

Opening Words

My Symphony by William Ellery Channing (the younger)

To live content with small means.

To seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion.

To be worthy not respectable, and wealthy not rich.

To study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly,

to listen to stars, birds, babes, and sages with open heart,

to bear all cheerfully, do all bravely,

await occasions, hurry never.

In a word, to let the spiritual,

unbidden and unconscious,

grow up through the common.

This is to be my symphony.

Meditation

“This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown, or to any man or number of men — go freely with powerful uneducated persons, and with the young, and with the mothers of families — re-examine all you have been told in school or church or in any book, and dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem, and

have the richest fluency, not only in its words, but in the silent lines of its lips and face, and between the lashes of your eyes, and in every motion and joint of your body.” — *Walt Whitman, from the preface to Leaves of Grass*

Homily

Well, here we are again. That time of year when the days grow short and colder here in the northern hemisphere. I hope that all of us will gather in some way with family or friends to feast together and exchange meaningful gifts, perhaps for Christmas, or Kwanzaa, or Hannukah, or Eid, or just because that’s what we do. The day and time may vary, but the impulse to gather and share with those close to us seems to be ancient and universal, no matter which holy days we may be observing.

And here in an America, at least, it’s all overlaid with that much newer holiday, the one that John Michael Greer¹ calls Glurgemas – the seasonal consumer frenzy of shopping and buying gifts and goodies – with its own semi-religious iconography of Santa and Frosty and Rudolph and snowflakes and jingle bells, and the inescapable holiday Muzak, nostalgic and sentimental, that pervades almost every store you walk into.

It's easy to decry this consumerism, but 70% of our economy is driven by consumption. Livelihoods depend on it. Food and rent depend on it. Many stores and shops make as much as half their sales in a few short weeks, and the effects

ripple out across many lives. Some of these are good, some bad. But enough ink has been spilled on that subject, and I doubt I can add much original to it.

And this time of year can be fraught with family dynamics, with expectation and disappointment, and old wounds made fresh. It isn't an easy time for some of us, and they just hunker down and wait for it to pass.

Despite all that, the holiday season is still a time for making music, for parties and breaking bread, for getting in touch with old friends, for renewing the bonds of our relationships, and of participating in something larger than ourselves, something that brings us together as a society.

Gift exchange is one of the key ways in which we go about those things, and we are seeing a small but definite turn away from consumerism, and towards our social obligations to give, to receive, and, most importantly, to reciprocate.

There are some pretty ancient practices around this, ones that are deeply embedded in all faith traditions and cultures, and they aren't just for the holiday season, but as part of our daily lives, as a friend of mine observes: *We gift each other with meals prepared, with gardens tended, with the chores that keep a household running, with kindness, patience, care, attention...a constant giving-and-receiving that starts at home and extends into the world through friendship, community, and activism.*

One of those ancient obligations is that those who have must give to those who don't. This generosity is not just a necessary social good, but a spiritual practice.

In Buddhism, this is called *dana*, and generosity towards all sentient beings – not just humans – is one of the noble qualities of character we should aspire to. As the Tibetan monk Losang Drakpa wrote back in the 14th century:

Total willingness to give is the wish-granting gem for fulfilling the hopes of wandering beings.

It is the sharpest weapon to sever the knot of stinginess.

It leads to bodhisattva conduct that enhances self-confidence and courage, and is the basis for universal proclamation of your fame and repute.

*Realizing this, the wise rely, in a healthy manner, on the outstanding path
Of (being ever-willing) to offer completely their bodies, possessions, and positive potentials.*

The ever-vigilant lama has practiced like that.

If you too would seek liberation,

Please cultivate yourself in the same way.

Christians are admonished to give to the poor as an expression of God's love, and are considered virtuous only if not done for others to admire. In Matthew 6:1 we are told *"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' in front of others, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."*

In Judaism, *tzedakah*, a Hebrew term literally meaning righteousness but commonly used to signify "charity", refers to the religious obligation to do what is right and just, and is seen as one of the greatest deeds that a person can do.

