norms of modern (Euro-American) life. They were slowly convinced that these were in fact human *needs* that they should strive to satisfy for themselves and their children. The figures of political and moral authority—government officials, religious leaders, international aid workers, and Marxist rebels—ultimately made sure that they perceived these new (Euro-American) needs as *rights*, to which each one of them, like every other Mexican citizen, and indeed every human being, was entitled. When they migrated to the city of Oaxaca with their families, hoping for brighter futures filled with modern prosperity, they were met with enormous barriers, erected by the same institutions that had seduced them in the first place.

Upon this scenario, the people of el Diamante have resolved to embrace what they called the 'necessary evil' of self-organizing; of providing the conditions for living with dignity and health in a hostile environment, and of creating the kind of community to which they aspire, themselves. Thus, in the past decade they have been able to conquer from the state the property deeds for their small plots of land and get electricity for their neighborhood, among other small victories.

The people of el Diamante did not actively participate, as such, in the social movement of 2006. In fact, two of the neighbors are police officers, and two others are active militants of the ruling party. Others include housewives, single mothers, former *campesinos* (small farmers), teachers, state bureaucrats, small business owners, and truck drivers. The great diversity of the neighbors does not only lie in their

regional, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, but also on their occupations, professions, and political inclinations. And yet, el Diamante is an emblematic example of the same spirit that drove the great social movement of 2006. How?

### *Tequio*

What has made it possible for el Diamante to survive as a settlement and forge itself into a community is not a common ideology or a set of shared interests. Rather, it is personal relationships based on interdependence, trust, and reciprocity in the midst of a hostile reality, despite ideological, economic, social, and cultural differences. The neighbors keenly understand that their self-interest is not separate, or even different from the collective interest. And so daily life is peppered with experiences that unify this unlikely community, such as annual *fiestas*, weekly evening prayers, birthday parties, and first communions; not to mention the monthly *asambleas* (assemblies) in which the entire population, including the children, discuss the problems they need to solve and the dreams they want to turn into reality. But perhaps the most invigorating instance through which they come together is through the voluntary gifting of their work and their time, also known as *tequio*. Whether to clean up the road or dig trenches to drain rainwater during the heaviest part of the rainy season; to embellish a street or a household for a christening or wedding party; or to plant a garden or a *milpa* (a traditional corn field), *tequio* is the work that is offered *gratis* for the sake of the collective good. Rural communities in Oaxaca are founded on this institution, and city neighborhoods could not possibly do without it, either. People understand that most of a community's needs and aspirations can be met with moderate means; that all that is really required is the collective will to pull together resources, time, and work, in order to make them a reality.

In the five years that I have lived in this city, I often marvel at the fact that most of what I and all of my *compañeros*, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances do as 'work' is rarely remunerated. How, then, do we possibly make a living? And why on earth do we carry on with so many unpaid hare-brained ideas, projects, and initiatives? Well, it didn't take me long to realize that *tequio* is alive and well in this growing tourist gem of a city, even when it is not called so by name. Oaxaca bustles with cultural vitality: the

graphic and street arts, the cultural centers, public libraries, music and photography houses, the free movie theaters, the neighborhood produce and crafts markets, the rich gastronomic tradition and the many modern neighborhood restaurants that complement it, the community media centers that produce radio, video and film of all genres, the book and arts fairs, and the thriving indigenous cultures that have survived centuries of oppression and manifest themselves in all aspects of daily life; all make this an extraordinarily unique and vibrant city. I came to realize that none of this would be possible if it weren't for the generalized practice of freely and generously gifting one's time, energy, creativity, patience, and labor not only to one's own enterprises, but to other people's as well. Why? Among the most practical reasons: because others also do so when it is I who needs the extra hands, minds, and hearts but cannot afford to pay them. More deeply, however, we give because it is rewarding in itself; because it brings us closer together without money as intermediary, and because it affords us the privilege of learning new abilities, new trades, and new ways of seeing the world in a communal spirit of sharing. Of course, we also do it because it can be very gratifying, rewarding, and lots of fun, if approached with the right attitude.

### *Community*

Today, nearing the end of 2008, the neighbors of el Diamante are speaking more frankly about their abundance, their strengths and their virtues, and less about their weaknesses, their needs, and their differences. They are less reluctant to assert their rural backgrounds, and prouder of their cultural heritage and communal spirit. They are investing less energy in denouncing the government and the state bureaucracy, and investing much more energy in building the community that they desire. Thus, to paraphrase Paul Goodman, when they run up against obstacles that won't let them live that way, they are coming up with creative ways to overcome them, and their politics are more concrete and practical. What they used to call the 'necessary evil' of doing without state or corporate assistance, they now call 'the necessary good' of practicing *tequio*, reciprocity and communality in an urban setting. They are frankly questioning the worthiness of the Development Project—of importing others' notions of what it is to live well—and asserting their own idea of the good life.

*“Language is based on gift giving. This hypothesis breaks through the taboo against using nurturing (gift giving) as the model for other kinds of human activity and it has important consequences.*

*If language is based on nurturing, and if thinking is at least partially based on language, then thinking is at least partially based on nurturing.*

*However, thinking can also be based directly on non-linguistic nurturing. Sending and receiving messages, which is a commonplace way of describing chemical and hormonal interactions in the body, can also be viewed in terms of less intentional giving and receiving.*



*If we view language as gift giving transposed onto a verbal level, and if we accept the idea that it was language that made humans evolve, we could come to the conclusion that it was the gift giving aspect of language, not just the capacity for abstraction that caused the leap forward.*

*This conclusion could lead us to think that gift giving and receiving could be the way forward for humanity to evolve beyond its present danger and distress.*

*Indeed we could begin to take nurturing as the creative norm and recognize exchange as the distortion which is causing a de evolution and a danger to the human species as well as all other species on the planet.”*

- Genevieve Vaughan

<http://www.gift-economy.com/theory.html>

# THE GIFT OF THE WORLD CAFE

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By way of a brief introduction, the World Café can be understood in at least three ways –

- as a process, based a set of integrated design principles
- an international community of practitioners and advocates
- a metaphor for the living network of conversations that underlies the human experience and through which we collectively create our lives and futures.

The essence of the World Café work is in the evocation of collective intelligence for the good of the whole. We have a website that provides information and tools so that anyone can understand the World Café design principles and know what's needed to host the process in their own communities and organizations.

The World Café came into the world as a gift. It literally 'appeared' among a group of intellectual pioneers who'd gathered to speak with each other about something that mattered deeply to them. It came out of their deep listening to each other and the 'field'. Since then the phenomenon they discovered has been studied and extensive research done to identify and refine the design principles that lie at the core of what produces the World Café 'experience'.

So, from its very genesis, the World Café was born into 'a culture of generosity'.

What that meant to co-founders Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, who continued to mindfully nurture this gift through its first 10 years, was that it remain a gift, freely accessible to all. As Juanita says, “We just ‘knew’ when the World Café was born in our living room that it was somehow a gift, meant to be used, in our friend Finn Voldtofte’s words, for ‘world service.’ We recognized early on that this innovative gift which we had experienced together needed to be shared freely.”

Such a simple and effective tool for fostering deep human connection and evoking the collective wisdom of groups was too important not to be made freely available, and it has been offered in service to the innate human capacity to address the challenges of our times since its inception.

From its simple beginnings as a conversation among a small group in David and Juanita’s living room, the World Café has now co-evolved beyond anyone’s wildest imaginations into a global dialogue movement. Here are some of the things we have learned along the way about how to retain and grow its essence as a gift:

- **Design a powerful, easy-to-use process that ‘travels well’.** The World Café process is a simple elegant structure that allows collective intelligence to emerge from our conversations using an age-old pattern in human communication.
- **Make visible the design principles so that others can adapt and innovate.** The World Café principles are an “open platform” that can be adapted to address questions that matter in ways that best suit the unique needs of each situation.
- **Share the core ideas and fundamental process generously.** From the beginning the World Café has been guided to make sure ideas can spread freely through the network and core materials are readily available at no charge. We have created a website full of resources and an online StoryNet that holds our stories and makes them available free of charge.

- **Encourage experimentation and learning.** By encouraging adaptation and trusting people to know how to design and host good conversations, World Café hosts generate a culture of generosity, contribution, creativity and collaborative learning across fields, sectors and cultures.
- **Consciously weave the web of relationships.** The World Café fosters a spirit of friendship and hospitality, carefully nurturing both new friends and long-held partnerships and cross-cultural connections.
- **Nurture emerging leaders and multi-generational collaboration.** Welcoming new hosts and supporting new leaders are guiding principles of the World Café. The online Community of Practice is another powerful way that the gift spirit travels, as new World Café hosts can ask questions and put out requests for help that are freely responded to by expert World Café hosts at no cost.

The World Café Community Foundation, while being a 501c3 non-profit, is not a normal NGO. Many key members of the World Café Community Foundation and the World Café network donate large amounts of their time as in-kind contributions to the success of the whole. Serving as resources for the rest of the World Café global network, they step forward as stewards for their regions and/or key areas like research into the intellectual foundations for our work, virtual communications, inter-generational collaboration, etc.

The voluntary stewardship structure of the World Café is not only a model of the gift economy in itself, but it's an example that helps nurture the evolving gift economy/culture of generosity at the heart of this work in the rest of World Café community and all who are touched by the work.

The first ten years of the World Café's evolution was supported financially by co-founders Juanita Brown & David Isaacs, who 'tithed' back 10% of the income derived from their World Café work, as well as 100% of the royalties from the World Café book, which they continue to give back today. World Café hosts in

countries around the globe are following David and Juanita's lead in 'tithing' back a portion of fees earned from passing on this work, thereby helping ensure that this gift continues to grow.

By subverting the 'commodified' market on behalf of the gift economy, along with the other elements of our resourcing ecology, we enable a continually expanding circle of people around the world to experience the power of conversations about questions that matter.

When we read the cumulative stories of our collective conversations we begin to notice the patterns and 'themes' that are living between us. We start to understand what these themes are telling us in relation to the 'great narrative' of our times. Our collective understanding gives us an opportunity to make meaning together and begin to understand that together we can create the futures we want to see, which is the ultimate gift of the World Café.

## The Wonder of Wikipedia

*Contrary to what many (especially postmodernists) believe, modernisation and globalisation do not automatically lead to more individualism and 'fluidity'. Internet and social software lead to the creation of new networks and to a revitalisation of cultures of exchange and gift economies.*

*The Wikipedia web-based collaborative encyclopedia is, in most of its operations, a thriving gift economy. Hundreds of thousands of articles are available on Wikipedia, and none of their innumerable authors and editors receives any material reward. Wikipedia has been constructed entirely out of gifts, and gives information freely. From time to time Wikipedia has engaged in fundraising activities, asking people to contribute funds toward operating expenses; these donated funds are gifts, albeit explicitly solicited ones. A tiny portion of Wikipedia's income comes from product sales, mostly T-shirts, mugs, and the like, with Wikipedia logos.*

*Because Wikipedia exists within a money economy, some expenses must be met with money, such as paying for servers, domain registration, and for certain IT work involved in server maintenance. Therefore, the information in Wikipedia is a gift economy, but some operational aspects of its website and related entities are not.*

# COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION IS FREE

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Recently my new Wired Magazine arrived. It is one of my peepholes to the future, whether in economics, technology or social change. I make sure my traditional filter of seeing the world established in my studies in the '60s is shut down when I start to read the articles in Wired....otherwise I would find myself in a magical world, outside the bounds of what I used to understand is reality.

