

Gift giving and the goddess

A philosophy for social change

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The society in which we are living, let's call it 'capitalist patriarchy' for lack of a better term, creates a perspective, a pair of eyeglasses given to us in childhood, through which we learn to look at and interpret the world. These glasses create a selective vision, foregrounding some kinds of things and backgrounding others. Some kinds of things become invisible altogether. It is the privilege and the responsibility of all those who believe in the Goddess(es), in magic, and in the immanence of a better world, to take those glasses off and re focus. There is another point of view that we already engage in even without knowing it because we are trained to discount it or to interpret its messages as something else. That is the point of view of the gift paradigm.

In the early sixties I married an Italian philosophy professor and moved to Italy from Texas. Because he had studied the philosophy of language at Oxford my husband was asked to collaborate with a group of Italian professors who were starting a journal based on applying Marx's analysis of the commodity and money to language. I went with him to the meetings. I was in my early twenties at the time and was completely bowled over by the ideas the group was discussing. I had one of those moments of enlightenment in which it seems you can understand everything. I also thought: If this means so much to me, a fairly normal girl from Texas, other people would probably have a similar reaction. Well, the years passed. The journal did not happen after all though my husband did write books dealing with the subject during the several years we were married. His approach was to look at language as exchange. Somehow that did not totally convince me. It did not accord with my original vision. Besides I was deep in mothering our three daughters and I felt that exchange was a very minimal part of that experience. In fact exchange is giving-in-order-to-receive. You have to satisfy little childrens' needs unilaterally. They cannot exchange with you. As they get older you can of course engage in manipulation but that usually ends up hurting both the children and yourself. I knew that language was older than exchange, certainly older than exchange for money. Children also learned language before they learned exchange.

I had read some anthropologists like Malinowsky and Mauss who wrote about symbolic gift exchanges and competitive potlatch. I began to develop a theory about language, exchange, and money. It appeared to me that communication was about satisfying communicative needs, needs to relate to each other as human beings regarding our experience of the world. I did an analysis of money as an 'incarnated word' which satisfies the communicative

need everyone has in capitalism to relate to each other, bridging the gap caused by mutually exclusive private property. I joined the feminist movement in Italy and in the international consciousness raising group I was part of, which was made up mostly of women connected to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N. (which happened to be located near my house), we talked a lot about women's free labor in the home. I began to see that women's labor is gift labor and that it is the basis of co-muni-cation ('muni' means 'gifts' in Latin), the giving of free gifts together, which forms the co-muni-ty. In fact by nurturing our children we form both the bodies and the minds of the people who make up the community. This material non-sign communication involving giving and receiving without a pay back, is what makes us human generation after generation.

Giving has a transitive logic of its own. If A gives to B and B gives to C then A gives to C. Besides, when you satisfy someone's need you give value to them, since the implication is that if they were not important to you, you would not be satisfying the need. The giver has to focus on the need of the other, so the transaction is other-oriented. Her satisfaction lies in the fulfillment and well being of the other person. The receiver must actively use what is given to her or the gift is wasted. Her position is creative, not passive, as has sometimes been imagined. She can later take turns, becoming a giver too, giving something to someone else, but she does not have to give back to the original giver an equivalent of what she has been given. The motivation of the giving is the satisfaction of the need not the 'pay back'. Needs evolve and change. After basic needs are filled new more complex needs develop. Children who first live on milk later need other kinds of food; they learn to walk and need their mothers to allow them to be independent, and mothers satisfy that need also. Giftgiving and receiving create bonds between giver and receiver. The receiver knows someone else is 'out there' because someone has satisfied her need. The giver knows the receiver is 'out there' because she has seen the need, fashioned or procured something to satisfy it, and knows that she has influenced the well being of the other person. The bonds are formed without an expectation of reciprocity. It is not the incursion of a debt that forms the bond, rather the direct satisfaction of the others' need. This bond-making capacity which is at the basis of co-muni-ty has often been seen as instinctual. As women have recently insisted however, nurturing requires a great deal of conscious effort on the part of the care giver.

Opposed to gift giving is the Way of exchange, where the needs of the other are satisfied only in order to procure the satisfaction of one's own needs. Exchange involves an ego oriented logic and requires calculation, quantification and measurement to ascertain that what is received is equal to what is given. Exchange is adversarial and competitive because each person is trying to get as much as possible from the transaction. Our capitalist economy is based on exchange. The logic of exchange encroachingly influences all our relationships where gift giving used to be. Money is used to define the value of people, economists talk of a 'marriage market', the 'free market of ideas',

'human capital'. Fast food restaurants take over nurturing and advertising 'educates' our needs - while we pay for this 'education' as part of the price of the product. Needs exist for the market only where they are addressed through 'effective demand', the demand of those people who have the money to pay for the products. Other needs simply do not 'exist'.

