

“Blessed to Give; Blessed to Receive”

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I have not ridden a bicycle for forty years but my 31 year old daughter, noting what a great city Madison is for riding bikes, committed to buying me a bicycle of my choice out of her first month's salary as a speech pathologist in the fall of 2007. A year later, now in Minnesota instead of Boston, she is beginning a second new job and assured me that the offer held. Call her, she said, from the bicycle shop and she would put it on her credit card.

On Monday of this week I got a new bicycle. When I called her with the price, about three hundred dollars less than she said she was willing to spend but way more than I had thought it would be, I said, “Are you sure you can do this?” and she said, “Mom. Let me do this for you.” When I turned to my husband with tears in my eyes, he said with a twinkle in his, “Now you're about even for paying her fine when she “borrowed the car” when she was 14.”

That's a whole other story. But it was never about getting even for anything. The transaction was in and of itself a perfect and unconditional exchange, the in breath and out breath.

I like many of you, grew up in a culture, where the dominant message was, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” This was reinforced by sayings such as, “There's no such thing as a free lunch”, “You need to earn your rewards”, “Pay your own way” , If you're really good, you will get a treat. “You only get what you deserve...” If you get something you want whether you deserve it or not, it is important to appear undeserving or at least to protest in a way that will make you appear humble.

In the pragmatic reality of my own life, I never questioned any of this, to the point that I had for many years the tendency to deflect the giving of others. I have received a great deal over the course of my life but had for many years a kind of secret bank of favors – knowing that I had extended myself enough through the giving of myself and the sharing of my resources that I could rest assured that I was indebted to no one. When what I received seemed gratuitous, I would deflect. Compliments: what a lovely dress. I learned to say , oh this old thing...Or congratulations on your winning the speech contest. To which I knew to say, oh, it's no big deal. The competition wasn't that strong.

I remember sharing compliments with my friends in high school and discussing the whole idea of ulterior motive – he's complementing you because he wants a favor or she's saying that so you'll let her borrow your new sweater.

I think of the times I was given gifts and the first words out of my mouth would be, Oh, but I don't have anything for you. The cosmic quid pro quo that produced pile of obligatory stuff, unwanted, unneeded and ultimately unvalued.

These and other experiences and messages have been and in many ways continue to be the order of the day. The conditional nature of both giving and receiving is such that wanting and

needing have taken on a generally negative cast – paired with words like selfish, demanding, undeserving, while giving has been alternately elevated to the ultimate virtue or the ultimate form of manipulation and control.

Take charitable giving, for example.

“We come to our mission engagements with the danger of hubris — that we have something to offer the rest of the world,” said Will Browne, former associate director of the PC(USA)’s Worldwide Ministries Division of the Presbyterian Church.

“We’ve been blessed by God by many riches and are by nature generous,” he said. “Because others do not have those gifts we create power imbalances which makes mutuality difficult.”

Frequently that imbalance takes the form of Americans failing to recognize what others have to offer, said the Rev. Tricia Lloyd-Sidle, regional liaison for the Caribbean.

“When the Cuba Partners (a mission network of congregations and presbyteries with relationships with the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Cuba) meet, we wrestle together with giving gifts and the appropriate ways to share our resources,” she said.

“What’s far more difficult is figuring out how to receive gifts from our Cuban partners, because we find it easier to give than to receive,” Lloyd-Sidle said. “We have to be vulnerable, empty ourselves of our assumptions, learn about other people and cultures. It’s usually easier to think about how to share what we have than to put ourselves in a position to receive what others have to share.”

I don’t think we need look so far as the Cubans and the Presbyterians to see this phenomenon in action. How often do we consider the idea that the GOAL of giving and receiving is mutuality and building the capacity for authentic interdependence. We may have been, according to the US constitution, created equal with rights but in fact we are each and all in any moment in possession of something that someone else needs or wants and in need of something someone else needs and wants. You, here know as much as anyone about how our capacities as well as our needs change throughout our lifetimes. Many of you know first hand about the cultural and experiential hardwiring that makes you feel that you have gone from being a generous or at least persistent giver and doer to being a reluctant and dependent receiver. Many of us have spent our lives providing and doing for others. Blessed with health and opportunities some of us have nurtured children who are more or less appreciative of our efforts on their behalf. Using the Cuban Presbyterian analogy

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This is a powerful statement in the face of our cultural conditioning. “It’s usually easier to think about how to share what we have than to put ourselves in a position to receive what others have to share.”