One article that I had read in the March edition of Wired caught my attention, Free: Why \$0.00 Is The Future of Business. As often happens, I began to sense that I was at the verge of uncovering some new idea or principle that could have some connection to our 'community transformation' work at the Center for Communities of the Future. As I reread Free, I came to the following quote "Give a product away and it can go viral. Charge a cent for it and you are in an entirely different business, one of clawing and scratching for every customer."

Then it hit me based on both experience and thinking about this time of historical transition. Community Transformation based on rethinking and redesigning all aspects of how our local communities educate, govern, lead and provide economic development in a time of constant change, can only occur if those involved with seeding this transformation recognize that we must *"give an idea away and it can go viral."*

Thinking about how the ideas in this article connected (hmmm) gave me a new aha! moment.... an understanding that one key reason the Communities of the Future continues to grow and spread is that all the ideas and methods we have developed (master capacity builders, creative molecular economy, transformation learning, connective thinking, etc) that undergird our work in seeding capacities for

community transformation are published on different webjournals and in articles....and have always been free to those who are interested. Without realizing it, because of gifting these ideas, all of us in the Communities of the Future network have created a brand that can help bring diverse people and ideas together as a part of collaborative networks and teams to rethink the common good, whether it be the Global Rural Network, cospeaking at conferences, or using the new CommunityTransformer.com Web 2.0 social networking site to share ideas and create new approaches together.

Our revenue streams come from the secondary requests of people and organizations that read the ideas and methods and invite various members of the core of our COTF network to work with them, speak at conferences, or facilitate transformative projects because of the experience and expertise we have developed over the last twenty years.

A fundamental way true transformation will occur with individuals, organizations and communities in the future, is if they approach their work as if it were a business for which fundamental ideas, principles and methods were given away in the way a virus spreads....and then build interlocking networks of those interested in building capacities for transformation to pay for the expertise of those who have brand credibility. In this way, we will move to a dynamic world economy and society able to adapt to constantly changing conditions, and, as a result, balance human, economic, spiritual, social, ecological and moral values.



*In that wonderful story, “The Book of Mirdad”,  
Mirdad says, “More possessions, more possessed”.*

*We think that we own so many things, but actually it is the other way around: it is these things which dictate terms to us. We are their slaves, so they own us. When we make a list of our possessions such as shares, FDs, homes, cars, etc., we give this list the heading, “Assets”. Instead, we should be listing them under the heading, “Sources of Problems and Worries”!*

*Kabir has a beautiful poem extolling the virtues of such an attitude. Essentially, he says, Nothing in this wide world belongs to us, or can ever belong to us. By trying to make them ours, we are only adding to our problems, increasing our miseries. Everything we see around has been created by a single Creator and belongs to Him. The only one whom we can call our own and therefore own is the Creator, and if only we can do that, everything in the creation will automatically become ours, for He literally owns everything. Then, we can enjoy everything in this world, without worrying about the problems associated with possessing things...*

*- TS Ananthu, Navadarshanam, Bangalore, India*

# CYCLE YATRA: A JOURNEY OF GIVING AND RECEIVING

Shilpa Jain <shilpa@swaraj.org>

*“Bin Paise Cycle Yatra, Chale, Chalo! Chale, Chalo!  
Cyclewalleh zindabad!”*

[Money-Free Bicycle Journey, Let’s Go! C’mon, Let’s Go!  
Long Live the Bicycle Riders!"]

For the last few years, friends in the Swapathgami network have hosted an challenging unlearning adventure: spending an entire week traveling on bicycles. The catch? No money in anyone’s pockets — not even one rupee — as well as no food, mobile phones, iPods or allopathic medicines. The *Cycle Yatra* is an inward and outward journey/pilgrimage by bicycle. It is an intentional experiment in breaking out of our fear of money and re-connecting ourselves with the gift culture. It is based on surrendering to the goodness and generosity of people, nature and the universe to provide both food and shelter, as well as love and care. It is about revaluing and recovering many of our gifts which have been made invisible.

For all of us who have participated in the *yatras*, the act of leaving home without money is the first mental hurdle to overcome. We as urban people are not used to being so vulnerable. This vulnerability, we have learned, is key to accessing the gift culture. And then removing the other ‘safety nets’ (of ready-made food, technologies and medicines) means an even greater level of exposure of our sacred selves. During the yatra, we cannot meet our daily basic needs by buying things from the Market so we need to figure out how to re-build positive relationships with people that are not mediated by money or institutional status. This means that there is also the risk of rejection. Not an easy leap to make for most of us, and yet having done it again and again, I know it’s not only possible but also liberating.

I have participated in all three week-long cycle *yatras* (two in Mewar, Rajasthan, one in Chandigarh, Punjab). The *yatra* is primarily a journey of giving and receiving. It only works if you both give of yourself generously and freely, and if you have the humility to receive the gifts of others.

One short story from the first *yatra*: There were about eight of us at this point. Several had had to leave along with way, either falling ill or being summoned home by family members. We had reached our 'destination' (the point on the other end of our loop, from which we were going to start heading back to

I feel a *cycle yatra* is one of the best things you can do to recover your faith in humanity. I've learned that a few basic principles/practices are important for re-engaging with the gift culture in a healthy way.

#### **- Talk to 'Strangers'**

The cycle *yatra* starts with taking a risk and putting your real self out there to the world. This involved overcoming our own conditioned shyness, fear, and even ego. It sometimes meant pushing ourselves a bit to share our intimate selves more openly. Villagers helped in this process by often asking us many 'personal' questions. This also called for us to set aside many of the labels that we have been conditioned with such as 'illiterate', 'backwards', 'poor', etc. and trying to see and listen to individuals as they truly are in the spirit of friendship, rather than as development stereotypes. As we slowly re-learned to appreciate our own gifts as well as those of others, strangers were no longer 'strangers'.

#### **- Renegotiate Boundaries**

Through the *yatra*, we quickly remembered that boundaries, rules and norms are not fixed for eternity. They are human-made and are subject to renegotiation and transformation, both for ourselves and with others. There were many situations along the way where we re-engaged our own institutionalized notions such as 'private property', 'hygiene', caste hierarchy, class, religion, gender roles, etc. vis-a-vis peoples' expectations and the larger commons. This 'border-crossing' opened up many new opportunities for co-learning. Much of this happened quite spontaneously and naturally as a result of choosing to stay in the intimacy of people's houses and spending time with nature rather than at hotels, local government facilities, resorts or youth hostels.

### **- Try to do an Honest Day's Labour**

We were very clear from the outset that we would work for our food, that we wouldn't go to rural areas and continue the parasitic relationship that city people have had (of taking, taking, taking). First, only you can decide what is an honest amount of work for the food, air, water, etc. you consume. There was no one to tell you what that is. Each person had to work it out for his or herself, and as a group traveling together, we had to work it out collectively.

Second, no work is too big or small. We graciously accepted whatever work one gets, whether it was moving heavy baskets of manure to the fields, or loading endless bundles of hay onto a truck, or harvesting peppers, or sweeping up the house, or preparing rotis on the earthen stove, or washing dishes. Each time we worked, it was an opportunity to heal the connection between our hands, hearts, heads and spirits.

Lastly, work has to occur without expectations. Sometimes, I would work and that family wouldn't (or couldn't) offer any food or drink. Nonetheless, I would still smile and thank them for the opportunity, and then continue on my way, trusting that the universe would provide eventually.

### **- Move at the Pace of the Slowest**

This phrase is adapted from our friends, the Zapatistas. The yatra is both an individual as well as a collective journey. It is not a race or some kind of competition. As they travel together, all of the travelers slowly become more

Udaipur): Jaisamand Lake. It was beautiful, and several people got in for a swim. The sun was hot, so we decided we would stay there til it dropped a bit and then make our way to a village for the night. In the meantime, we started chatting with all the different vendors there, who were curious about us and our bicycles. In a short time, we found ourselves painting a mural on the side of one of their stalls, chopping vegetables for the *chaat*, and soon performing the short plays, juggling and music we had prepared as offerings for the villages we visited. In return, we accepted tea, fruits and even camel rides!

Then, the boatmen, who take tourists as well as locals on the lake, asked if we would come to their island for the night. Their family had been living on the island for 400 years, and 65 family

members lived there now. They helped us find a place to keep our bicycles for the night, and we accompanied them at sunset to their homes on the island. Two by two, we each entered a home and chatted and cooked food with them and ate together. All the children gathered around us at night and we shared our tent and musical instruments with them and played games together. The stars that night, from an island floating in Asia's largest man-made lake, were astounding.

In the morning, we woke early and helped clean the cow and buffalo sheds. We pounded corn to release its kernels and helped collect it into bags. Some of the friends exchanged their knowledge of macramé, and we played some more games together. Then, the boatmen took us back to the shore, where we found our bicycles safe and sound. Pedaling away, we were all overwhelmed and delighted by the generosity and beauty of the entire experience. It had been magical.

So, for those who want a way to experience life without money and relationships unmitigated by institutions, the cycle yatra is a bold and brave undertaking. The beauty of the cycle yatra is that, unlike most programs, it doesn't cost anything to organize (aside from bicycles and simple repair equipment, which can also be borrowed and returned). But what it provides is truly priceless. After all, recovering our faith in humanity and nature is probably the best cure to the readymade world!

Check out some pictures and a film from the first and second cycle yatra at [www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/walkoutsnetwork.htm](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/walkoutsnetwork.htm)

conscious of their own needs as well as the needs of others in the group. A container of trust self-organized to hold the pilgrims. Those ahead slowed down to make sure everyone was in eye-shot and stopped at forks in the road to make sure no one was left behind. Those who had the puncture and bicycle repair equipment brought up the rear to help anyone who might need it. We offered massages to each other when we were tired and shared our food when there was less. We gave each other space and time to reflect and share our feelings and insights. Along the way, we learned many lessons about communication, conflict transformation, and listening to each other.

The sky, the sun, the moon, the wind and the clouds  
are at work,  
so that you find a piece of bread not to be eaten with  
ignorance of its source.

\* \* \* \* \*

Our ancestors planted and we ate;  
we will plant so that our grandchildren will eat.

- Persian proverbs  
shared by Aydin Yassemi <a.yassemi@gmail.com>

# NATURE'S GIFTS: VALUING THE INVALUABLE

Manish Bapna <mbapna@wri.org>

We rely on nature for the most basic of our human needs. The value of what nature provides – clean water, fertile soils, an amenable climate and spiritual respite to name but a few dimensions – is infinite. Yet, all too often in our modern world, 'infinite' translates to 'zero'. Nature's precious gifts are rarely valued much less recognized. A recent global assessment estimated that two-thirds of nature's bounty – technically referred to as 'ecosystem goods and services' – are in a state of decline.

