

o3b The Gift Relationship (ii)

When I was researching for the topic of the gift relationship, I came across a fascinating article called “Industrial-Strength Gifts” by Louis Kim, an American technology executive. He is also involved in the Catholic ‘Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology’, the Yale Centre for Faith and Culture, and the Institute for Ecological Civilisation.

Kim bases much of his article on a book by Lewis Hyde entitled “The Gift”, from which Kim examines what qualities are contained in a gift. Here are three of those qualities:

- Something of a gift comes back to the giver.
- A gift increases in value as it is transferred.
- Gifts enliven communities beyond just an individual giver and receiver.

Here are five stories that illustrate those qualities.

(i) Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson tell the story of a Christian hermit called Macarius in their book ‘Altered Traits’.

Macarius lived in the Egyptian desert in the early fourth century AD.

One day someone brought Macarius a gift of a bunch of grapes. He very much wanted to eat the grapes but he gave them to another hermit living nearby who was weak and was in greater need.

And that hermit, though grateful for Macarius’s kindness, thought of yet another among them who would benefit from eating the grapes, and passed them on to that monk. The grapes were passed through the entire hermit community until the grapes came around again to Macarius.

(ii) Louis Kim himself tells this next story.

“I found Mrs. Zimmermann by entering two *n*’s in Google, not one. For thirty-eight years, I had wanted to thank my former middle-school teacher for an affirming memory. When I was in the eighth grade at St. Pius X, I had stepped over a desk instead of going around it. Mrs. Z (as we called her) saw me and yelled, “Mr. Kim! I know your parents, and I expect better from you!”

Perhaps surprisingly, instead of feeling chastened, I felt visible, seen for some potential I didn’t fully recognize at the time. Through the following decades, during my low moments, that one loud admonition served as the floor below which I could not sink.

Mrs. Z remembered me during our first phone call, but not the desk incident. She remembered something else. When I had left for college, my mother, who rarely left her little store, drove to school, sought out Mrs. Z, and handed her a silk scarf,

saying, “Thank you, Louis is going to Brown (University).” I had either forgotten or never heard the story.

Months after I called her up, I met Mrs. Z in person. She was in her eighties, white-haired and now much shorter than I. She handed me an envelope, and inside was the scarf my mother had given her with a note: “Please give this to your sister.”

Such is the priceless and circular potency of gifts.”

(iii) The third story is told by Taitetsu Unno, who was a leading Pure Land Buddhist practitioner in the United States.

It’s a story about three grapefruits.

In 1968 Unno and his family were visiting Japan. They received a gift of three grapefruits, at the time a very rare and very expensive fruit in Japan.

Since Unno and his family were just about to return to California where grapefruits were abundant and cheap, they decided to give away the three grapefruits to the wife’s teacher at a flower-arranging class.

A few days later the teacher sent them a letter. Taitetsu Unno describes its contents:

“She wrote that she shared the first grapefruit with her grandchildren, who were thrilled w

Unno reflected that according to Hua-yen Buddhism (a Chinese Buddhist tradition based

“No one can measure the effects of a single act of giving, for its repercussions are beyond our limited imagination”.

(iv) The fourth story is told by Alva Noe, professor of philosophy at the University of California.

Noe tells how one time, when he arrived at a road toll, ready to pay the necessary cash, his cash was refused, with the words “Those people in front of you, they paid for you”. Noe didn’t know the people in front of him. He was puzzled.

He writes:

“Then it hit me. A stranger had paid my toll for me. And what’s more he or she had done it for no good reason. Or, rather, she or he did it for no other reason than to, as the saying goes, ‘to pay it forward’.

I couldn’t wipe the grin off my face. Once the reality set in – that I’d been the target of a random act of kindness – I could not stop smiling. I felt so happy. So grateful. I felt blessed. I felt as if I were part of a community. A secret community of kind people.”

(v) The fifth story comes via Jonathon Haidt, an American social psychologist.

Haidt writes about one of his research topics, ‘elevation’; which he defines as a warm, uplifting feeling that people experience when they see unexpected acts of human goodness, kindness, courage, or compassion.

“It makes a person want to help others and to become a better person himself or herself.”

As part of research into elevation people were asked to write about a specific time when they saw a manifestation of humanity’s ‘higher’ or ‘better’ nature. Here’s one of the stories:

“Myself and three guys from my church were going home from volunteering our services at the Salvation Army that morning. It had been snowing since the night before, and the snow was a thick blanket on the ground. As we were driving through a neighbourhood near where I lived, I saw an elderly woman with a shovel in her driveway. I did not think much of it when one of the guys in the back asked the driver to let him off here. The driver had not been paying much attention so he ended up circling back around towards the lady’s home. I had assumed that this guy just wanted to save the driver some effort and walk the short distance to his home (although I was clueless as to where he lived). But when I saw him jump out of the back seat and approach the lady, my mouth dropped in shock as I realized that he was offering to shovel her

