

READING

Our reading comes from the essayist Charles Eisenstein, from an article he wrote for *Yes!* magazine (available online at <http://www.yesmagazine.org/happiness/to-build-community-an-economy-of-gifts>):

“Wherever I go and ask people what is missing from their lives, the most common answer (if they are not impoverished or seriously ill) is "community." What happened to community, and why don't we have it any more? There are many reasons—the layout of suburbia, the disappearance of public space, the automobile and the television, the high mobility of people and jobs—and, if you trace the "whys" a few levels down, they all implicate the money system.

More directly posed: community is nearly impossible in a highly monetized society like our own. That is because community is woven from gifts, which is ultimately why poor people often have stronger communities than rich people. If you are financially independent, then you really don't depend on your neighbors—or indeed on any specific person—for anything. You can just pay someone to do it, or pay someone *else* to do it.

In former times, people depended for all of life's necessities and pleasures on people they knew personally. If you alienated the local blacksmith, brewer, or doctor, there was no replacement. Your quality of life would be much lower. If you alienated your neighbors then you might not have help if you sprained your ankle during harvest season, or if your barn burnt down. Community was not an add-on to life, it was a way of life. Today, with only slight exaggeration, we could say we don't need anyone. I don't need the farmer who grew my food—I can pay someone else to do it. I don't need the mechanic who fixed my car. I don't need the trucker who brought my shoes to the store. I don't need any of the people who produced any of the things I use. I need someone to do their jobs, but not the unique individual people. They are replaceable and, by the same token, so am I.

That is one reason for the universally recognized superficiality of most social gatherings. How authentic can it be, when the unconscious knowledge, "I don't need you," lurks under

the surface? When we get together to consume—food, drink, or entertainment—do we really draw on the gifts of anyone present? Anyone can consume. Intimacy comes from co-creation, not co-consumption, as anyone in a band can tell you, and it is different from liking or disliking someone. To forge community then, we must do more than simply get people together. While that is a start, soon we get tired of just talking, and we want to do something, to create something. It is a very tepid community indeed, when the only need being met is the need to air opinions and feel that we are right, that we get it, and isn't it too bad that other people don't ...

Community is woven from gifts. Unlike today's market system, whose built-in scarcity compels competition in which more for me is less for you, in a gift economy the opposite holds. Because people in gift culture pass on their surplus rather than accumulating it, your good fortune is my good fortune: more for you is more for me. Wealth circulates, gravitating toward the greatest need. In a gift community, people know that their gifts will eventually come back to them, albeit often in a new form.”

SERMON

“Community is woven from gifts.” That’s a beautiful statement. Let’s poke at it a bit and see if it’s really true. Charles Eisenstein says that “community” means being part of a social group in which we know and need the specific other people. Not just someone with their skills, but THOSE particular people. A group in which we have relationships and trust that mean that it’s not necessary for every household on the block to own a lawn mower; those four households can work out a schedule and share a single mower. What a departure from the late capitalist message of advertising, that we all need our own mowers because ... it’s somehow damaging to us to ask to borrow one? Because we can’t trust our neighbors to lend out a mower? Because ... there will be some kind of lawn mowing crisis that requires every lawn to be cut simultaneously?

In this regard, Eisenstein is certainly right. We have come to a point at which many of us choose to spend our labor, in the form of billable hours, to obtain money which we use to

purchase our own lawn mower rather than putting in emotional labor, in the form of conversations and exchanges, to build a relationship with our neighbor that can include shared use of a lawn mower. Building the relationship is necessary – because without it, how can we trust that our neighbor will ALWAYS, or at least USUALLY, let us borrow the mower? How can our neighbor trust that we won't ruin it by mowing rocks or some other negligent action? We can trust when we have a relationship with each other that provides some context. I know my neighbor is meticulous about his yard maintenance, so I can have some confidence that he will treat my lawn mower with care if he borrows it.

But can a gift economy work when it's bigger than relationships between neighbors? Can there be such a thing as a regional gift economy that encompasses too many people for each person to have a one-to-one relationship with every other person? Of course there can. It doesn't look quite like what Eisenstein's describing, but it's very possible. Here in the mid-Willamette Valley there's a group called the "Corvallis Families Gift Economy," which actually includes people from Albany, Philomath, Monmouth, and the rural areas in between as well as Corvallis. (Available at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/221503684599610/> - you will need to request membership in the closed Facebook group.)