The exchange economy requires scarcity in order to function appropriately. If gift giving were the mode of distribution exchange would become unnecessary. People would not exchange if their needs were already being satisfied by giftgiving. We can see the creation of scarcity for example, when overly abundant products, say peaches, are plowed under in an attempt to keep the price of the remaining peaches high. Abundance also makes hierarchy lose its leverage. No one would have to obey or nurture and reward the 'one at the top' if she could get her needs met elsewhere. Scarcity is being artificially created through arms spending (\$18 billion is spent every week on armaments worldwide while that would feed all the hungry on earth for a year) and other non nurturing and wasteful expenditures in order to create and maintain an environment in which exchange and hierarchy appear to be necessary for survival. There is also a kind of 'scarcity of meaning'; getting to the top appears to be the way to achieve meaning in our lives. Not succeeding in this pursuit to be dominant seems to make our lives meaningless.

I think that if we are to understand what is going on, the basic distinction that must be made is the distinction between giftgiving on the one hand and exchange on the other. The perspective of exchange is so powerful and pervasive that it obscures and cancels gift giving. We do not even use words that recognize the giftgiving way. For example archaeologists talk about 'food sharing' practices as important for the beginnings of pre history, and a recent book (1) mentions 'grooming' as a possible basis for the development of language. Food sharing can be seen as gift giving and grooming is a service all mothers perform. By not recognizing giftgiving as an important independent human way of behaving with its own logic, the continuity between mothering and other types of activity are lost. Anthropologists who study giftgiving in so called 'primitive' cultures talk about 'gift exchange', Their concentration on debt and forced reciprocity as the basis of human bonds denies the bond making capacity of direct giving and receiving.

Over the years I developed a theory of language as gift giving in contrast to my ex husband's theory of language as exchange. While we give to one another and create community, there are many material things we cannot give, like mountains or the sun, and many immaterial things, like justice or partnership that cannot be transferred, or just handed over to another. Words are the socially invented commonly-held sound-gifts we can give to each other in the place of other material and immaterial gifts, creating our bonds as part of the group verbally when we cannot do so materially. We satisfy each other's communicative needs to be put into a common relation to the world. The specification of this relation at any moment constitutes the trans-

mission (giving and receiving) of information. We are related to each other in community as verbal givers and receivers regarding specific parts and aspects of the world (even in cases when, as happens in capitalist exchange, we are no longer giving to each other on a material basis). Syntax itself can be seen as a transposition of giving from the plane of interpersonal behavior to the plane of the relation among words. Subject, predicate and object can be seen as giver, gift or service, and receiver. A theory of language of this sort restores mothering or nurturing to its place as the main factor in our becoming human not only as a species but individually, life by life.

Abstract reasoning has been influenced by exchange. It is not a *sui generis* activity but only a complication of giftgiving and language, which has left aside or cancelled the other oriented content in order to contend with cause and effect, quantification, self reflecting consciousness and supposedly value-free (not value- giving) ‘activity’. By abstracting from giftgiving we prepare ourselves for exchange. We eliminate meaningful human relations and bonding based on giving, and separate reason from the emotions which respond to needs. Our emotional responses create the map that tells us where and what gifts to give. Basing reason as we do on the equations and categories of exchange while discrediting emotions, we find our lives are no longer ‘meaningful’. That is because meaning - in life as in language - is formed by gift giving communication. We also forget that the truth is other oriented, that it satisfies the other’s need to know, while lying is constructed according to the model of exchange, satisfying only the speakers’ own need. Our lack of honesty is also a lack of altruism and gift giving is defeated once more.

Many aspects of our lives are informed by the paradigm of exchange without our realizing it. For example, justice is constructed upon the exchange model. We quantify wrong doing and impose a payment. The feeling of guilt is a kind of personal readiness to pay. We need kindness instead, forgiveness and a concentration on the needs of all the parties involved. Profit, in Marx’s sense of surplus value, is an unpaid portion of the workers’ labor, which may be considered as a leveraged gift. The system of exchange depends upon this gift for its motivation and on the many free gifts that are given to it by women’s (and some men’s) nurturing work, the sometimes laborious activity of shopping, of child care and elder care, the ‘reproduction’ of the work force. Slavery of one kind or another throughout history has provided the forced unpaid ‘extra’ that was necessary for the growth of ‘just’ and equal exchange. Presently the cheap labor and natural resources of third world countries provide a flow of gifts to the market economies of the North.