Here are a couple of powerful stories to think about. The Amazon basin provides gifts to people around the world, continuously recycling carbon dioxide into oxygen, cleaning air and regulating regional and global climate. One fifth of the Amazon has now been lost to loggers, farmers and ranchers. Likewise, mangroves and other types of coastal wetlands provide much-needed storm protection to countries situated around the Bay of Bengal. These wetlands act as a natural speed bump mitigating the damage of cyclones and other tropical storms. However, urban expansion, aquaculture and demand for forests products have decimated mangroves in Burma which contributed to the great human toll from cyclone Nargis last year.

The Earth is merciful in what it provides humanity but its patience knows some limits. We are pushing these limits and are have on occasion crossed the threshold. To help overcome these challenges, environmentalists have started placing values on ecosystem services. The purpose of placing a monetary number on nature's gifts is to ensure that these benefits are incorporated in financial and economic decisions. By recognizing that ecosystems generate value, the decisions we take on building new roads or converting forests to agriculture may be reexamined. Economists call this addressing 'externalities'.

Hundreds of studies have attempted to capture the monetary value of nature in one context or another. Arguably the most well known of these studies was led by Robert Costanza in 1997. His team came up with a price tag for all ecosystem services of \$33 trillion per year – almost twice the global gross national product at the time. These services can be categorized under three broad headings:

- provisioning services: products obtained from ecosystems including food, fiber, fuel, genetic resources, etc.
- regulating services: benefits obtained from the regulation of ecosystem processes including erosion regulation, climate regulation, water purification, pollination, etc. and
- cultural services: nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences,

Although the \$33 trillion is a rough estimate and likely understates the true value of Earth's ecosystems, the study forces us to confront whether we fully recognize the many gifts nature provides to people. Some have argued, however, that by reducing nature in this way reflects a highly anthropocentric view of the world, and monetizing this value affirms the primacy of neoliberal economics. This is a reasonable concern. Costanza's study team readily acknowledged that there are moral, ethical and aesthetic reasons to value and protect nature quite apart from its benefits to humanity. Many religious and spiritual traditions value nature not only for people's sake but also for nature's sake.

Nevertheless, given the dominance of market-based capitalism, quantifying the value of ecosystem services, in my view, is one necessary step forward in the short term. We all implicitly make assumptions about how much we value nature in decisions we take that affect the planet. Being more explicit about these assumptions in government and business decisions that are based on economic or financial returns respectively will result in more sustainable choices. This may not entirely solve the ecological crisis before us but it will help avert the total collapse of those life-affirming goods and services gifted by nature.



# REMEMBERING A POET OF CRIANZA THE GIFT OF NURTURANCE

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Kenneth Patchen was a powerful working class poet from Ohio, USA. He wrote some of the strongest anti-war poetry alongside some of the most tender love poems. He laid some of the groundwork for the Beats by reading poems with the jazz musician Charles Mingus accompanying him on upright bass. He fought long and hard with his words, all of which were acts of defense: the defense of dignity, tenderness, nurturance, truth, and beauty, all in the face of the horrors of history. He wrote his poetry and prose through the two World Wars, and never lost sight of the human heart and the natural world, of the importance of communion and conversation, of resistance and regeneration. Patchen penned this phrase, "Gentle and giving — the rest is nonsense and treason."

Becoming rooted in the village of Totorkawa (Cochabamba, Bolivia), I've metaphorically kept that phrase tucked in my *ch'uspa*, along with sacred coca leaves, and sometimes a little tobacco. I recall fondly an interaction I had upon first moving here with my wife Valentina, an embodiment of that phrase (which I've come to refer to as an ethic of *crianza* — 'nurturance' in Spanish). I was introduced to a lumberjack/farmer in a neighbors' dirt floor courtyard where people come together to drink and share the fermented corn beverage called *chicha*. This man embraced me and said something along the lines of, "My friend, there are no strangers here. It is all about friendship, and nurturance." My heart wanted to sing out in the presence of such...grace.

I see this gentleman frequently but still don't know his name (often triggering further reflections upon what it really means to be a gentle man). I call him *maestro*, and he greets me with a tip of his hat and an "*Hola hermano!*" (Hello brother!). Sometimes he even kisses the knuckles of one of my hands. It was

a profoundly moving moment for one such as myself — a survivor of the U.S., which often seems to be the polar opposite of such warm, human values/principles, ethics. The very word 'nurturance' has even fallen out of use, damn near disappearing altogether.

When I talk to folks about our work back in Totorkawa in the learning community of *UywanaWasi La Casa de la Crianza* (Home of Nurturance), there is usually an uncomfortable pause when I translate *crianza* into nurturance. In certain moments, time allowing, the pause becomes an inroad for having a deeper conversation about how that ethic manifests itself in Andean culture, and what it might look like locally if we recuperated and re-placed at the very center of our beings and communities such an ethic. Thirty years ago, in the book [The Unsettling of America](#), the Kentucky poet/farmer/philosopher Wendell Berry wrote about the dominant culture of exploitation and the threatened culture of nurturance, of how these two mindsets are present within everyone.

I write this while back in southern Appalachia, where the culture of exploitation has reached horrifying new levels, in the guise of mountaintop removal, and the appearance of 'supermax' for-profit prisons. There is still, fortunately, a cultural thread running through the land here that is a thread of nurturance. It manifests itself in home cooked meals, sitting on the front porch and conversing with friends and neighbors, playing music, tending a backyard garden of tomatoes, beans, okra, corn. Lots of young radical activists these days are locking themselves to the entrance gates of coal plants, to tractors and trucks, dropping banners that name the injustices and its collaborators. Rightly so.

But if those faint and fragile threads of communion and regeneration continue to wither, if they are not affirmed, practiced, kept front and center in our lives, the laundry list of indignities will become so overbearing that we may ultimately find ourselves in an existential briar patch, whereupon every activist type lunge at 'the problem' tears at us and draws a bit more blood. We may end up solely residing in a state of indignation (a barren land of countless indignities) — knocked off center by righteous anger, no longer able to be 'gentle', 'giving', unconsciously contributing to the death of nurturance.

My sons, Camay and Samiri, accompany me most mornings, out towards the far side of one of our *chacritas* (in the Andean cosmovision, the plot of land where the human community, the community of deities, and the natural world converse), to warm our bones in the first rays of sunlight. Sometimes Samiri, two and a half, wanders over to nibble on some fresh spinach leaves or crunch on a string bean. Camay, going on seven, in those moments sometimes busies himself gathering up some lemons and apples from the trees that ring the *chacra*, to take down the road to share with his friends. They start their day nestled safely within a cultural hammock where *crianza*, nurturance, still holds sway.

I'm careful not to idealize or romanticize here. Forces of modernity and progress are weighing down upon our village every day, as they do upon thousands of other villages across the 'global south'. Sometimes one can almost hear a snap! in the wind, as the illusions of modernity seduce (trick!) folks into venturing into the city to sell their labor on the cold and inhuman free market. Much confusion and violence ensues, directed toward the self, others, sometimes the land and fellow creatures. The violence I believe comes when we feel the scales being tipped, when exploitation is held in high esteem, and nurturance is viewed as child-like, as a thing of the past, an impediment to 'progress' even! It becomes more explosive when we find ourselves unable to define clearly this grave imbalance and to understand its roots.

Sometimes, as a younger man, I had a recurring dream of being up in the branches of a tree. Each branch symbolized a beloved person in my life. If I let my gaze trail down one particular branch, I usually, very quickly, arrived at the excruciatingly painful realization that there was a crippling pain killing that branch, *each* and *every* branch. The dreams have stopped in direct correlation to my growing commitment to get at the roots of all this pain, and to become a farmer and a poet of *crianza*.

The late Eduardo Grillo (and his compañeros) of the Peruvian learning community PRATEC, frequently uttered this phrase: "*Criar y dejarse criar.*" Nurture and allow oneself to be nurtured. I added it to my *ch'uspa*, where it nestled naturally beside the phrase from Kenneth Patchen. While chewing a little coca, our boys playing at my feet, I penned this tune, "You're Not Broken".

*A jar o'shine by my side*

*And fiddle tunes on the wind they do ride*

*And they tell me somethin' I once did know*

*They remind me of somethin' I once did know*

Boy, you're a child of the Blues, God, and ol' Mother Earth  
& spirits gathered 'round at the time of your birth

I recall the day like so many ones before

But it's easy to forget here on the killin' floor

You're a poet, a father, a farmin' man

A rebel, a race traitor, and American

Borders will not hold you, nor no silly little flag

Nor no party allegiance or a stupid little tag

You're a miner of truth and a laborer of love

Communin' with nature and the spirits above

You're not broken, though society'll try like hell

You're not broken, go on boy, I wish you well

*A candle sits on a shelf in the hall*  
*Step out on the front porch and hear them night birds call*  
*And they tell me somethin' I once did know*  
*They remind me of somethin' I once did know*  
Sssh, listen up, step inside the wind  
Life is love and death your friend  
Morning glories open, close, climb and fall  
Corn spires, cook fires, and children's calls  
Sayin', "Hey Mister, 'Scuse me Ma'am,  
Won't ya drop down on one knee & help us understand?"  
"All those hateful somethings you're a-takin' to your grave  
Try takin' a nothin' you love...they call that gettin' saved"  
"But not by no hustler with a Bible and a billfold in his hand  
Ya see the Holy Ghost don't need no middle man"  
"Gentle and Giving' is what it's all about  
The rest is nonsense and treason'  
do I have to shout, do I have to shout!?"

# REDISCOVERING THE JOY OF GIFTING

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While growing up, I had not given much thought to the custom of giving gifts. Around the time of my marriage, I gave it a serious thought. Since I was going to have my own house, I wanted to make sure that each of the gifts I received had some personal meaning for me. I knew that most gift givers gave gifts to set the equation right – the gift given would have the same money value that they had received from us on some earlier occasion or if the celebration was going to be lavish, then the giver had to in turn give an expensive gift to compensate the hosts for their expense. I wondered how these gifts could have any personal / sentimental meaning attached to them. They were going to be just more material stuff (which I may not even need) sitting in my house. Therefore, I refused to accept these gifts. To make a long story short, I did not win this argument with my near and dear ones involved in planning my wedding. However, I decided to take only those gifts to my house that had sentimental value for me and left the other gifts for my family to deal with.

At that time, my struggle with the gift giving custom began. I had accepted the idea that as thinking and feeling beings, we were expressing to others several things through gifts: we loved/cared about them, appreciated their efforts for us, or valued their presence in our lives, etc. However, when I gave or received any material gifts, I saw a disconnect between these sentiments and the gift. Rather, I felt that the material gift watered down the feelings of the giver. Hence, my whole being was stressed at the thought of accepting gifts. In my initial attempts to end this unsentimental exchange of gifts, I started to refuse any gifts (even from parents and in-laws on all special occasions). This value of mine led to some people being very upset with me.

