

It's Not What You Keep

Epiphany reflections on the true nature of gifts | KARL CLIFTON-SODERSTROM

Several years ago, shortly after Christmas, I had the unique blessing of driving two elderly members of North Park Covenant Church from Chicago to their winter retreat in Sedona, Arizona, along Route 66. My traveling companions were Paul (PJ) and Gladys Larson, two former literature professors from North Park University, long since retired.

PJ and Gladys were the kind of people whose curiosity about the world set the gold standard for all of us who seek to understand the wonders of nature, culture, and how God keeps trying to teach an often hard-headed humanity. On the road, our conversation topics ranged from the geological stratification in the American Southwest, to what we learn about cultures from the words they use to correct their children, to the finer subtleties of Swedish humor.

Both PJ and Gladys have now gone on to join our Lord, but their passion for geographic and intellectual adventures inspires me still. In this season of Epiphany, when we consider the meaning of God's good gifts to us, I offer here a lesson inspired by their witness.

"Let the verbs do the work!" advised my college professor upon reading an early draft of an essay I was still cobbling together. "They will give clarity and life to your prose."

Studies show that adult English speakers populate their speech with more nouns than do speakers of other languages. This tendency starts young—children learning English for the first time prefer nouns to verbs. It's as if the world is a collection of things that need to be

named. This does not always make for clear communication. William Zinsser, in his classic book, *On Writing Well*, bemoans this tendency of American English, which makes corporate, government, and academic rhetoric difficult to understand. "It no longer 'rains,'" he writes, "we have precipitation activity or a thunderstorm probability situation. Please, let it rain!"

Academics and political pundits love to make nouns out of verbs by adding erudite-sounding suffixes to make words like globalization, optimization, marginalization, impactful. Editors who suffer through the turgid prose of their writers advise, "Stop turning your verbs into nouns. Let the verbs do the work."

The language we use, PJ and Gladys would say, shapes our moral imaginations. The words we use to describe our desires, obligations, duties, and sufferings inform how we imagine living out a good and faithful life. When our prose is dominated by nouns, it's as if our world is simply made up of things. In reflecting on the meaning of God's good gifts to us, I offer a similar piece of advice: *Remember that gifts are rooted in the activity of giving; the noun only makes sense as a verb.*

Shortly after making the trek with PJ and Gladys, I was privileged to attend a ceremonial dance of the Native Americans at the Santa Clara pueblo. It took place on the central plaza of the pueblo and included scores of dances and hundreds of observers from within the tribe. As is often practiced, the conclusion of the dance was marked by a gift-giving cer-



A gift is only fully realized when it is given again.

emony. Following the choreographed dances, a more chaotic movement overtook the plaza as individuals and families began crossing the large open space to meet others and bestow gifts on them. Long embraces and brief conversations accompanied the gift giving. I later learned that at the next ceremony, days, weeks, or months later, those who had received gifts were expected to return the generosity. Gift exchange, celebrated publicly through such ceremonies, is a central unifying practice of the community.

Unfortunately, it is from this practice of mutual gift giving that the term “Indian giver” was coined. The term is often meant as a derogatory remark toward one who is seen as so uncivilized as to expect the return of a gift that is given. In his book *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life*

of Property, Lewis Hyde describes the misunderstanding of the Native American practice: “Imagine a scene. An Englishman comes into an Indian lodge and his hosts, wishing to make their guest feel welcome, ask him to share a pipe of tobacco. Carved from a soft red stone, the pipe is a peace offering that has circulated among the local tribes, staying in each lodge for a time but always given away again sooner or later. And so the Indians, as is only polite among their people, give the pipe to their guest when he leaves. The Englishman is tickled pink. What a nice thing to send back to the British Museum! He takes it home and sets it on the mantelpiece.

“A time passes and the leaders of a neighboring tribe come to visit the colonist’s home. To his surprise he finds his guests have some expecta-

tions in regard to his pipe, and his translator finally explains to him that if he wishes to show his goodwill he should offer them a smoke and give them the pipe. In consternation the Englishman invents a phrase to describe these people with such a limited sense of private property.”

The opposite of “Indian giver,” according to Hyde, might be “white man keeper” or even “capitalist.” The motto once used by John Nuveen & Company speaks to this disturbing characteristic of our culture: “It’s not what you earn, it’s what you keep.” (In a recent Google search, I have found out that countless investment and accounting firms use this same motto.) In a society that defines assets and resources solely as possessions, as things—as *nouns*—it would do us well to retrieve the social conception of the gift.

In conversations with a professor of social ethics who specializes in Native American studies, I learned that the essence of a gift for those from Santa Clara is not necessarily that it return to its original owner, though that indeed may occur, but rather that the gift must always move. A gift is only fully realized when it is given again. There may be other forms

CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

Karl Clifton-Soderstrom teaches philosophy at North Park University in Chicago.

It's Not What You **Keep**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

of property in life that stand still, that find their rest in our keeping of them, but to be a *gift* is to continue moving by being given again and again. The verb defines the noun—the activity determines the thing.

The essence of Christian gratitude and stewardship is reflected in the Santa Clara practice of gift giving. The material resources of our dwellings here on earth become transfigured in becoming gifts. In the gift, the other's material needs become my spiritual needs. Such gifts exist between the economics of exchange and the unconditional grace of God. The gifts of stewardship bridge the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven by moving between earthly economics and resources and heavenly grace.

Of all the things we encounter in the world, in all the experiences we have, in all the people we meet, and in all the wisdom we learn from them, there is so little we earn alone. The world gives itself to us. People, as parents, friends, and communities, give themselves to us. In the incarnation, Christ gives himself to us.

We err when we turn these dynamic events into static things, as “mere” gifts. Rather, in Epiphany, after we have had time to sit with the momentous event of Christ's birth, we realize the grace that is Christ is an ongoing unfolding of generosity. We can then remember that we too are caught up in the cycle of generosity and gratitude.

This cycle starts with an initial humble realization: there is an essential element of grace in every aspect of our lives, our resources, and our communities. This grace is not a thing that we hold, but a movement within which we participate. As such, we are called to give that grace a movement that bonds communities and individuals together.

Or in the words of my teachers,
“Let the verbs do the work.” ■