By taking off the eyeglasses of exchange we can see Mother Earth not as the adversary or as raw material for our profit making activities but as the great gift giver. Each of the four elements has a different gift quality. Fire can be given to others without losing it, water nurtures life freely making up most

of our body mass, earth gives us ground, space, and innumerable gifts of plant and animals, while air flows from a high pressure to a low pressure area, from where there is more to where there is less. (That's the answer that is blowin' in the wind). Our hearts pump blood out to satisfy the needs of our cells and then the blood returns to be re oxygenated. Every ecological niche meets the needs of the animals and plants that are adapted to it. Light from stars leaps over endless space to become a gift when our eyes are there to receive it. Mother Earth herself has taken the light of the sun and used it to create life in innumerable interactive (intergiving) patterns. In fact giftgiving is Her Way, not exchange. So how did exchange happen? How did we get so far from the Way of the Mother?

I believe the answer goes something like this. By naming boys and girls with different gender terms we have alienated our boy children. We have taught them they have to be something different from their giftgiving mothers, even though it is difficult to construct an identity apart from the giftgiving by which our bodies and minds are formed. Cognitive psychologists have indicated that we construct our categories using prototypes (2). I believe that when a boy discovers he is not part of the category of his giftgiving mother he seizes upon the father as the prototype for the category 'human' and he uses that prototype for his own development of a non nurturing, non female, identity, which then appears to be the human identity. There is a one-to-many relation between a prototype and things related to it, so there is logically only one prototype per category. Boys are in the situation of having to compete with the father and with other males to be the one prototype for 'human', an almost impossible and contradictory task. The competition to get to the top and remain there becomes dominance and power-over. Hierarchies are constructed to provide many levels of categories so that at least some different people get to have the prototype position. In response to this misconceived, artificial agenda, females are seen to be those who cannot be prototypes for the human concept and who do not compete for dominance. In fact they continue to be socialized to be mothers and to follow a different, more human, giftgiving agenda. The fact that both men and women can participate in the work force and do child care shows that these are socially imposed roles and value systems. They are not biologically pre determined. In fact many people have both value systems operating internally, with all the conflict and confusion that 'engenders'.

Anthropologists talk about a cross cultural 'manhood script' and describe many more or less atrocious puberty rites which ensure the distance of the boy from the mother and the nurturing way. The stoicism and autonomy males are required to embrace encourage them to be impervious to their own and other's needs. Attention to needs is of course necessary for the giftgiving way to function. Competition and domination are part of the script and take place in opposition to giftgiving, cooperation, inclusiveness and the celebration of differences. One place which does not have this 'manhood script' is the island of Tahiti. The language of Tahiti does not contain gender terms. (3) To me this seems to bear out my idea that the script is basically

written by language itself, causing a problem of miscategorization. Some other hunter gatherer societies, such as the African !Kung live in harmony with nature. They recognize nature as nurturing them, giving them gifts in a ‘cosmic economy of sharing’.(4) There the mothering prototype is recognized or projected into nature, even if the language does have gender terms and misogyny.

If language is based on gift giving, and if it was language that made humanity evolve, we can say that it was, at least in part, giftgiving that made humanity evolve. We are actually giftgivers and receivers, like nature, but we have misinterpreted the gift of our biological differences and the corresponding gifts of our gender terms to mean that we have different basic life scripts. These scripts alienate the members of half of humanity from the giftgiving norm and make the other half subservient to them. One long term peaceful solution to the problem would be to eliminate gender terms as in Tahiti. Another is the restoration of the mothering prototype.

Because we are all children who had to have had mothers or caregivers who nurtured us we can understand nature as providing for us in a giftgiving way. We can develop an epistemology in which our response to our experience, knowledge, can be seen as a kind of gratitude. We have blinded ourselves to this aspect of our human nature by giving our gifts to the market, to the exchange paradigm and to the values of the ‘manhood script’. The exchange paradigm competes mercilessly with the gift paradigm. Many of the great atrocities of history from the slaughter of the witches to the genocide of the indigenous peoples have been motivated by the need of the exchange paradigm to eliminate the giftgiving or mothering model as the prototype for human life on earth. However at this point the exchange economy is destroying the planet and penalizing huge numbers of humans through poverty, disease, violence and war. We must become wise enough to shift paradigms towards the mothering way.