Having put a stop to accepting gifts, I then wondered whether to give gifts. Not accepting gifts was my value, but not other peoples' value. Therefore, I continued giving gifts. This too was stressing me out because my friends and family had enough material stuff and I felt it pointless to add more to that, and also, the purchased gifts were a cheap way to express the sentiments with which I was giving. I soon reached a point where I neither accepted nor gave gifts.

But, due to my own conditioning, I started to feel awkward to go to any special celebrations without a gift in hand. Around this time, my husband and I started to brainstorm for gifting ideas that could express our sentiments and were beyond the material gifts. We came up with several ideas for gifting and decided that when we got invited to the next celebration we could give the host a choice of gifts that we could give. There were several ideas we came up with:

- giving a sapling on the occasion of a child birth
- offering to do landscape work as a house warming gift
- giving 'Food for talk'© cards on the occasion of marriage/anniversary or when they have teenagers in the house
- offering to cook for a week for a new mother
- spending quality time with our friends' kids on their birthdays (this looks like everyday stuff, but in the lives of many children, adults do not spend time playing/doing stuff that children enjoy)
- giving used books to bring fresh perspectives to one's life
- offering to organize or cleanup after a big function

- on our friends' birthdays offering to baby sit or giving them a break from their daily chores
- making beautiful hand-made cards, or a piece of hand-made art to beautify their home or garden
- donating blood to Red Cross or money to other socially-responsible organizations on their behalf

I felt giving such gifts gives me the opportunity to deepen my relationship with the receiver, or sometimes to share ideas and values close to my heart. It does not feel like a mindless transaction. Note: Such gifts can be given only when the receiver values them.

Excited about such gift ideas, I decided to be open to the idea of accepting gifts. So at present, when someone wants to give me a gift I try and start a dialogue with that person to see if she is open to such offbeat ideas of gifting. If yes, and she wants to really please me then the gift ideas for this year include:

- try and reduce your water consumption
- for 3 months refuse plastic/paper bags when grocery shopping (carry reusable bags)
- recycle
- give used books with fresh perspectives, etc.

I am pleased to say that I have already received one such gift on my birthday. A friend agreed to take one less shower per day for three months. I am now excited with the whole idea and want to start my own gift registry where people can pick and give me gifts that are not mere material transactions. I look forward to more such ideas from my friends and family.



*“...perhaps the true measure of the gift in art is how it surprises us — that is, how it awakens our perception of the other, how we are moved by it and what it revives in our own soul. If we place it under too bright a light — as we so often do when we try to make art a commodity that can be replicated on demand — we risk sacrificing the gratuitous nature of the gift in art that gives it its inner power to change and transform.*

*In this respect, gifts are the agent of liveliness. Their true measure is in how they undo our expectations and surprise us. And this may be how we learn to recognize the gift in art. It is the moment of heightened powers, when the speaker speaks and is also spoken through, when the pianist plays and is also being played. We find ourselves in a place that is so close to our own nature and our own heart that there is no effort — and while when we are there, we cannot possibly be anywhere else. Yet, when we are not there, it is impossible to find. But for a moment it has us... And once the matrix is set, it is something from which to grow out from, so that we may always act from a place of presence and in the fullness of our own gifted life. [...]*  
*For all of time, we have co-existed in not one, but two, economies — one based on the commerce of the market, the other on the commerce of the creative spirit or gift exchange. While the gift*

*can survive without a market, the market cannot survive for long without the gift. Yet, in past years, the rapid rise of industrialism has expanded the economy of the market at the expense of the exchange of gifts. We cannot return to the past. But we can begin to merge together the wisdom of our heritage with the progress of our evolving technology and modern thought.*

*That is the quest that Walt Whitman called us to: to be witnesses to the world and, at the same time, to be servants of the gift. In the fullness of time, we will find again the enchantment that is life's reward for living a gifted life.*

The mind may wander, but the heart  
Knows where we belong.  
Come let us travel the  
open road together.

Let us  
Hear the song that may awaken  
the heart  
to a beauty greater  
than words can tell.

- Michael Jones

# CHARITYFOCUS: THE ORGANIZATION OF GIFT

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**Do-Nothing Design:** perhaps it is because CharityFocus had no other choice, our work falls under Fukuoka's elegant Do-Nothing paradigm. Of course, it doesn't mean not doing anything, but it implies organically self-organizing into innovation, efficiency, and scale. Our effort lies in creating distributed, decentralized, many-to-many systems where our centralized role stays minimal and invisible. We're simply instruments in holding the space for our values. And ultimately, this quality of our designs are rooted in our collective awareness. Several years ago, after a walking pilgrimage, I wrote a small post called "My Design Principles" that ended with: "When I go deeper within myself, I am affecting all three of my design principles very directly: see reality as it is, master your mind and be in tune with nature."

**Be Volunteer-Run:** this is our first principle. This nestles you into the "power of many", and with the Internet, this networked power of many creates a rich density of interconnections that self-organize itself into umpteen, unimaginable directions. With all volunteers, the trust is very high and that improves efficiency radically; in addition, it gives rise to servant leadership where the chief coordinator isn't your boss, but more like a sibling who can mirror a deeper potential you wish to be manifest in the world. That servant leadership radically alters the organizational DNA. Furthermore, being volunteer-run dramatically reduces your overhead and allows you to deliver services for free; and because the barrier to entry is reduced, it attracts people and shifts the traditional supply-push model to a demand-pull one. Our "business plans" are always a step behind the future, right smack in the present; ie. our new projects aren't based on predictions about anticipated scenarios in the future — it's always about looking at the present and saying, conditions are ripe for this new project or innovation. As a result, there is no such

thing as a failed idea; implementation could fail but the timing is always spot on. And ultimately, giving your time is profound in and of itself; in a recent interview on giving time instead of money, I said: “If giving money is generosity, giving time is generosity on steroids.” :)

**Don't Fundraise:** this is our second principle. “This is enough,” is our attitude, no matter what we have. If it feels like this is *\*not\** enough, the lack is in the heart of the organization and that is only fulfilled by one thing — stepping up the selfless service. :) When we our Smile Card sustainability experiments failed, we decided to step up it up — Smile Cards went on sale. It made no sense, but the next day, someone randomly sent in a donation that covered our costs. Just as a laundry machine is useful without knowing the details of centripetal force of the spin cycle, this principle of serving selflessly until you have enough also is quite useful. :) We can't theorize it or replicate it, but we can give anecdote after anecdote about how it has worked for us. To me, this is about the “power of monastic”. Monks and nuns across all traditions have understood this and lived on these principles for centuries; the CharityFocus challenge is to create an organization that is “monastic”. To work in this way, at a practical level, is to revere all life. My two word mantra is — “assume value”. Last week, I had a coffee with this woman trying to “bring more noble speech in the world”; two weeks later, she wrote a glowing article on her site. On the other hand, two days ago, someone egged our house, which is equally an offering too. No matter who it is, no matter what they are offering, assume value; everyone has gifts and they are constantly offering those gifts to the present moment. You just need to cultivate the eyes to see the value in it. At a subtle level, not fundraising allows us to deeply value all people, all events, and all life.

**Think small:** this is our third principle. No matter what the project, its smallest base case has to have meaning. DailyGood started with four friends as subscribers — and even if it ended after one email, it was meaningful. Today, it reaches 70K people daily and that's fine too. PledgePage empowers people to do events to raise money for their favorite nonprofits; the site users have raised more than \$3MM but even if it didn't scale, it has meaning for that one person running that one marathon in honor of their mother who has breast cancer. Thinking small, though, has subtler ramifications too. Over time, the

base case starts shrinking from one-project to one-action; i.e. you start valuing every step of the process. And when you become deeply process-oriented and hold the smallest action with the reverence it deserves, you outsource the outcome-management to the self-organizing principles of nature. You're not at all worried about how fast the project will be implemented, how you will sustain it or scale it, if someone will copy it or whatever. This is truly liberating, and naturally increases your capacity. A rich guy once asked Mother Teresa about her fundraising plan and she essentially said, "How should I know?" Sages have always understood this very clearly. :) Just as fundraising become a major overhead in traditional organizations, our attachment to outcomes is another attachment that even non-traditional efforts can face and our third principle helps us counter that by being deeply process-oriented.

**Full-on Gift-Economy:** this is the foundation of the CharityFocus work. In a gift economy, goods and services are given freely, without asking for anything in return; instead of "savings", it is the circulation of the unconditional offerings within the community that leads to increase — increase in connections, increase in relationship strength. In that spirit, we started by gifting our services, then added Smile Cards, a volunteer-run restaurant named Karma Kitchen, an art magazine called works & conversations, and so on. What sustains the gift-economy are people who carry the gift forward; to create this cycle, we need to empower everyone to be a producer, reduce barrier to entry, and create networks to amplify word of mouth. For us, that translates into producing stories, doing everything for free, and leveraging the Internet.

**No Soundbyte:** whenever people ask about CharityFocus, they've been culturally programmed to listen for soundbytes. Soundbytes are useful sometimes, but they're harshly approximate to the point of inaccuracy; so now-a-days, I just don't do it. If you're seeking inspiration or utility from CharityFocus, we can help; if you're looking to replicate or capture the model, you have to look deeply at our values and be-the-change.

**Radically Open:** when the dominant paradigm sees a success story, it aims to box it into its familiar patterns. It happens at a personal level and at an institutional level. Being caught in the security of replicable patterns is limiting, and often fatal. In 2005, in the height of CharityFocus potential, I wondered if I had the guts to drop the manifestation of CharityFocus and stay committed to my values on the roads of India. And so my wife and I, without a plan B, took off on a walking pilgrimage. If my fellow volunteers saw value in CharityFocus, they'd keep it running; if they had new experiments they wanted to try, they could do that; and if no one cared, then it would be the end. A year later, much had changed and grown and I was offered leadership once again. Much in the way, we aim to radically open to new ideas. When Richard and I first met, we had no intention of starting a gift-economy magazine but it happened. Practically all our ideas come from the most unsuspecting places, and because we're radically open, we're learned how to tune in.

**No Choreographed Diversity:** lot of circles will work hard to manufacture diversity; it's a good first step but having been on the receiving end of it, it often feels superficial. Yes, you have different colored skins in the room, yes, you have a gender balance, and yes, all socio-economic classes are represented, but that's not necessarily honoring diversity. When an indigenous shaman talks about holding paradoxes, it feels so much different than an intellectual semi-listening to an opposing theory. At CharityFocus, perhaps because we have no resources, we pretty much can't manufacture anything. As a result, we're honest, transparent, and humbly comfortable in our own skin.

**Networked Communities:** as members are added to a network linearly, the value of the network increases exponentially, which charted looks as if it were headed to infinity; that is, the more interconnected we are, the greater our value. With every new project, CharityFocus provides a platform which a) provides tools for creating value, b) generates auto-catalytic networks that blur the line between producers and consumers, and c) opens up its collective distribution channels to foster many-to-many connections.