The Corvallis Families Gift Economy has about 1800 members, far too many for everyone to know everyone. Everyone in the group knows SOMEONE in the group, because membership spreads by word of mouth. The way giving works in the Corvallis Families Gift Economy is a kind of one-to-many interaction, facilitated through a Facebook group. A person makes a post describing what they have to give away – baby clothes, a kitchen table, a cell phone charger, cans of soup – and people comment to say they'd like to receive it. Pleasingly, this process also happens in reverse. A person makes a post requesting something, and members of the community volunteer to meet the need.

Sometimes it happens that the match is between two people who know each other, who are friends or neighbors. When that happens, the interaction fits more closely with Eisenstein's description of neighbors helping neighbors. When the match is between people who don't

know each other, the interaction is differently charged. There's less of a sense of "helping a friend" and more of a sense of general generosity and gratitude. This is a valuable experience in its own way, and a spiritual practice. Why? Because it speaks to our fundamental understandings of the way the world works.

For each of us, from the beginning of our lives, there have been a series of experiences that have helped to set our expectations for life. When we cried as babies, we got various kinds of responses: maybe a quick response, maybe a slow one, maybe a response that didn't quite meet the need we were trying to express, or maybe a response that instantly satisfied us. We formed expectations about the world: "This is a place where my needs will generally be met and people are generally responsive to me." Or, "this is a place where I'll need to be loud to get my needs met and to get people to respond." Or, "It's hard to predict whether my needs will be met when I first ask, or whether I'll have to scream."

Of course, we continue to have experiences throughout our lives that set and re-set our expectations. No matter what kind of babyhood each of us had, we've followed on that babyhood with years of living. We are pattern-seeking creatures, we humans, whether we know it or not. Deep in our brains, something below our consciousness has been watching all this time, paying close attention to whether a quiet request is effective or a scream is required.

When we participate in a gift economy, when we ask a collective of mostly strangers to help meet our need for new shoes for the kids, or a cell phone charger to replace a broken one, and we receive that help – that goes into the pattern we're constructing. That tells us, deep in the back of our minds, that the world is a good, responsive, generous place. We feel gratitude: a pleasant feeling that lights this good world up.

When we GIVE in a gift economy, answering the need of a stranger, we help to build someone else's sense that the world is a good, responsive, generous place. And we get to feel gratitude again: that we had something to give, that we could experience the glow of meeting someone's need. We have a moment of evidence that the overwhelming message

of advertising and corporate consumerism is WRONG. Most of the time, we aren't suffering from scarcity. We have what we need. We have enough to give some away and still be fine. And because we have received, we also know that when we have needs, those needs will often be met. We take part in a spiritual practice that builds an expectation of the world grounded in mutual care.

A gift economy is not a barter economy. That's important. Whether giving to friends or to strangers, a gift economy does not include a running mental tally of who owes whom, or who's given more. There may be a sort of social capital that accrues to those who give the most, in the form of goodwill and praise, but a person who has given ten things to me is not then entitled to "cash in" on that giving later and demand ten things back from me.

So what happens when some people do more receiving than giving in a gift economy?

There's a cartoon that goes around from time to time that illustrates this. In the cartoon, three people are trying to see over a fence to watch a baseball game. (We won't worry right now about whether it's right for them to be watching over the fence.) One is tall enough to see over the fence, one is of medium height, and one is quite short. Can you picture it?

In the first panel of the cartoon, labeled "equality," each person has been given a box to stand on. The tallest person is now more than tall enough to see over the fence, the medium-height person is just tall enough, and the shortest person is still too short to see.

In the second panel of the cartoon, the tallest person has no box to stand on and can still see over the fence. The medium-height person has one box to stand on and can still see over the fence. The shortest person now has two boxes and is finally able to see over the fence. This cartoon is often labeled "equity" or "justice."

Can we imagine a gift interaction between these people? A tallest person who determines that they don't need their box and offers it up to the shortest person? A shortest person who says to their companions, "Could one of you spare a box? I still can't see." A

relationship in which the tallest person doesn't worry that they'll need that box later and hesitate to give it up; a relationship in which the shortest person feels comfortable asking for what they need.

