

“Receiving as Giving”

Sermon by Julie Parker Amery

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“It is better to give than to receive.” How many of us have had that adage running through our bones and blood since childhood? It is better to give than to receive. From a tender age, we are taught this. We who identify as female in particular are taught to be giving, to see what others need, and to offer what we can. Even to put aside our own needs in order to give others what they need. This is the right way to be a human, we’re told.

Now, let me clear: I am not here to disavow the act of giving. Giving is great. But what I do want to do this morning is lift up the act of receiving. Because giving and receiving are not opposites; they go hand in hand. But receiving is often seen as the shameful reverse of giving. The one who gives is saintly, generous, prosperous, *better*. The one who receives is weak, impoverished, *less than*. We would rather be the giver than the receiver perhaps because of what they have come to represent. “It is better to give than to receive” can be taken to mean, “It is better to be the stronger, saintlier person than the struggling, needy one.” The act of giving—in the context of a consumerist, capitalist culture—puts one in a position of power, while being on the receiving end of a transaction makes one vulnerable.

In his book *Sacred Economics*, philosopher, teacher, and author Charles Eisenstein invites us to turn this notion on its head and to consider the act of receiving itself as an act of giving. Receiving *is* giving. By graciously receiving a gift, he suggests, we open ourselves up to being in relationship. To reject a gift is to shut it down.

Let me share a simple, everyday example that illustrates this. I have a friend with whom I go out to breakfast every so often. The first time we went out, she reached for the bill and insisted on paying. I insisted on giving her cash for my share. We butted heads for a bit, and I finally gave in. Exasperated, I said, “okay, okay” and allowed her to pay. You know, it was one breakfast. I could live with that. But when this same scene played out a second time, after we got breakfast again, I felt quite mortified. Do I give the impression of not being able to pay? Does she pity me? What game is she playing at? Is she trying to gain

power over me? I left the diner feeling somewhat small because I had yet again allowed myself to be at the receiving end of what was now feeling like charity.

The third time, and light dawns on Marblehead. This time I stated up front that I would pay the bill. And—she did not protest. Whereas she had resisted my former attempts to pay my share, she was entirely willing to let me buy her meal.

What she seemed to understand, subconsciously or consciously, was that one of us receiving the gift of breakfast from the other was a way for us to open ourselves to the prospect of more such outings. Were we to each pay for our own, we were acknowledging the very real possibility that this could be a one-time occasion. I was so consumed by the worry of being seen as a moocher that I couldn’t understand that.

But even then, it took some time for me to get comfortable with the fact that sometimes we will lose track of “whose turn” it is to pay. Because the scorekeeping was another type of cutting off. When we were even, when we had both paid for the same number of breakfasts, then our get-togethers could come to a natural end. We could be done. Neither of us owed the other anything.

But approaching it more organically—sometimes I give, sometimes I receive—has opened me up even more to the gifts of relationship. I see the meals she buys not as borrowed against a future one that I’ll buy, but as it is—a gift. Someday, I’ll gratefully give something to her. Maybe it will be breakfast. Maybe it will be something else.

Imagine, though, if she refused what I offered. Or imagine if she had refused to let me buy her breakfast that first time I offered and continued to insist that she pay. Then our relationship would indeed be out of balance. She would be asserting power over me. But by giving me the gift of receiving my offering graciously, she was in effect nurturing our relationship as one of two people relying on each other, giving, receiving, being open to what the other had to offer. It might be breakfast. It might be a listening ear, or a lift to an appointment, or a loaf of freshly baked bread.

It can be difficult to receive something graciously.

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Receiving a meal is one example. Receiving help is another. In a sermon she preached in November, Reverend Rebecca spoke about how difficult it is for us New Englanders in particular to ask for help. It makes us feel more vulnerable, perhaps, than we would like. It's difficult for some of us to receive compliments or praise. We deflect it. "You play the piano beautifully." "Well, I used to play better than I do now." Rather than receiving expressions of gratitude, we shrug them off. "Thank you for shoveling my walk." "Eh, it was nothing. It took just five minutes." In a sense, by responding rather than receiving, we shut the other person down. We tell them, in so many words, "Your praise, your gratitude, your sentiments, don't matter to me." We offer, instead, what we believe is humility. "I'm not as great as all that."

But as Charles Eisenstein writes, "Much of what goes by the name of modesty or humility is actually a refusal of ties, a distancing from others, a refusal to receive. We are as afraid to receive as we are to give; indeed, we are incapable of doing one without the other. We may imagine ourselves as selfless and virtuous for being more willing to give than to receive, but this state is just as miserly as its reverse, for without receiving, the wellspring of our own gifts dries up."