**No Advertising:** considering that we send 50 million solicited emails per year, to our user base of 195K members, we could easily throw in a few ads in the mix and more than cover our costs even with just a 1% click through rate. That doesn't even count our websites that attracts visits from millions of unique visitors. But wanting something in return from the service you provide inherently clutters the spirit of your offering, and so we have steered clear of this.

**Full Transparency:** with CharityFocus rules of operation, transparency is critical. Everyone has to be in-the-know about what we are doing, how we are doing it, and how they can participate in the revolution. There's a fine line between not asking and sharing information, and we have to skilfully walk that line in a way that is authentic. And sometimes you have the opposite problem; like this year, we attracted (a lot) more money than we needed; so we wrote about it and true to our ethic of no-accumulation, we gave it away. Our blog is a great place to share information, we have Tigers Updates that shares visionary pieces, and we have many excuses to gather in person as well.

**No Cashing Out:** when you serve freely, you attract people and gain influence. Most institutions, from corporate to spiritual, aim to 'monetize' that attention. But how far can you go without cashing out? We don't know, but we want to push the bounds. While we are in position to have staff and increase efficiency in some specialized sense, we would never do that because it would disturb the entire ecosystem. Instead we ponder this kind of question — what happens if you invest all of the 'return on influence' back into itself?

**Personal Journey:** the biggest question that everyone asks: "If you live in this gift-economy way, how do you pay your personal bills?" And that's generally followed by, "Is everyone in your organization like this?" The answer to the latter question is, no. Everyone has their own unique equation. Some are retired, and are naively exuberant, some have good karma, some are dedicated, some are exploring, some are tithing, and so on. Most are volunteers who give a few hours a week. What brings us all together is that we all care about the spirit of service. And as per the personal question of how one survives in gift-

economy, I generally cite three core areas: (a) service: deliver concrete value to those around you; (b) context for suffering: because you won't always get what you want, you have to have your own answer to why bad things happen to good people; (c) community: friends whose journeys are inter-twined with your own liberation. The first talk I ever gave, when I was 23 and CharityFocus had just started, still rings true. Incidentally, I later ended up being married in that same monastery.



# INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF GIFT

Ivan Illich

I do think that if I had to choose one word to which hope can be tied, it is hospitality. A practice of hospitality recovering threshold, table, patience, listening, and from there generating seedbeds for virtue and friendship on the one hand. On the other hand, radiating out for possible community, for rebirth of community.

Hospitality, that is, the readiness to accept somebody who is not from our hut, [across to] this side of our threshold to this bed in here, seems to be, among the characteristics which anthropologists can identify, one of the most universal, if not the most universal. But hospitality, wherever it appears, distinguishes between those who are Hellenes and those who are 'blabberous', barbarians. Hospitality primarily refers to Hellenes who believed there is an outside and an inside. Hospitality is not for humans in general. Then comes that most upsetting guy, Jesus of Nazareth, and by speaking about something extraordinarily great and showing it in example, he destroys something basic.

When they ask him, "Who is my neighbor?" he tells about a Jew beaten up in a holdup and a Palestinian (called a Samaritan, he came from Samaria, actually he's a Palestinian). First two Jews walk by and don't notice the beaten Jew. Then the Palestinian walks by, sees that Jew, takes him into his own arms, does what Hellenic hospitality does not obligate him to, and treats him as a brother. This breaking of the limitations of hospitality to a small in-group, offering it to the broadest possible in-group, and saying, you determine who your guest is, might be taken as the key message of Christianity.

Then, in the year 300 and something, finally the Church got recognition. The bishops were made into something like magistrates. The first things those guys do, these new bishops, is create houses of

hospitality, institutionalizing what was given to us as a vocation by Jesus, as a personal vocation, institutionalizing it, creating roofs, refuges, for foreigners. immediately, very interesting, quite a few of the great Christian thinkers of that time, 1600 years ago (John Chrysostom is one), shout: "If you do that, if you institutionalize charity, if you make charity or hospitality into an act of a non-person, a community, Christians will cease to remain famous for what we are now famous for, for having always an extra mattress, a crust of old bread and a candle, for him who might knock at our door." But, for political reasons, the Church became, from the year 400 or 500 on, the main device for roughly a thousand years of proving that the State can be Christian by paying the Church to take care institutionally of small fractions of those who had needs, relieving, the ordinary Christian household of the most uncomfortable duty of having a door, having a threshold open for him who might knock and whom I might not choose.

This is what I speak about as institutionalization of charity, the historical root of the idea of services, of the service economy. Now, I cannot imagine such a system being reformable, even though it might be your task and the task of courageous people whom I greatly admire. The impossible task they take on is to work at its reform, at making the evils the service system carries with it as small as possible. What I would have chosen is to awaken in us the sense of what this Palestinian example meant. I can choose. I have to choose. I have to make my mind up whom I will take into my arms, to whom, I will lose myself, whom I will treat as that vis-a-vis, that face into which I look, which I lovingly touch with my fingering gaze, from whom I accept being who I am as a gift.

# HELPING VS. GIFTING

Marianne Gronemeyer

*We felt the following excerpts from Marianne Gronemeyer's article, "Helping", would help to demonstrate the difference between 'helping' and the gift culture/economy.*

*"If I knew for certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life... for fear that I should get some of his good done to me."  
- Henry David Thoreau*

Help as a threat, as the precursor of danger? What a paradox!

[...]

Modern help has transgressed all the components of the traditional conception of help. Far from being unconditional, modern assistance is frankly calculating. It is much more likely to be guided by a careful calculation of one's own advantage than by a concerned consideration for the other's need.

Nor is help any longer, in fact, help to someone in need; rather it is assistance in overcoming some kind of deficit. The obvious affliction, the cry for help of a person in need, is rarely any longer the occasion for help. Help is much more often the indispensable, compulsory consequence of a need for help that has been diagnosed from without. Whether someone needs help is no longer decided by the cry, but by some external standard of normality. The person who cries out for help is thereby robbed of his or her autonomy as a crier. Even the appropriateness of a cry for help is determined according to this standard of normality.

[...]

The embarrassment surrounding foreign aid, which makes it so difficult to spare the receiver shame, comes from the fact that it is *development* help. Only under this rubric is help not help in need, but help

in overcoming the deficit. Between these two types of help there exists an unbridgeable difference. To understand it, one has to have considered the equally profound distinction between need and neediness.

The person suffering need experiences it as an intolerable deviation from normality. The sufferer alone decides when the deviation has reached such a degree that a cry of help is called for. Normal life is both the standard of the experience of need as well as of the extent of the help required. Help is supposed to allow the sufferer to reapproach normality. In short, the sufferance of need, however miserable that person may be, is the master of his or her need. Help is an *act of restoration*.

The needy person, on the other hand, is not the master of his or her neediness. The latter is much more the result of a comparison with a foreign normality, which is effectively declared to be obligatory. One becomes needy on account of a diagnosis — *I* decide when *you* are needy. Help allotted to a needy person is a *transformative restoration*.

[...]

Help for self-help does not reject the idea that the entire world is in need of development; that, this way or that, it must join the industrial way of life. Help for self-help still remains development help and must necessarily, therefore, still transform all self-sufficient, subsistence forms of existence by introducing them to 'progress'. As development help, it must first of all destroy what it professes to save — the capacity of a community to shape and maintain its way of life by its own forces. It is a more elegant form of intervention, undoubtedly, and with considerably greater moral legitimacy. But the moral impulse within it continues to find its field of operation in the 'development-needy countries' and to allow the native and international policy of plunder to continue on its unenlightened course. In this light, the sole helpful intervention would be to confront and resist the cynical wielders of power and the profiteers in one's own home country. Help for self-help is only a half-hearted improvement on the idea of development help because it exclusively mistrusts help, and not development itself..

"Helping" is available in full in *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, edited by Wolfgang Sachs, 1992

*“In Islam, any benefit accruing to a lender of money is regarded as usury and is prohibited. There is no such thing as a ‘usurious’ rate of interest in Islamic law, because all rates of interest are usurious. And although the prohibition of usury is not a cure-all for the maladies of modern life, where it has been implemented as part of a wider regime of Islamic regulation, the historical precedents are excellent. The universities, hospitals, welfare systems, and infrastructure of Iraq, Spain and the Ottoman Empire were funded without resort to interest-bearing loans. The lesson is clear. Interest-based finance is not a pre-requisite for society’s sustainable advancement. In today’s context, the prohibition of interest would yield immediate benefits to the majority of the world’s poor.”*

- Tarek El Diwany  
Resurgence Magazine, May/June 2008

# SACRED ECONOMICS 101

Christopher R. Lindstrom <[chris@smallisbeautiful.org](mailto:chris@smallisbeautiful.org)>

It might be said that the proverbial emergence of humanity, in the form of Adam and Eve within the Garden of Eden, was, in fact, the emergence of the self-aware human being. By 'self-aware', I do not mean in the sense where someone is feeling insecure or out of touch, but someone who is connected to the source of one's own being, both within one's own consciousness and also permeating throughout all of nature, the cosmos, the totality of physical and non-physical existence. This primordial enlightening occurred thousands of years ago. The cultures, knowledges and ways of life assumed by these ancestors has been past down to the remnant of indigenous cultures and tribes scattered across the earth.

But in modern 'civilized' times, these people are dismissed as primitive charlatans; naive savages, who, unable to come to terms with the perilous forces they were confronted by in the wilderness, projected imaginary visions of supernatural beings into the world. Because they did not have the faculties of reason to understand the world around them, or to accept what they didn't know, these supernatural beings were the result of make-believe stories and myths to satisfy their desire for meaning.

However, there is much evidence that there is another side to it. These peoples were, in fact, communing with the deepest depths of their own consciousness — a consciousness that was intimately one with the rest of Creation. They were adept at willingly entering states of consciousness that gave them access to another reality, an alternate reality, yet one that was inseparable from the one of waking consciousness. The Aborigines call this state 'Dream Time', because it was literally connecting with the same lucid state that we often encounter in our dreams, where we are connected with a myriad of characters and visions. For these ancient people, it was Sacred knowledge. It gave them, not just faith, but an experiential

connection with what may be called the spiritual forces animating the physical cosmos. With this direct experience of a transcendental force, behind the veil of space and time, comes a profound respect for nature and the awesome and mysterious powers, rhythms, and patterns that sculpt its perpetual transformation.

In the world of modern cities, a whole other side of our consciousness reigns supreme. The shamanic and revelatory consciousness has warped into a new perverse form — the religion of Economics. Yet, conventional economics has a fundamental error: it has narrowed our relationship to nature from one being based on a primary respect and recognition to the integration and interdependence of living systems, to a sense that we are somehow disconnected from this rudimentary fountain of life, and that it exists solely to fulfill our unquenchable thirst for material pleasure and our personal pursuits for power and prestige. So, the modern economic system is designed to do just that. It is the proverbial 'Ring of Power,' placing God-like abilities to dominate nature and other human beings into the hands of a relatively small group of unspeakably immature and irresponsible individuals. It is unapologetically biased towards the dominance of private finance over all aspects of the economy, the rest of humanity, and of nature in general.