We are at a critical time. Like a psychotic, society ‘acts out’, representing its psychosis externally at another level in its institutions, in its hierarchies and its wars, in individual and collective acts of competitive violence to achieve the dominant position. As I write these words my country and yours are acting out their manhood script to destroy the male prototype of another society by dumping millions of tons of phallic bombs and missiles upon ‘his’ territory and ‘his’ people, to get rid of him. In the longer term, first world businesses maraud third world countries in the name of ‘free trade’. Scarcity is created where abundance should be causing starvation and disease for many while the few at the top accumulate the capital that allows them to leverage power over the many. In this scenario giftgiving appears unrealistic, an impossible dream. However, psychoses can be healed. The half of humanity which has not been given the manhood script can begin to validate the giftgiving values it already has and promote them both personally and politically. The half of humanity that does have that script can begin to question it instead of embracing it or acting it out.

We can all look at the problems of society as needs that are waiting to be satisfied. Solutions to our society's problems, to its psychotic displays, its cruel and murderous behavior patterns, are the greatest gifts that anyone can give. They are gifts to the children of the future, and to Mother Earth herself who does not want to see her precious creations destroyed. They also provide the healing gift of self respect as we act in accordance with a human race in harmony with the giftgiving universe. I believe that well thought out social and political activism is one way to begin to give these gifts. Another is the creation of alternative models. Another is communication at a 'meta' level about the sick society and the gift economy. At the same time we have to avoid the obstacles that have impeded the shifting of the paradigm until now. For example charity, while it involves giftgiving, is only functional on an individual basis and does not address the systemic status quo. We need to concentrate on changing the psychotic institutions not only on saving their individual victims. By changing the institutions and shifting the paradigm we can spare everyone. I believe that the popularity of both Princess Diana and Mother Teresa is due to our longing for a female giftgiving prototype. Both of these women were caught within patriarchal institutions however, and were not so much addressing changing the system itself as they were involved in practicing individual charity. I believe systemic change is the key because it is the system that is causing the problems. Concentrating on individual charity usually makes us forget the need for systemic change and does not challenge the status quo.

Another paradox involves the prototype position itself. If the social prototype is as I believe, a projection of an instrument of our concept forming process, concentrating on its dominance and singularity creates an exclusionary mentality as happens with monotheism. The singular dominant prototype of the giftgiver is a contradiction in terms. The giftgiver always includes the other. Moreover, as Patricia Mognahan says, goddess spirituality is never monotheistic. On the other hand Christianity can be seen as proposing a giftgiving male prototype (perhaps the idea of the Trinity attempts to get beyond the paradox by re introducing plurality into the prototype, uniting the many in the One). Monotheism and patriarchal hierarchies conceal the giftgiving that women have been doing daily throughout history. The validation of sacrifice makes us not see that the context of scarcity in which sacrifice is necessary, is created by the exchange system.

Those of us who honor the ancient ways and love Mother Earth, approaching her with wonder, can participate in the varieties of life beyond monotheism, loving the whole in her parts. When we create a society in which giftgiving has become the human norm, our spirituality will be liberated and we will recognize the goddess in each other and the earth. Though some of us may feel that we are already experiencing this phenomenon, we have to remember the dire situation society is in and try to turn our giftgiving towards the big picture. Protesting against patriarchy is a spiritual necessity. We must mother society, mother the future, mother our Mother the Earth

and our human mothers as well as our children. As we call upon the ancient goddesses of our own and other cultures we empower ourselves with their gifts and we are also respecting the need of the people of the past not to have lived in vain, to have a progeny that survives on this magical planet, which must not be destroyed. When we look at our planet from space we see that here we are living in comparative Eden. The sun shines on other planets and on the moon yet they are desolate. The earth has created all this abundance of life, using the energy of the sun. She is the creative receiver-and-giver. We must honor her processes. When we have restored the giftgiving way we will all be able to communicate with the spirits of nature who have no gender script. Presently our exchange system must be toxic to them so they keep away from us. Our psychic abilities cannot develop because the contents of our minds have been made manipulative by our economics. Perhaps if we create a gift based society we will be able to form a community with the spirits of the dead as well, a practical heaven on earth.

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