

Gift Economy

*"My very life is sustained through the gifts of others.
This should be reflected upon again and again..."*

The above verse is something that monastics recite regularly. But the truth of the matter is not meant for a select few. Rather, it is a reminder to all of us that our lives are supported by a multitude of others, both human and non-human. The interdependent nature of our existence is indisputable. We fool ourselves if we think otherwise. The air we breathe, the water we drink, cook or bathe in, the food we eat and the clothes we wear are only a few of the most obvious examples of life's necessities that are not produced by ourselves. If we take this for granted, we fail to see how our dependence lends a fragility or uncertainty to our existence. It is just this lack of control that we want to avoid facing.

To regard everything on this planet as part of our life support system can lead to a sense of gratitude. Or it could lead to the fear of scarcity as resources decline or become tainted. We don't want to feel helpless when it comes to receiving what we need to survive, so it's easier to not pay attention to our dependency. But rather than ignoring our vulnerability, we can all it to bring us into a more active participation with life by asking ourselves how we are contributing to the systems of which we are a part. How do I give back in order to help nourish that which sustains me? This question is not meant to incite guilt but rather strengthen our sense of agency and connection to all that is alive. Could we view reciprocity as a creative act that ennobles the heart as it enriches the whole?

I'm guessing that you're familiar with the concept of "random acts of kindness" and may even have been the perpetrator or recipient of such benevolence. The joy that this brings to others is precisely because the benefit received was not solicited but given freely - proof that joy arises from generosity. Similarly, the "pay it forward" concept is another way of acknowledging the truth that our lives are supported as we wish for others to realize the same. This clearly runs counter to the exchange mentality that assigns a specific value to things and thereby removes both the initiative of the giver and the pleasant surprise of the receiver. When a transaction is required rather than being voluntary, it doesn't allow for the cultivation of generosity which can serve as a foundation for many other wholesome mental states.

In his article, "Living in the Gift", Charles Eisenstein puts it this way: "It is simply that life is a gift, that the world is a gift, that the cosmos operates on the principles of gift. Please bathe in your intuitive resonance with this truth. Beneath the cynicism we know: it is all a gift. Gratitude is our native state. Generosity is its maturation. In a gift economy, the more you give the richer you are."

You may be thinking that this is an idealistic concept that is not practical in our modern world. While I might like to operate within a gift economy, the utility company that I depend on most likely would not. In fact, most if not all organizations rely on money as the means of exchange. Even the days of washing dishes in exchange for a meal at a restaurant is rare due to modern regulations. Like many ideas that are ahead of their time, we don't have to give up on them entirely. We can look for opportunities where these principles can be most effective: within the communities that you are part of. It is precisely because communities have become so disintegrated that we have lost touch with our neighbors with whom we once would have

bartered. Establishing community ties brings back many practices that lead to health and resilience, building social capital that goes beyond the measure of monetization. Most importantly, it brings us into direct contact with the foundational truth of our connection with all beings.

"When giving this gift, my heart will be glad,
and happiness and joy will arise in me...
one gives because it ennobles
and adorns the mind."

-The Buddha (AN 8:33)