If economics is the religion, then money is the god. After all, what is money but an unholy faith? It puts trust in a system that fundamentally erodes the livelihood of those who are not strong or clever enough to compete, erodes the very ecological system that we depend on for our ultimate survival?

Nearly all religions and spiritual traditions bear warnings to humanity. The greater we exercise our powers of creation upon the earth, we must, at the very least, assume a much greater respect and reverence for the cosmic and unknown forces at work. Buried in scriptures and mythologies is an awareness of humanity's fated, perilous clash with the God of nature — a recognition that should we open up the Pandora's box of money, capital and economic growth upon the world, we would be fatally undoing the natural balance of things. Yet, whether you believe in religious prophecies or not, our times are wrought

with looming catastrophes of apocalyptic proportions: global warming, mass species extinction and species loss, peak oil, global warfare, financial meltdowns. What's more, they all appear to be moving toward a common, imminent convergence point.

In the face of these disturbing truths, our only hope is to radically transform the systems that are largely responsible for this destruction. Even more importantly, we must transform the elements in ourselves that bind us to the unholy will of global corporatism, militarism and private finance. This economic transformation can be synthesized by creating a new economic practice: the practice of sacred economics. This new discipline is the inclusion of knowledge and respect of the Sacredness of all living beings, of all life, directly into our economic institutions. The means for measuring and valuing wealth must also be designed to account for the health of the environment that we live in, as well as the collective wealth and vitality of communities.

Of course, it is essentially impossible to quantify all of these values in numerical terms. Nor is it essentially necessary to account for their transfer. Nature provided for all life forms without the written means of accounting for the exchange of energy. People can live with this in mind. Those who have discovered the art of 'paying it forward' have shown that magical transformations can occur in a person, when they awaken to the power and possibility of giving (see groups like [www.charityfocus.org](http://www.charityfocus.org)).

Here are a few principles of sacred economics. It is a concept and practice I am still evolving, and I would love your feedback on it.

### **Giving and Receiving**

Life is a constant act of giving and receiving. In order for life to thrive, energy must circulate. It is a general principle that in any system the energy that goes out of that system must be replenished. This is true for our breath when we breathe in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, and it is true when we



consume food and drink and expel human waste. This ecological reciprocity is key to life. In nature, every bit of waste becomes the food of another organism.

In our rape and pillage economy, we have overloaded the environment with wastes that it cannot use, so they become toxic and destructive. And so it must be with money, if indeed, money remains a part of human society. Money must be made to account in some way or another for the generosity of the sun, the air, the waters. It must be real reflection of nature, and it must be sure that all things that we extract from nature go back in a way that nature can assimilate in a life-sustaining way.

### **Land**

Chief Seattle said in a famous speech, "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?" This principle is shared amongst all indigenous peoples and is central to an economics of the sacred. Putting land, or the rights to land, in the marketplace creates a cultural disconnection from nature, because people become preoccupied with an artificially prescribed monetary value, rather than understanding that land's real value cannot be measured, only experienced by relating to it with gratitude and reverence. 'Property-fication' also forces us to relate to land in terms of 'plots' and artificially created borders, thereby negating the natural seamless-ness and interconnectedness of ecology.

### **Knowledge**

Information is only scarce, when people make it scarce. If I have knowledge, sharing it does not deprive me of it; it only makes everyone better off. Unfortunately, the modern education system operates on the opposite principle: putting a price on knowledge, so only a few can access it, thereby keeping it scarce. Part of Sacred Economics will be dismantling this scarcity of learning in our lives. It will mean breaking out of the monopoly of schooling, and instead exploring and creating a myriad of learning spaces to connect to the passions, dreams, needs, questions, of each person and community.

## **Usury**

Sacred Economics cannot have interest as the principle means by which money is created. Very few people know this, but the fact is, all money is created as interest-bearing debt. This creates a fundamental burden on society to work under stress, to keep ahead of the compounding of compound interest. If you think about it, the mathematics of interest dictate that those who have more money earn greater profits on their money than those with less. This very simple yet profound reality is at the core of our social woes.

Nearly all religions have in them some prohibition against usury. Islamic countries, in fact, have instituted this prohibition into their laws. Yet, these warnings have been completely ignored in western society. The recent financial bubble bursts are simply what is destined to happen when we base our system on usury. The bubbles of debt, financial speculation, and real estate grow so big that they overwhelm the physical economy, essentially eating away at it, just like cancer depletes the life force of the body until it collapses completely.

## **Oneness**

The modern economy is very good at making people feel separate and alone. By creating an intrinsic wealth gap into the system, it tends to build resentment and depression into the minds of those who have less, and it creates a fear of that resentment in the minds of those with excess wealth. It also compels people to exploit the land, so as to get ahead in the market. The result is social and ecological alienation and degradation. This way of being is illusory and pathological.

Einstein once said,

“A human being is a part of the whole that we call the universe, a part limited in time and space. And yet we experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical illusion of our consciousness. This illusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for only the few

people nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living beings and all of nature.”

I believe that this task is the only thing that will allow human beings to continue living on this earth. To be here, to be alive, is a blessing that needs to be appreciated through the way we interact with one another, by bringing forth generosity and love, consciously, into all dimensions of life. Dismantling the systems of domination that perpetuate the illusion of separation, most notably, the neo-liberal system of economics, but also religion and politics, is the most important step in the liberation of humanity.

However, this cannot be done by any activities that oppose the system. We must do it through dis-engaging from it. We can do this gradually by creating new systems, new social organisms, that, like the emergence of a butterfly out of a caterpillar, will feed off of the energy, resources and knowledge generated by the old system. Once this process begins, it will be unstoppable. I believe that it has, indeed, already begun.

*“The Vedas have an unqualified emphasis of human responsibility towards the sustenance of all. This is based on the Indian understanding of human life as a gift that is constituted of and is sustained by all aspects of creation. Man is thus born in and lives in rna, (indebtedness) to all creation, and it therefore becomes his duty to recognize this debt and undertake to repay it everyday.”*

*– Annam Bahu Kurvita*

# THE KING OF KINDNESS

(an excerpt)

Mark Shepard

*"All revolutions are spiritual at the source. All my activities have the sole purpose of achieving a union of hearts. Jai jagat! — Victory to the world!"*

- Vinoba Bhave

On April 18, 1951, the historic day of the very genesis of the Bhoodan movement, Vinoba entered Nalgonda district, the centre of Communist activity. The organizers had arranged Vinoba's stay at Pochampalli, a large village with about 700 families, of whom two-thirds were landless. Pochampalli gave Vinoba a warm welcome. Vinoba went to visit the Harijan (the Untouchables) colony. By early afternoon villagers began to gather around Vinoba at Vinoba's cottage. The Harijans asked for eighty acres of land, forty wet, forty dry for forty families that would be enough. Then Vinoba asked, "If it is not possible to get land from the government, is there not something villagers themselves could do?" To everyone's surprise, Ram Chandra Reddy, the local landlord, got up and said in a rather excited voice: "I will give you 100 acres for these people." At his evening prayer meeting, Ram Chandra Reddy got up and repeated his promise to offer 100 acres of land to the Harijans.

Vinoba could not believe his ears. Here, in the midst of a civil war over land monopoly, was a farmer willing to part with 100 acres out of simple generosity. And Vinoba was just as astounded when the Harijans declared that they needed only 80 acres and wouldn't accept more!

Vinoba suddenly saw a solution to the region's turmoil. In fact, the incident seemed to him a sign from God.

At the close of the prayer meeting, he announced he would walk all through the region to collect gifts of land for the landless.

So began the movement called Bhoodan — 'land-gift'. Over the next seven weeks, Vinoba asked for donations of land for the landless in 200 villages of Telengana. Calculating the amount of India's farmland needed to supply India's landless poor, he would tell the farmers and landlords in each village, "I am your fifth son. Give me my equal share of land." And in each village—to his continued amazement—the donations poured in.

*Who gave, and why?* At first most of the donors were farmers of moderate means, including some who themselves owned only an acre or two. To them, Vinoba was a holy man, a saint, the Mahatma's own son, who had come to give them God's message of kinship with their poorer neighbors. Vinoba's prayer meetings at times took on an almost evangelical fervor. As for Vinoba, he accepted gifts from even the poorest — though he sometimes returned these gifts to the donors — because his goal was as much to open hearts as to redistribute land.

Gradually, though, the richer landowners also began to give. Of course, many of their gifts were inspired by fear of the Communists and hopes of buying off the poor — as the Communists were quick to proclaim.

But not all the motives of the rich landowners were economic. Many of the rich hoped to gain "spiritual merit" through their gifts; or at least to uphold their prestige. After all, if poor farmers were willing to give sizeable portions of their land to Vinoba, could the rich be seen to do less? And perhaps a few of the rich were even truly touched by Vinoba's message. In any case, as Vinoba's tour gained momentum, even the announced approach of the "god who gives away land" was enough to prepare the landlords to part with some of their acreage.

Soon Vinoba was collecting hundreds of acres a day. What's more, wherever Vinoba moved, he began to

dispel the climate of tension and fear that had plagued the region. In places where people had been afraid to assemble, thousands gathered to hear him — including the Communists. At the end of seven weeks, Vinoba had collected over 12,000 acres. After he left, Sarvodaya workers continuing to collect land in his name received another 100,000 acres.

The Telengana march became the launching point for a nationwide campaign that Vinoba hoped would eliminate the greatest single cause of India's poverty: land monopoly. He hoped as well that it might be the lever needed to start a 'nonviolent revolution' — a complete transformation of Indian society by peaceful means.

The root of oppression, he reasoned, is greed. If people could be led to overcome their possessiveness, a climate would be created in which social division and exploitation could be eliminated. As he later put it, "We do not aim at doing mere acts of kindness, but at creating a Kingdom of Kindness."

Soon Vinoba and his colleagues were collecting 1,000 acres a day, then 2,000, then 3,000. Several hundred small teams of Sarvodaya workers and volunteers began trekking from village to village, all over India, collecting land in Vinoba's name. Vinoba himself — despite advanced age and poor health — marched continually, touring one state after another.

The pattern of Vinoba's day was daily the same. Vinoba and his company would rise by 3:00 a.m. and hold a prayer meeting for themselves. Then they would walk ten or twelve miles to the next village, Vinoba leading at a pace that left the others struggling breathlessly behind. With him were always a few close assistants, a bevy of young, idealistic volunteers — teenagers and young adults, male and some female, mostly from towns or cities — plus maybe some regular Sarvodaya workers, a landlord, a politician, or an interested Westerner.

At the host village they would be greeted by a brass band, a makeshift archway, garlands, formal

welcomes by village leaders, and shouts of “Sant Vinoba, Sant Vinoba!” (“Saint Vinoba!”) After breakfast, the Bhoodan workers would fan out through the village, meeting the villagers, distributing literature, and taking pledges. Vinoba himself would be settled apart, meeting with visitors, reading newspapers, and answering letters.