I witnessed the most dramatic examples of this when I worked as a behavioral consultant at a wellness clinic. The predominant clientele were middle aged women struggling with their weight. I did intake interviews. The stories were, of course all unique AND in some sense were exactly alike. Some had jobs outside their homes and some were fulltime homemakers. Nearly all were primarily responsible for the care and feeding of a husband and/or two to five children often between early teens and young adulthood. Most saw themselves as pretty good cooks and understood their role as providing three meals a day, laundry service chauffeuring and general home management as well as often having a full or part-time job. Then I would ask, so with all this taking care of everybody else, who takes care of you. I would keep a large box of Kleenex next to my chair because inevitably this question would give way to a flood of tears. “No one.” When I pressed them the two words I would most often hear about why they expected so little for themselves, the words I hear most often were guilty and selfish. And so what they did to nurture themselves, to take something in, to receive, was to eat.

As well as a need to give we all have a need to receive, take in, to be filled. Furthermore we need open a space in our lives for that to happen and in turn provide opportunities for others to express their own love and generosity. Betty, the custodian at the first church I served, came in one day, threw herself into a chair and said, “ I don’t understand it. I’m exhausted. I have my 25 year old son living with me. I cook three meals a day for him. I do his laundry and I let him use my car and I can’t get him to move out!”

We can teach kids how to say thank-you but how do they learn to be gracious receivers when the only experience their parents as the founts of all privilege. How do any of us learn to be gracious receivers when we experience it so seldom.

Thank-you for the lovely dinner. Oh, it was nothing.

What a lovely dress. Oh, this old thing.

What a wonderful job you did. Well, it could have been better.

For years I attended the Port Cities luncheon where the local Woman of the year was honored. This was a lovely affair where nominees from local volunteer agencies would be honored and one would be chosen as Woman of the Year. The food was always good and the table conversation lively and I loved being in the presence of so much wonderful woman energy. But

the part I disliked most was the presentation itself. The honoree would be introduced. She would be someone who had worked tirelessly for this cause or that, raised enough money single handedly to save a small village, put seven children through medical school on a secretaries salary by scrubbing floors in a packing plant and when she would step to the microphone, the first words out of her mouth would inevitably be some variation on the phrase "I am so honored but I don't really deserve this. All those other nominees did far more than I did." Then would often follow a list of self effacing disclaimers that left me wondering why we had been so short sighted as to think this person should be the choice after all.

What I longed for was just one person to step up and say, "Thank-you. I have done the best I could with the life I was given and I am touched and filled by your appreciation. I have gotten a lot of satisfaction along the way and sometimes I have struggled to keep on giving back which I have so richly received. The nurturing and support of many of you has helped to fuel my actions. Thank-you for that and thank-you for this."

For me, anyway, this is a model of gracious receiving. I myself was called up short during the break in my first seminary class. The instructor, Claire Fisher, sought me out at the coffee pot and told me how much she had appreciated my contribution to the class discussion. I was flattered and pleased and immediately launched into a disclaimer about my own contribution and she stopped me cold. She looked at me and said, "Say, 'Thank-you, Claire'."

In that moment I received two gifts: first the gift of her feedback and second a reminder about gracious receiving.

It is part of the human condition that any and all of us are from time to time have needs and desires that are filled by others. It is not so hard to receive what we believe we have earned or what we have paid for. What is sometimes hard to receive is what we receive undeserved or unearned, that which is simply and graciously offered by fate or by circumstance or by someone else simply fulfilling their own need to give. As in the case of the Cubans and the Presbyterians

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My mother died twenty years ago this July. She was as giving and loving an individual as has ever walked this earth. Her life was rich and full as a result. Unfortunately she was not a gracious receiver in the sense that she believed that when she could no longer give what she thought she should, she was unworthy to receive. We who loved her and would have given anything to help and support her found ourselves protected from her needs and desires. She did not want to worry us. She did not want to bother us. She did not want us to know that she was sad or scared or overwhelmed with caring for my father. When she did share with us she would temper her needs with apologies about being a burden. We her children who had received so much were denied this opportunity to be received.

I freely acknowledge that this flow of giving and receiving from parents to children at the start of children's lives that reverses itself at the end of parent's lives is complicated and one of the great conundrums of human existence. It is a journey not for the faint of heart. But I think that if we can dismantle some of the cultural messages that make us feel self-righteous and conditional about our giving and guilty and unworthy in our receiving we can come to understand that this is the breath of the universe. "From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share and from this we live."

Fortunately this is not sermon where I have to wrap this up neatly at this point but rather the beginning of a conversation.