Now imagine that instead of boxes to stand on, what's handed off is a box of stuff. A box full of baby clothes and toys; a box full of kitchen implements. From those who have more than enough to those who have unmet needs, without keeping score. Equity.

It's a little different when the giving in question benefits an institution or cause, of course. In a one-to-one interaction, even between strangers, there's a social reward: a "thank you," a smile, a note left on a porch after a gift is picked up. The giver knows that the act of giving has been witnessed, at least by the recipient.

Giving to an institution can change this. For example, the volunteer hours that are given to the UUFC by members of this congregation are sometimes witnessed and sometimes invisible. Most often, the giving is only witnessed by a subset of the congregation – usually the other people who are engaged in the same kind of giving! There is no audience or acclaim for writing checks or folding newsletters, and while there are annual expressions of gratitude for RE teachers and committee chairs it's not the same as a thank-you every time a gift of time or skill is given.

So why give to a church? For the same reasons one might give to strangers, as it turns out. We are constantly helping to set not only our own but also each other's expectations of the world. Volunteering in whatever way is appropriate for us, giving without worrying about accounting or credit, is an act of generosity for individuals. And collectively, the fact that the UUFC has the volunteer hours it needs to keep going, without too much worrying about it, helps us all to feel safer. This is a place where needs can be met, where problems can be solved, where generally daily life and interactions move along smoothly.

There are exceptions to this: there always are. Times when something doesn't get done fast enough, or a task gets forgotten, or someone is unexpectedly out sick. But remember that

we're talking about our unconscious minds, here, that are making patterns. The weight of things MOSTLY going well is often sufficient to counterbalance the times when something falls through the cracks.

So that's all well and good, but does it affect any of us individually? Yes! And can we only GIVE to a church and not receive? No! Just as we bring our expectations with us to church, and come to have expectations ABOUT our church – “this place is generally reliable,” or “this place is chaotic and unpredictable” – we also bring our needs to church. Because we all have needs. It's human to need, whether a physical object or some advice or companionship in difficult times or simply for a friend with whom to share conversation. When we feel that a church generally is a safe and reliable place, it becomes easier to reach out to individuals we've met through church and say, “Can I borrow your lawn mower?” Or, “Can you recommend a good dentist?” Or, “I need a friend right now. I just got some bad news, and I'm scared.”

The beautiful thing that can happen in congregations is that emotional needs can be met in equitable ways. That last example: “I need a friend right now. I'm scared,” is someone who needs an extra emotional box to stand on. And if you know you're in a good place right now – feeling centered and able – then you have a box to give. You can spend your time with me, and listen, and hold space. And of course you and others can give the practical gifts that churches often offer: casseroles and other meals, shawls that are a physical representation of love, time spent in yard work or childcare to take some tasks off my plate.

I believe quite strongly that one of the core purposes of religious community is to connect us to each other in ways that help us to feel less afraid and less alone. When we give to members of our community, whether it's a listening ear or a fresh meal, we help the recipients to know that they're not alone – and knowing we're not alone helps us to be less afraid. When we give, we also settle the knowledge into our unconscious minds that when the time comes for us to receive, our community will provide. Hard things will happen to us all – crises, losses, days when it's all too much – and yet the world is a good place in which our needs are generally met. A place to be grateful for.

And our giving, our actions that provide assurance of the goodness of the world, need not be limited to our own congregation. Recently, a series of predominantly black churches has been struck by arson. A coordinated interfaith effort called the Rebuild the Churches Fund has been set up online where individuals and congregations can contribute financially toward rebuilding these churches. You can find the link on our website, in the “UU Action Updates” section.

Remember that as we’re all identifying patterns, all the time, we’re also making those patterns for ourselves and each other. While the action of a few burns a congregation’s church, the actions of many can give resources to rebuild it. Those who give are influencing the patterns in positive ways for themselves and the recipients. We need to create positive, hopeful patterns for all of us, to reassure each other that even in the face of maliciousness, or fear, or suffering, we hold each other and the world is still good.

Beyond this, there’s one more reason I regard giving as a spiritual practice.

Poet and philosopher David Whyte says that “All friendships of any length are based on a continued, mutual forgiveness.” In other words, if you and I are friends, than you and I are forgiving each other all the time. I forgive you for being late to meet me for dinner. You forgive me for forgetting your birthday. I forgive you for saying something offensive or insensitive. You forgive me for not living up to your idea of who I am. We forgive each other for each time we’ve been let down.