In late afternoon, there would be a prayer meeting, attended by hundreds or thousands of villagers from the area. After a period of reciting and chanting, Vinoba would speak to the crowd in his quiet, high-pitched voice. His talk would be completely improvised, full of rich images drawn from Hindu scripture or everyday life, exhorting the villagers to lives of love, kinship, sharing. At the close of the meeting, more pledges would be taken. There were no free weekends on this itinerary, no holidays, no days off. The man who led this relentless crusade was 57 years old, suffered from chronic dysentery, chronic malaria, an intestinal ulcer, and restricted himself, because of his ulcer, to a diet of honey, milk, and yogurt.

By the time of the 1954 Sarvodaya conference, the Gandhians had collected over three million acres nationwide. The total eventually reached over four million. Much of this land turned out to be useless, and in many cases landowners reneged on their pledges. Still, the Gandhians were able to distribute over one million acres to India’s landless poor — far more than had been managed by the land reform programs of India’s government. About half a million families benefited.

Meanwhile, Vinoba was shifting his efforts to a new gear — a higher one. After 1954, Vinoba began asking for donations’ not so much of land but of whole villages. He named this new program Gramdan — ‘village-gift’.

Gramdan was a far more radical program than Bhoodan. In a Gramdan village, all land was to be legally owned by the village as a whole, but parceled out for the use of individual families, according to need. Because the families could not themselves sell, rent, or mortgage the land, they could not be pressured off it during hard times — as normally happens when land reform programs bestow land title on poor individuals.



Village affairs were to be managed by a village council made up of all adult members of the village, making decisions by consensus — meaning the council could not adopt any decision until everyone accepted it. This was meant to ensure cooperation and make it much harder for one person or group to benefit at the expense of others.

While Bhoodan had been meant to prepare people for a nonviolent revolution, Vinoba saw Gramdan as the revolution itself. Like Gandhi, Vinoba believed that the divisiveness of Indian society was a root cause of its degradation and stagnation. Before the villagers could begin to improve their lot, they needed to learn to work together. Gramdan, he felt, with its common land ownership and cooperative decision-making, could bring about the needed unity. And once this was achieved, the 'people's power' it would release would make anything possible. Vinoba's Gramdan efforts progressed slowly until 1965, when an easing of Gramdan's requirements was joined to the launching of a 'storm campaign'. By 1970, the official figure for Gramdan villages was 160,000 — almost one-third of all India's villages!

But it turned out that it was far easier to get a declaration of Gramdan than to set it up in practice. By early 1970, only a few thousand villages had transferred land title to a village council. In most of these, progress was at a standstill. What's more, most of these few thousand villages were small, single-caste, or tribal — not typical Indian villages. By 1971, Gramdan as a movement had collapsed under its own weight.

Still, the Gramdan movement left behind more than a hundred Gramdan 'pockets' — some made up of hundreds of villages — where Gandhian workers settled in for long-term development efforts. These pockets today form the base of India's Gandhian movement. In these locales, the Gandhians are helping some of India's poorest by organizing Gandhian-style community development and nonviolent action campaigns against injustice.

*Reference: <[www.markshep.com/nonviolence/GT\\_Vinoba.html](http://www.markshep.com/nonviolence/GT_Vinoba.html)>*

*“Scientists who use advanced imaging technology to study brain function report that the human brain is wired to reward caring, cooperation, and service. According to this research, merely thinking about another person experiencing harm triggers the same reaction in our brain as when a mother sees distress in her baby’s face. Conversely, the act of helping another triggers the brain’s pleasure center and benefits our health by boosting our immune system, reducing our heart rate, and preparing us to approach and soothe. Positive emotions like compassion produce similar benefits. By contrast, negative emotions suppress our immune system, increase heart rate, and prepare us to fight or flee.*

*These findings are consistent with the pleasure most of us experience from being a member of an effective team or extending an uncompensated helping hand to another human. It is entirely logical. If our brains were not wired for life in community, our species would have expired long ago. We have an instinctual desire to protect the group, including its weakest and most vulnerable members — its children. Behavior contrary to this positive norm is an indicator of serious social and psychological dysfunction...”*

- David Korten

“We Are Hard-Wired to Care and Connect”

YES! magazine, Issue 47, Fall 2008

# MY EXPERIMENTS WITH INTIMACY

Nitin Paranjape <sakhanitin@yahoo.com>

I am afflicted with a trait which I suppose is common, yet I feel peculiar. Even though I like receiving gifts, I find myself feeling awkward accepting them. I suppose at the core is an assumption that the process of gift-giving will raise good feelings about me in the receiver's heart and mind. I tried to evaluate this reason and found that there may be some shades of truth in it, but it is not so straight and simple. Giving involves thinking about the other person, understanding their universe and their wishes. It shifts our focus from 'us' to 'them', and as it does, it unwittingly bridges the gap between the two with naturalness and warmth. Gifting is that precious means by which entry into other's soul is possible.

But in today's consumer-driven life, gifts too have become 'plastic-coated'; we have become dependent on the market to fulfil our wish of giving. And the wide range of available products dazzles us to temporarily forget the reasons for giving. The focus shifts to the product rather than the person. In the end, the receiver is inundated with 'gifts', which have no relation to his/her needs at that moment. The market has also unconsciously slipped in the notion of 'price tag'. The value of how much it costs has replaced the value of feelings associated with the act of giving. A costly tag means the gift is valuable. I have had both kinds of experiences — received gifts which do not mean anything and have chosen ones for completing the formality.

In the face of this artificiality, my family and the organisations that I was working with earlier tried something different. We decided to make things with our own hands instead of buying from the market. This made lot of difference. The act of creating immediately connects us to our inner world and, at the same time, links us with the others for whom we are making the gift. Creating something with our own

hands requires time, which challenges the market's desire to make us passive consumers. Though my output, a papier-mâché, wasn't a grand design, it involved my complete attention and I reckoned it would please the receiver, a colleague in the office. It definitely did, and I felt elated.

Since this has been on my mind and is a symbolic resistance to the growing domination of the consumer world on our lives, I am constantly thinking of situations where it could be applied. Recently, in one of the colleges where I am a guest faculty, I tried it with students who had passed their second year design examination. I told them that there could be another way of celebrating. As opposed to buying 'pedhas' (sweets made from milk), I invited them to try their hand at making home-made dishes to bring to college. I was surprised the following day when I was invited to their class to join in the revelry. There was literally a lavish spread on the table. Everyone had made something with their own hands. The boys too surprised their mates by bringing a variety of delicacies. The joy was palpable and the sharing boisterous. Most of them revealed that they enjoyed making the dish for their friends and eating together was like icing on the cake. Later, the students got together and decided to contribute making their campus green by planting trees. One idea had birthed another, and the process of reflection of what they could do together had begun.

At Abhivyakti, the organisation with which I was associated, we tried to usher in the gift-culture in our annual meets, a space where the entire team is present to review and plan ahead. We invited the members to bring one precious item which could be gifted to someone who needed it. In the evening time, in a circle, members displayed what they had got and each one spoke about what it meant to them. The gifts were exhibited, and the team members went around looking at it. The next invitation was to choose the gift that was on display and offer something in return as exchange. The condition of 'return' gift was that it was not to be of material variety but something the person could do, like a massage or a snack-item. The exchange was about moving beyond the culture of money and reclaim what we as human possessed within. When the offer of return gift was done, the owner of the gift would decide whom to give the gift and reasons behind it.

For instance, I had a watch which was very dear to me, but I wasn't using it. I got many offers from my colleagues – massage, poetry reading, my favourite dish, and embroidered-handkerchief – and I had difficult time in choosing. But when I announced the worthy recipient of the watch, my decision was more emotional. The watch went to the person whom I felt would give my gift the same kind of love and attention that I did.

The atmosphere of this gift-culture and exchange was emotional and heavy. Each person had become vulnerable in the bonding that had happened, and the love they experienced in giving and receiving. Each member got something along with a valuable lesson. Not everything that one wanted became available. It was dependent on many factors. What you were offering as an exchange, your relationship, your behaviour among many small things that we don't notice. The gift had become more than commodities that they once were. They took away something personal from each as they changed hands and brought back much more than money could have given. The chance for members to speak about their personal belongings, listen to what 'precious' meant to others and the informal exchanges, the surprise and joy on the faces of each member, made the occasion special and memorable.

Each year, the door to others' hearts has widened through the means of gift exchange, and the culture has become intimate and unique. We had taken a small step to move away from our dependence on the market and its ready-made world.

Why I am awkward receiving gifts might be related to the fact that I don't like to be seen vulnerable, and being at the receiving end of someone's generosity is definitely one such moment! I think it's time to change. Being vulnerable in front of others is an invitation to share a private moment. I realise the power of the gift culture. Creating a space of intimacy not only deepens our community bond, but also helps us to discover our inner worlds and to transform ourselves!

# GIFT GIVING AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Maralena Murphy and Jenny Leis <jennyleis@riseup.net>

Many of the other pieces in this publication speak eloquently and thoroughly of the relationships between gift culture and the emergence of a transformed ecosystem of human relations. In this essay, we wish to build upon this very premise, that we are hardwired as biological creatures to work together and that we derive greater satisfaction from giving of ourselves rather than hoarding and guarding. The question thus becomes: how to do this in a way that is most public, drastic, viral and effective?

The City Repair Project, in Portland, OR, actively spreads a lived, universally accessible experience of gift culture by facilitating the creation of spaces for free and reciprocal exchange in the public sphere. At the heart of City Repair's work lies the idea of Placemaking, a concept maybe best framed by a short description of its opposite. We here in the United States live lives steeped in the principles of domination, anonymity and impartial exchange characteristic of capitalist society. Born into houses our families did not build (and often cannot afford to own), witness to geographies resulting from homogenous design, and disconnected from the sheer diversity of the natural world by way of living in grids within grids, we are not often given opportunities to put down roots in a way that cries to the world: WE LIVE, HERE AND NOW!

Placemaking is a multi-layered process within which citizens foster active, engaged relationships to the spaces which they inhabit, the landscapes of their lives, and shape those spaces in a way which creates a sense of communal stewardship and lived connection to the commons. This is most often accomplished through a creative reclamation of public space: projects which take the form of benches on street corners where neighbors can sit, rest and talk with each other, kiosks on sidewalks where neighbors can post information about local events, needs and resources, public 'free bins' where folks can discard their

extraneous goods and know that someone else in need will receive the gift freely, and street paintings in the public right-of-way that demonstrate to all who pass through that this is a Place: inhabited, known and loved by its residents.

In all instances, these projects are undertaken by local communities who come together to discuss what it is they want in their neighborhood — what elements are lacking in the public sphere and how the community can work together with the resources they have to create their own Garden of Eden in the very place where they now live. In this way, City Repair's work necessitates of its participants that they give gifts – of time, resources, energy, commitment and care. And it is through the giving of these gifts that the work of repairing the social and physical fabric of the city is accomplished. Citizens learn how to grow ecosystems of reciprocal exchange through depending on living, breathing interactions with known people and places, rather than on the vast screening, impersonal abstractions of money-exchanges and bureaucracies.

