**My Love Language Is Gifts**

*To name the world as gift is to feel one’s membership in the web of reciprocity. It makes you happy—and it makes you accountable.” Robin Wall Kimmerer, The Serviceberry*

*Jesus said to the host who had invited him, “When you hold a lunch or dinner . . . invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; and blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you.” —Luke 14:12-14*

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When I turned 40, Liz and I had only been together a couple of years. Long enough for her to know my love languages, but short enough that she still wanted to impress me. So, for that monumental celebration of another turn around the sun, she commenced to give me forty gifts. That’s a lot of presents. At about 21, she stopped wrapping them, except for a tag that would say “this counts as four presents because it’s a BIG ONE….” I can’t remember any of those forty presents, except a bag of chocolate covered raisins and caramel bites called Moose Poop which she picked up in Wyoming over the summer. What I do remember is how much fun I had anticipating her presents, and the drive and care she put into my 40th birthday. It wasn’t about the gifts. It was about the giving, about the receiving.

My love language is gifts.

Love languages refer to the different ways we humans prefer to give and receive love. Conceived by Dr. Gary Chapman, the framework suggests that people express and appreciate affection in five distinct ways. If you know what your partner or friend or child’s love language is, it can help in communication and foster stronger relationships. While I am skeptical that there are only five languages (words of affirmation, acts of service, giving/receiving gifts, quality time, and physical touch) Chapman’s premise has seemed to stick over a couple of decades.

It’s true, my love language is gifts. It’s not about being materialistic (although that is a danger, at least for me, because you know, shoes). It’s more about the joy in given a token that you know will surprise and delight another. I don’t know how to explain it, but a gift of a cookie from the bakery is as thrilling to me as a 24K gold bracelet. (I think, anyway. I have never received a 24 K gold bracelet, which actually might be a source of stress for me because I have a tendency to lose things.) For me, the adage “it’s the thought that counts” couldn’t be more true. I think I got this from my mom, because you could wrap up a pencil you picked up at the auto parts store and she would delight in it.

My love language is gifts.

Imagine my great delight in reading Robin Wall Kimmerer’s book, The Serviceberry, which explores the concept of “gift economy” and reciprocity in both the natural and human world. Using the serviceberry (Juneberry) as model and metaphor, Kimmerer explores how a “gift economy” of abundance and interconnectedness leads to flourishing, rather than economies that focus on scarcity and competition. The serviceberry’s sharing of it’s bounty is an example.

Most of the world’s current economic systems prioritize self-sufficiency and hoarding, leading to a sense of scarcity. It focuses on the individual, rather than community.

A gift economy is a system of exchange where goods and services are given without without the expectation of immediate or equivalent return, often with a focus on social relationships and mutual benefit.  
The primary motive is generosity and a desire to help, rather than a profit motive. While not immediate or equivalent, gifts often trigger a desire to reciprocate in the future, strengthening social bonds. 

In David Graeber’s book, Debt: The First 5,000 Years, there is a story about Danish Arctic explorer Peter Freuchen. After returning from an unsuccessful walrus hunt, Freuchen found one of the successful indigenous hunters dropping off several hundred pounds of meat. He thanked him profusely. The man objected indignantly:

"Up in our country we are human!" said the hunter. "And since we are human we help each other. We don't like to hear anybody say thanks for that. What I get today you may get tomorrow. Up here we say that by gifts one makes slaves and by whips one makes dogs.”

Graeber writes “*The refusal to calculate credits and debits can be found throughout the anthropological literature on egalitarian hunting societies. Rather than seeing himself as human because he could make economic calculations, the hunter insisted that being truly human meant refusing to make such calculations, refusing to measure or remember who had given what to whom, for the precise reason that doing so would inevitably create a world where we began "comparing power with power…and reducing each other to slaves or dogs through debt.*

*It's not that [the hunter] was unaware that humans have a propensity to calculate. If he wasn't aware of it, he could not have said what he did. Of course we have a propensity to calculate. We have all sorts of propensities. In any real-life situation, we have propensities that drive us in several different contradictory directions simultaneously. No one is more real than any other. The real question is which we take as the foundation of our humanity, and therefore, make the basis of our civilization.”*

The idea of gift economy is embedded in our Judeo-Christian story. The text from Leviticus suggests that the early Israelites, while forming their identity as different from surrounding cultures, were encouraged to live generously to all—especially to the most compromised—the widow, the poor, the traveler, the foreigner. Leviticus emphasizes holiness, social justice intended to foster a society that is reverent and equitable, reflecting a concern for the welfare of the community and a rejection of exploitation.

Leviticus was in the bones of Jesus as he sought to remind people “Who is My Neighbor”—-the one who looks after another person, especially when that person is weaker than themselves, is the neighbor. Think of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. It is a gift economy mindset, where a small offering, a boys’ lunch of dried fish and a bit of bread, can be multiplied through sharing and gratitude, reflecting the potential for abundance when people trust each other and cooperate. There is no room for quid pro quo.

God’s gift economy is the supreme love language.

I think now, more than ever, we need to consider what a gift economy looks like in communities of faith, when we are living in a time where scarcity and hoarding is the rule of Washington, where democracy and decency are clawed away almost every minute; where the very teachings of Jesus are disregarded in the name of Christian Nationalism.

It’s not practical, I know. It sounds impossible. And yet, I believe the love language of a gift economy is possible in our neighborhoods and in our lives. It’s necessary.

This week I read two historical novels about Happy Land. The Kingdom of the Happy Land was a community of formerly enslaved peopled who embarked on an experiment in communal living in Hendersonville County, near Lake Summit, on the borders of North and South Carolina. There is scant information in the historical record, but new research by Hendersonville’s own Suzanne Hale and Ronnie Pepper indicates they came from Cross Anchor in Spartanburg County, sometime in the 1870’s. This was a period of deadly racial violence in the South and the beginning of the Jim Crow era, suggesting that the settlers were motivated to set up a refuge apart from a society that endangered their lives and limited their opportunities.

This new promised land’s name was Happy Land~~and it wasn’t just a sweet idea, but an aspiration. The residents of the Kingdom of Happy Land longed to to create a community of peace, harmony and self-determination and mutual support.

I don’t know if the Happy Land was governed by a gift economy, but how could it not have if community and mutuality was at the heart of the experiment? One thing is clear in the records is that they lived by the belief in “One for All and All for One.” To me, that sounds like a gift economy that prioritizes wealth and well being at the expense of NO ONE.

Flourishing is mutual.

Kimmerer reminds us there are concrete ways in which to intentionally live into the love language of gift economy. The simple practices of gratitude, and expressing it clearly to those around you. Giving without expectation. Sharing. Being mindful of the origin and impact of what you purchase. Value relationships over objects. Leaning in and on one another.

This is counter-cultural to what we have learned. Personally, I know I have work to do, because you know, shoes. Or whatever. And yet, I want to seek the fullness of life in you, in the tree outside, in our gorgeous world. I want to share my table of abundance with joy and gratitude. I want to live lightly and fully.

I want you to know the breathtaking and simple awe of the love language of gift economy. Because— it is beautiful, and the at the heart of all of who we were created to be. Amen.   
  
  
**SOURCES**

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