Giving and receiving go hand in hand. I experienced this truth recently in the context of the Conscious Dying Coaching program in which I'm currently enrolled. In a recent conversation, my coaching partner mentioned that she would like to put together a resource for her loved ones that would list the ways that she wishes to be cared for in her final days. She shared that she was doing it not only for herself, but as a way to help her loved ones know how to assist her. She explained that she has felt awkward and helpless in such a situation, when she has been with someone who is ill or dying and she hasn't known what to do. By leaving instruction for her loved ones, she is opening herself to receive their care, but she is also giving them the gift of explicit instructions for what to do, how to be with her, in what might be an uncomfortable situation. She is giving. She is receiving.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, botanist, professor of plant ecology, member of the Citizen Potawatomi

Nation, and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, writes eloquently about the nature of giving and receiving. When receiving a gift, she writes, "gratitude is the first intuitive response... (and) Gratitude creates a sense of abundance, the knowing that you have what you need. In that climate of sufficiency, our hunger for more abates and we take only what we need, in respect for the generosity of the giver." Our second response, she writes, is reciprocity. We receive a gift from someone, and we want to either return it, or pay it forward. Receiving, gratitude, giving, receiving, gratitude, giving... it becomes an unending circle, each feeding into the other.

"Gratitude and reciprocity..." she writes, "have the remarkable property of multiplying with every exchange, their energy concentrating as they pass from hand to hand, a truly renewable resource." Being a botanist, she illustrates this with an example from the natural world: "I accept the gift (of berries) from the bush and then spread that gift with a dish of berries to my neighbor, who makes a pie to share with his friend, who feels so wealthy in food and friendship that he volunteers at the food pantry. You know how it goes."

Yes, you know how it goes. A sense of gratitude leads to generosity. But how can we be grateful if we continually turn ourselves away from receiving?

We turn ourselves away from receiving the gifts of others. The help of others. The compliments of others. The gratitude of others. In our capitalist, materialistic society, we have turned ourselves away from receiving even the gifts of the Earth. We've turned these gifts into commodities. Look at what's happened with water. Water! Currently, the bottled water industry in the United States is worth over 86 billion dollars. When did we stop seeing water as a gift from the Earth and begin to see it as something to purchase from a store? The moment we did was the moment our connection to the Earth became severed. We were no longer receiving a gift from the Earth but were purchasing a commodity with cold hard cash. So, we feel no obligation to the Earth. We need not reciprocate in any way.

Both Charles Eisenstein and Robin Wall Kimmerer write about a gift economy, where gratitude and

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relationship, rather than money, are the currency of exchange. In a gift economy, the circle of receiving, gratitude, and giving is central. Status is bestowed upon not the one who has the most, but the one who gives the most. Robin Wall Kimmerer shares this story, a report from linguist Daniel Everett about a hunter-gatherer community in the Brazilian rain forest:

“A hunter had brought home a sizable kill, far too much to be eaten by his family. The researcher asked how he would store the excess. Smoking and drying technologies were well known; storing was possible. The hunter was puzzled by the question—store the meat? Why would he do that? Instead, he sent out an invitation to a feast, and soon the neighboring families were gathered around his fire, until every last morsel was consumed. This seemed like maladaptive behavior to the anthropologist, who asked again: given the uncertainty of meat in the forest, why didn’t he store the meat for himself, which is what the economic system of his home culture would predict.

‘Store my meat? I store my meat in the belly of my brother,’ replied the hunter.”

Without meat to spare, the hunter will need to be on the receiving end of a meat share in a future scenario. And he has likely been on the receiving end in the past. One imagines that this filled him with gratitude, which in turn led to his sharing. The receiving, gratitude, giving circle.

“Without receiving, the wellspring of our own gifts dries up.” Without being open to receiving, we lose touch with the reality of human kindness. We lose opportunities to feel deep gratitude. Not fed by gratitude, then, yes, our own capacities to give, to share our gifts, does indeed dry up.

It’s a beautiful thing to be giving. And it’s a beautiful thing to be open to receiving. May we go from this place appreciating the balance. Giving. Receiving. Connection is made on either end. And in between, there is gratitude.

Amen.

Sources:

Charles Eisenstein, *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition*. (Berkeley CA: North Atlantic Books, 2021).

Robin Wall Kimmerer, “The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance,” *Emergence Magazine*. December 2020.