A friendship doesn’t work very well if we try to keep a forgiveness score. I don’t say, “Well, I’ve forgiven you five times, and you’ve only forgiven me three times this month, so I get two more screw-ups before your next one!”

I have this memory from my college years. I was quite busy with classes, my job, and extra-curriculars. A few friends of mine invited me over for dinner and a movie. “Oh, not this

week," I said. "I'm too busy. I'd love to, but I just can't." "Okay," my friends said. "That's fine, we understand."

The next week they invited me over again. Again, I declined. The following week, again. After a while, I said, half-joking, "At some point you're going to stop inviting me over, since I can never come!"

I say "half-joking" because of course I was afraid that it was true. That I had used up my allowance of missed dinners and declined invitations. "Never," one friend said seriously. "We'll just keep inviting you until you can come." He paused, and added, "Unless you're trying to hint that you don't want to be friends anymore, in which case you'll have to use your words and we'll talk about it." But I did want to remain friends, and eventually I made it to dinner.

Continued, mutual forgiveness. And the mutual here means equity, not equality. A forgiveness that doesn't keep score; a forgiveness that pours out like water. Here. As much as you need. As often as you need. Yes, I still want to be your friend. I will keep inviting you until you can come.

We have opportunities in gift economies to practice giving and receiving, to give as often as we can, to receive when we need to. Giving and receiving objects, or advice, or time with each other is important in our daily lives and in the patterns our unconscious minds identify. But what's even more important is that, like exercising a muscle to help it grow stronger, practicing giving and receiving baby socks and fresh-baked muffins lets us grow in our ability to generously forgive each other and to graciously be forgiven.

So many of us have a worry in the back our minds: is this the thing that's over the line? Is that small transgression actually unforgivable? Have I ended this friendship I treasure by saying the wrong thing?

And from the other side: am I being a pushover? Am I too forgiving? Will I feel stupid or embarrassed because I was too generous?

I was just at General Assembly last weekend, the annual meeting of Unitarian Universalists from all over the US, and I heard the Rev. Daniel Kantor from the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, Texas, speaking about this. He said that in his church when they talk about generosity, they talk about how frightening it can be. How generosity requires vulnerability and trust, which can be hard for us.

A while ago, I saw a friend of mine giving some counsel on Facebook. She's a single mom of a four-year-old, and she was writing to a single mom of an infant about the realities of single-parent life. "It doesn't get easier," my friend wrote. "But you do get stronger."

That's true too when we're talking about generosity, and vulnerability, and trust. It's why we practice on the easy stuff, the hand-me-down clothes for someone else's kid and the washing dishes after a potluck dinner. It's not that someday we'll magically be people who never doubt, who never feel foolish or afraid. Sometimes our friendships will feel desperately uneven. I know sometimes I wonder if I'm trying too hard. I think about just pulling back a bit and protecting myself. Other times I wonder if I'm taking too much and giving too little. I wish it could all be sweet, comfortable equality, but it's not. The balance shifts, and what we get is equity, not equality – and that requires some vulnerability, and some trust.

It doesn't get easier, but you do get stronger. You get better at staying there, at the point of vulnerability. You get better at waiting, to see if what you've offered up has made a difference days or weeks or years later. You get better at trusting that the other person in your friendship will speak up if something needs to change. You grow in your own sense of where your boundaries are, and how to give without violating them. You practice forgiving and being forgiven.

Because David Whyte is right. “All friendships of any length are based on a continued, mutual forgiveness.” And that forgiveness isn’t a weakness. It’s a strength. It’s a foundation that provides the robustness you need when there’s conflict in your relationships. A spiritual practice that lets you consider what you have to share and asks you to grow, yet again, in your abilities to give and receive, to forgive and be forgiven.

And that, right there, is the biggest gift of all.

So give, whatever you have to give, when you see a chance to give it. Be generous and enjoy the glow. And receive with gratitude, whether it’s tomatoes from your neighbor’s garden, or the knowledge that the UUFC newsletter comes out every month without fail, or a shoulder to cry on when life just feels too hard, or a friend who says, easily, “I forgive you.” Don’t keep score. Just rest in the web of relationships and patterns that tell your unconscious mind that the world is a good place, and you are safe here, and you are not alone.