In the *Mishneh Torah*, the great 12th century Jewish scholar Maimonides lists eight "laws about giving to poor people" – which I list in order from most to least righteous, with the most righteous form being allowing an individual to become self-sustaining and capable of giving to others in their turn. They are:

Enabling the recipient to become self-reliant.

Giving when neither party knows the other's identity.

Giving when you know the recipient's identity, but the recipient doesn't know your identity.

Giving when you do not know the recipient's identity, but the recipient knows your identity.

Giving before being asked.

Giving after being asked.

Giving less than you should, but giving it cheerfully.

Giving begrudgingly.

Islam has codified the practice of such giving in a very precise manner. *Zakat* is the third of the five pillars of Islam. The literal meaning of the word *zakat* is "to purify", "to develop" and "cause to grow".

Zakat is the amount of money that every adult, mentally stable, free, and financially able Muslim, male or female, is obliged to pay to support specific categories of people, and is considered an act of worship.

One's wealth is purified by setting aside a proportion for those in need. This cutting back, like the pruning of plants, balances and encourages new growth. Once believers amass a certain amount of wealth, they are obliged to give 2.5% of their savings and business revenue and 5–10% of their harvest to the disadvantaged. This includes the destitute, the working poor, those who are unable to pay off their own debts, stranded travelers and others who need assistance, with the general principle of *zakat* always being that the rich should pay it to the poor.

One of the most important principles of Islam is that all things belong to God and, therefore, wealth is held by human beings in trust, and must not be misused.

This principle – in one form or another – is prevalent throughout the religious and spiritual traditions of the world, and it goes something like this:

Every aspect of our existence is a gift from Spirit, or God/Allah/Jehovah, or the Ground of Being, or the Great Mystery, or whatever you want to call it. We are not entitled to any of it. Our lives, our breath, our sight, our bodies, our reason. Our food, our shelter, our parents, our children, our lovers and partners. Our technology, all our stuff, the land, the water, the air.... all of these and more, every bit.... these are all gifts for us to steward.

This is in direct opposition to consumer capitalism which tells us that we – or someone or something – can possess all these things. Perhaps the reverse is true, and we are possessed by them. Some people certainly are.

But these are all gifts which need to be received graciously, with gratitude and humility, and without thinking we somehow own them. This is a spiritual practice, harder even than generosity.

These gifts are not ours. We are not entitled to them.

They pass through us, and we through them. Because, as Lewis Hydeⁱⁱ has written about so beautifully - the gift must always move. We must always be returning these gifts in one fashion or another, or the world breaks.

Think of a whirlpool, or a tornado. They have form only because of what is flowing through them. So it is with the world, and our lives.

A gift that is not consumed or passed on becomes, in Lewis Hyde's words, "a commodity." A commodity is something whose exchange is simply transactional, makes no connection, leaves no connection. This is why commodities are associated with both freedom and alienation.

We cannot hoard these gifts. When we do, the connections made by these gifts are broken. When the gifts of life and love cease to move, to flow, bad things happen.

Among other things, we get inequality, as great piles of these gifts are turned into profit and stop flowing, and accumulate in the hands of the few. The circle of life gets broken, and the world gets eaten up, which is where we find ourselves.

For this is the paradox of the gift. When the gift is used, it is not used up. What is given away feeds again and again, while what is held onto feeds only once and leaves us hungry for more.

Every such gift must be returned, to the world and to the great circle of life. And as they pass through our lives and our hands and our hearts, we must bless them and add to them, and pass them on, so that the world may continue. And the people may live.

And that, quite simply, is what we are here to do. Bless our gifts and pass them on.

May it be so!

Closing Words

[At The End Of The Year](#) — John O'Donohue (To Bless The Space Between Us)

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Michael_Greer

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis_Hyde