

The Gift Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World. 25th Anniversary Edition
Lewis Hyde Second Vintage Books Edition, New York, November 2007
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One if not the chief reason for the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens was precisely that from the beginning to the end its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary and ordinary occurrence in every day life”

Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition*

I read *The Gift* shortly after the first edition came out 25 years ago. I had just taken time out of a busy leadership consulting practice to respond to the urge to return to the piano and later released a recording of original solo piano compositions. This choice to step out the path of my own daily routine to follow a different star provoked many questions about how we reconcile our gifts and talents with our education and professional career. Is it possible as Robert Frost wrote that our vocation and avocation might be one?

Like many who have read *The Gift*, the book seemed that it had been written specifically for me. As I read it for first of many times, I found a passage that helped to clarify this underlying conflict. Our skills are acquired and with them we enter into transactions with our world. The gift, on the other hand is bestowed, and with our gifts we transform our world.

The power of the gift according to Lewis Hyde is that;
“... It nourishes those parts of our spirit that are not entirely personal, parts that derive from nature, the group, the race or the gods (48)

With the gift the spirit of self and other is magnified and we join with the more than human world. This invites an engagement with the world that flows from a positive reciprocity with the other – the kind of reciprocity that comes to us as we learn to receive the gift with gratitude and labor freely in its service.

For many centuries the sharing of gifts has brought a sense of equilibrium and coherence to community. Conversation and language were themselves outward manifestations of the gratitude with which the gift was held. In place of gifts we have created commodities, objects of convenience, barter and sale that bring with them questions of ownership and control that detach us from the bonding and free movement that has always been the property of the gift.

In this context Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift* may be even more necessary now than when it was first published. The loss and alienation of community perhaps can be attributed to the loss of the gift. That is, that we don’t see ourselves or our environment outside the economic model that dominates our view of all things including public life.

As Lewis Hyde writes in his Afterword to the 25th Anniversary edition “ *On Being Good Ancestors*’;

“ The period of market triumphalism has, in sum, seen a successful move to commercialize a long list of things that once were thought to have no price and to enclose common holdings, both natural and cultural, that we used to assume no one was allowed to take private (377)

While Hyde also suggests that history may have brought these changes to us and that it may come back into balance as history continues to unfold, we can in, our own way, be custodians in how well in how we balance what is made with what is given in our own life and work. In the service of this quest, *The Gift* is a reminder that we need to see our world not only in the context of use but also of its intrinsic worth.

Recently in our community, a forum was held to consider what to do with a large log building that has been part of our heritage and was recently dismantled and stored until we found a new site. Many ideas were brought forward regarding its future use perhaps as an interpretive center as so on.... later in the evening another point of view was raised regarding whether we could simply accept this log building as a gift – to see it not for its usefulness but for its intrinsic beauty and aesthetic appeal. In this spirit could it be located not in a public park close to tourists but rather in the woods where it may serve as a sanctuary, a place of peace and tranquility away from the busyness of the everyday and where in its presence we could draw sustenance again from our storied past.

The gift itself represents the generous nature of the life behind life - the gift of existence that nature has been bestowed to us. The creative spark rests in the heart of everyone who hears its call and chooses to act on its behalf. While the gift has always thrived without a market, the market cannot flourish for long without the gift.

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