The crucial point here is the way in which these neighborhood projects actively spread a lived experience of gift culture, even to those who took no part in the project's creation. It is unfortunate for you, reader, that right now you are encountering City Repair's work through verbal description. What you need in order to understand the experience of those who move through repaired spaces is the visual representation: a beautiful painting, or earthen bench, or bulletin board mosaic. These projects, which slow traffic and create living detail and beauty no civil engineering firm could match, provide a physical space so obviously alternative to the dominant paradigm of the amorphous, impersonal 'public' that people cannot help but stop and wonder, "Ooh, what is this?"

This spark of interest and curiosity is the hook which draws our unsuspecting citizen into the web of gift culture: suddenly they are copying down the phone number of a local babysitter from a flyer in a kiosk, or find themselves sitting on a bench next to a neighbor who's grown so much zucchini she's giving bags of it away, or pulling out a small journal and pen from the 'communication station' and describing sweet

memory from childhood, a story that will live now in the public pages to be witnessed and enjoyed by the hundreds of other people who will pass that way, stand in that very spot, and reach in and pull out the same small spiral notebook.

These projects' existence in the public sphere allow for the gift to keep on giving, if we may be so bold.

In the context of the evident necessity for a species-wide transition from one globalized market economy to many localized, interwoven gift economies, City Repair's projects build feedback loops which reinforce the ability of people to give of themselves. It is not only that gifts grow relationships by creating flavor and texture, memory and presence in the connection between maker and user, giver and receiver. It's that living inside those relationships enables us more and more to give of ourselves, as we build trust and understanding through shared experience and collective action. And it's these relationships, the trust between people, that founds cultures of respectful sharing, that can fuel movements and restructure worlds.



# HEALING GIFTS

Madhu Suri Prakash <msp1@psu.edu>

In the pre-dawn D.C. darkness of chilly February 2008, I thought that the cab I had just hailed was driven by a fellow Indian.

“Where are you from?” he asked in the familiarly courteous tone of fellow Indians seeking some tiny connection so far from home.

His tone of voice and questioning clearly suggested that he already knew the answer to his question.

“With this big *bindi* on my forehead ... ? Where else can I be from but from India! You, too?” I asked in turn.

“No, I am from Pakistan,” he answered quietly.

“I am too ... in a way.... My parents and grandparents ... my aunts and uncles .... We are Punjabis. All my ancestors were born and raised

in Lahore, Pind Dadan Khan, Rawalpindi. They were forced to leave their homes... their neighbors and friends when they fled their Punjab for India when our land was torn by The Partition.

From speaking of our past...our ancestors, we moved to the present. I asked him what it was like to be a Washington, DC taxi driver.

Unwittingly, I opened up a hornets nest. Pain poured out as he shared the horrors he suffered – as a Muslim – after 9/11. He announced he could take no more the humiliation and harassment all Muslim taxi drivers daily continue to endure since that horrible day.

“The cops and George Bush are the real terrorists. Daily, after 9/11, they have been systematically terrorizing Muslim cab drivers working in DC. It is unbearable. I can take it no longer. Despite the life and community I have created here for the

past two decades since my brother sponsored me, I am returning to Pakistan.”

“What will you do there?

“First, regain some dignity. Our loss of dignity here is unbearable. ....”

Tongue tied by the intensity of his pain, at first I knew not what words could offer him comfort, could ease this stranger’s pain.

“Forgive...” I urged. “You can still make a good life here... Please do forgive those who humiliate and harass you, who give you grief. They know no better.”

Aching with his Muslim Ache, I sensed an immediate surprising sadness speaking with this stranger.

Struggling for some words of peace and forgiveness, I could only muster:

“Too bad politicians divided our two lands and turned us into each other’s enemies. ... Whenever I meet Pakistanis, I cannot help but feel that we really belong together ... just as our ancestors

did .... Our food, language, music, clothes .... All unite us despite being Hindus and Muslims. Each time I meet Pakistanis, we find ourselves wishing we were still together; not separated by artificial national boundaries; not friends-turned-into-enemies ....

For a few minutes, we rode in silence.

Still fumbling for words that might be a balm to his rage, I stuttered:

“We belong together ... all of us... to each other...”

He did not respond, just remained completely silent. Suddenly, he stopped his cab. I glanced outside and saw that his pain and silence had driven him to the wrong destination. His story, charged with such intense emotion, had brought him to the train station instead of Greyhound.

Gently, I reminded him that I needed to be at the Greyhound station. He paused; took stock; apologized for his mistake; and in a few swift minutes in his taxi, had flown me to the right place. More apologies he offered for his error.

Stepping out and collecting my bag, I asked him the amount of the fare.

“I do not charge my sister.”

He stood before the money extended in my hand, his hands by his side, mute.

Seeing my confusion in this shift from the money economy, he asked shyly for a gift:

“Give me only one dollar for luck. A lucky dollar auspiciously starting a new day.”

One symbolic dollar [*boni*] exchanged our hands. A token... A gift for the new day unfolding.

Shyly, I put back the rest of the money in my wallet.

Wordlessly, we embraced. Never to meet again, this stranger and me.

Emptied of words for now, he drove away in a warm silence, our quietened hearts beating to the slow rhythms of our shared humanity.

*‘It is not love to my neighbour — whom I often do not know at all — which induces me to seize a pail of water and to rush towards his house when I see it on fire; it is a far wider, even though more vague feeling or instinct of human solidarity and sociability which moves me. So it is also with animals. It is not love, and not even sympathy (understood in its proper sense) which induces a herd of ruminants or of horse to form a ring in order to resist an attack of wolves; not love which induces wolves to form a pack for hunting; not love which induces kittens or lambs to play, or a dozen of species of young birds to spend their days together in the autumn; and it is neither love nor personal sympathy which induces many thousand fallow-deer scattered over a territory as large as France to form into a score of separate herds, all marching towards a given spot, in order to cross there a river. It is a feeling infinitely wider than love or personal sympathy — an instinct that has been slowly developed among animals and men in the course of an extremely long evolution, and which has taught animals and men alike the force*

*they can borrow from the practice of mutual aid and support, and the joys they can find in social life.*

*The importance of this distinction will be easily appreciated by the student of animal psychology, and the more so by the student of human ethics. Love, sympathy and self-sacrifice certainly play an immense part in the progressive development of our moral feelings. But it is not love and not even sympathy upon which Society is based in mankind. It is the conscience — be it only at the stage of an instinct — of human solidarity. It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependency of every one's happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own.”*

- Petr Kropotkin

*Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution, 1914*

# YOU ARE, THEREFORE I AM

(an excerpt)

Satish Kumar

After nourishing nature comes the nourishing of society, which means a social order based on giving and receiving (*dana*). It means reciprocity and mutuality. We use intellectual, cultural and religious wealth to enrich our lives. This wealth has accumulated from generation to generation. We have learned much from the native Americans, the Australian Aborigines, the indigenous people of India (*adivasis*) and the Bushmen of Africa.

We have been guided by Jesus Christ, the Buddha, Mohammed and Mahavir. We have been inspired by Valmiki, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Jane Austen and many other writers. We have benefited from the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King. They were not motivated by fame, fortune or power. Buddha claimed no copyright on his teachings, and Shakespeare received no royalty cheques. We have been enchanted by music, paintings, architecture and crafts of many cultures, from time immemorial. We have received a treasure house of traditions as a free gift.

In return we offer our work, our creativity, our arts and crafts, our agriculture and architecture as gifts to society — to present and future generations. When we are motivated by this spirit then work is not a burden. It is not a duty. It is not a responsibility. We are not even the doers of our work. Work flows through us and not from us. We do not own our intellect, our creativity, or our skills. We have received them as a gift and grace. We pass them on as a gift and grace; it is like a river which keeps flowing. All the tributaries make the river great. We are the tributaries adding to the great river of time and culture; the river of humanity. If tributaries stop flowing into the river, if they become individualistic and egotistical,

if they put terms and conditions before they join the rivers, they will dry and the rivers will dry to. To keep the rivers flowing all tributaries have to join in with joy and without conditions. In the same way, all individual arts, crafts and other creative activities make up the river of humanity. We need not hold back, we need not block the flow. This unconditional union. This is the great principle of *dana*. This is how society and civilizations are replenished.

The poetry of Goethe and Milton, the myths of Mahabharata and King Arthur, the paintings of Van Gogh and Botticelli, the music of Mozart, the pyramids of Egypt, the Taj Mahal of India and thousands of other blossomings of creativity in the past have enriched us. We are filled with gratitude. Every moment is a moment of thanksgiving. This is our true 'capital' that we have inherited. But we cannot live off the capital for ever. If we do not replenish it, it will come to an end. It is good to cherish the fruits of our heritage, but it is a living imperative that we continue to add our creativity to this vital culture.

When we write a poem we make a gift. When we paint a picture or build a beautiful house we make a gift. When we grow flowers and cook food we make a gift. When all these activities are performed as sacred acts, they nourish society. When we are unselfconscious, unacquisitive, and act without desire for recognition or reward, when our work emerges from a pure heart like that of a child, our actions become a gift, *dana*...

*this one life is a great gift for me and for you  
your cells that reproduce your life is a miracle of the universe  
the womb that nurtured your soul into humanness  
has not charged you a price for its service  
the soil, the sea, the sky, the sun  
fed you, washed you, warmed you in abundance  
for no return.*

*what are you doing with this gift called your life?  
what if you lived this one life as it were a gift from God, Universe, Pacha Mama, you name it!  
what if you took every breath with tender consciousness and gratitude, remembering...  
...where your life came from.*

*what if you lived your one life in service of all life?  
in service of your brother and sister, in service of the soil and the tree,  
in service of the bird and the fish...this one time!  
what if your life that is a gift becomes a gift to life?*

- Filiz Telek, Istanbul, Turkey <filiztelek@yahoo.com>



**SHIKSHANTAR:  
The Peoples' Institute for  
Rethinking Education and Development**

Shikshantar, a *Jeevan Andolan* (life movement), was founded to challenge the culture of schooling and institutions of thought-control. Today, factory-schooling and literacy programs are suppressing many diverse forms of human learning and expression, as well as much-needed organic processes towards just and harmonious social regeneration. In the spirit of *Vimukt Shiksha*, we are committed to creating spaces where individuals and communities can together engage in dialogue to: (1) generate meaningful critiques to expose and dismantle/transform existing models of Education, Development and Progress; (2) reclaim control over their own learning processes and learning ecologies; and (3) imagine (and continually re-imagine) their own complex shared visions and practices of *Swaraj*.

Shikshantar is based in Udaipur (Rajasthan, India). Our core team works in collaboration with local and trans-local partners through dynamic processes of participatory conceptualization. To learn more about our efforts, please contact us at:

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***We welcome and encourage your questions, suggestions and support.***