

FROM YOU I RECEIVE

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That's a really lovely dress you're wearing. Oh, this old thing?

This soup is delicious! Why, it's the easiest recipe—it was no work at all!

Please accept this gift as a token of my appreciation. Now, that's just way too much!

Your sermon was particularly moving today. And to think I wrote it all yesterday!

Let me pick up the tab for lunch. Oh, I just couldn't let you do that!

Our culture makes it very hard to receive. Gifts, praise, compliments—whatever is being given, it is a natural response to make it seem like we're not worthy of such a gift. Our consumer culture teaches us that our worth is tied to what we can buy—and what we are given detracts from it.

In responding to the gifts of others in this way, however, we are often invisibly causing harm. Each gift requires *both* a giver and a receiver. Thus, to downplay our own self-worth when we are receivers is to subtly undermine the generosity of those who would give us things. We might not realize it, but it's true.

Further, each time we do this, we take one step further towards convincing ourselves that there's something really wrong with us—that we're not really attractive, or good dressers, or worthy of an expensive gift or a nice meal offered from someone who cares about us. That we're not worthy of that care in the first place. It's a short step from here to self-destructive and harmful behavior.

I know that I'm guilty of taking the first steps down this road. It's hard for me to accept compliments. It's hard for me to accept the generosity of others without making it seem like a business transaction—like promising to get lunch next time in those instances when I do accept someone else picking up the tab. I could have come up with this topic just mulling over my own struggles with receiving—and yet I've found over the past few months that I'm not alone.

In talking with members of this Fellowship over the past few months, one of the things that has risen to the top as a priority for me is to help us embrace a culture of generosity and abundance. To help us understand that there is enough to go around—enough time, enough money, enough energy, enough leadership, enough knowledge. To help us become better stewards of the communities we are a part of. To help us cultivate giving as a spiritual practice.

In order to do that, however, we must first understand what it means to receive.

We are taught that “it is better to give than to receive,” and yet, as I’ve said, each gift requires both a giver *and* a receiver. Giving and generosity are, by definition, things cultivated in relationship. One does not give into—or receive out of—a vacuum of individuality.

So we are called to learn how to receive gifts gracefully. To re-discover gratitude in our own lives—each and every day, even when it seems like there’s nothing to be grateful for (perhaps especially at those times).

But being grateful requires receiving. Expressing gratitude for something in the world, something in our experience, requires that we acknowledge that something has been given to us. It requires that we accept what has been given to us with an open heart.

The philosopher and spiritual teacher Sri Chinmoy, who passed away last week, once noted that:

“Ingratitude is a destructive force, whereas gratitude is a constructive force. Every day in our multifarious activities, either we express ingratitude or we express gratitude to our fellow beings.

“Ingratitude is not our inability to acknowledge the gifts we receive from others. Ingratitude is our deliberate unwillingness to acknowledge the gifts we receive from others. Gratitude is receptivity, the receptivity that acknowledges others' gifts, others' love and concern. Each time we express gratitude, we expand our hearts.”

(Sri Chinmoy, “Ingratitude and Gratitude,” found on-line at http://www.writespirit.net/spirituality/spiritual_qualities/ingratitude_and_gratitude)

To Chinmoy, the act of receiving a gift from another and being grateful for that gift is an act of love. Love for ourselves, and love for another who has given us something. Love that connects us into what he calls “inseparable oneness.”

When I moved to North Carolina, dear friends tried to teach me about life in the South. One of the things I learned was that in the world of Southern manners, one always extended an authentic offer three times, and one always refused something twice. This is, of course, so that people can make generous offers without actually meaning it! Imagine the ridiculous conversations that ensue using this logic. They sound something like this:

I’ll gladly give you a ride to the airport. *Oh, I don’t want to put you out.*

It’s no trouble at all, really. *But you live clear across town from me. I can take a taxi.*

It would be my pleasure, truly. I’ll pick you up at 7. *Well, thank you, then, I appreciate it.*

At any time in this exchange, the kind person offering a ride could have agreed with the person needing a ride’s excuses for not accepting one, basically retracting the offer they never meant to make in the first place (but felt they had to), and appearing generous.

Even better, had the person who really needed a ride just said “Oh, thank you! I appreciate your kind offer—how generous of you!” without the first two refusals, *they* would have appeared the rude one. What nonsense!

Now, I tell you this to illustrate the extremes our society goes to—choreographing an intricate dance of offer and refusal—in order to avoid the issues of real generosity and what it means to be on the receiving end of generosity.

I don't mean to imply that here in the Northeast there aren't similar rituals—there are certainly similar attitudes—in telling a story about the South. I just can't help but use this one cultural norm as an example, though.

People are taught that the *appearance* of generosity is as good as the real thing.

And, conversely, people are taught that others don't really want to *be* generous, so it's rude to accept their generosity without testing them first.

Is that any way to treat one another? Is that any way to be in relationship with one another? I don't think so.

Deep down, all of this talk about giving and receiving, generosity and gratitude, is about how we are in relationship with one another. And building real and right relationships with others means engaging in both mutuality and trust.

Learning to receive things with grace and gratitude requires us to be in relationships of mutuality with one another: From you, I receive, to you, I give, together, we share, by this, we live.

This is not all about money or material gifts. Our society's attitude towards giving and receiving extends to gifts of time and spirit as well.

Many of us have spent years being taught that receiving help means we're weak, that admitting vulnerability is a sin, that accepting a helping hand means there's something wrong with us. So, even when things are spinning out of control, even when we're in serious pain (physical, mental, emotional or spiritual), even when we feel like we're sinking under the weight of all that we have to do, we pretend like we've got it all under control or, even worse, we turn away offers of help. We refuse the generosity of spirit that we are offered.

If we are to be in relationship with one another, we need to get past that.

If we are to talk about "shared ministry" as a community, we need to understand that for every act of ministering to someone else requires that someone be ministered to. Sometimes, the part we need to play in the life of this community is to receive the care and support that others seek to give us.

And to respond to that care and support not with shame or by assuming some debt to the other person, but simply with a "thank you."

Part of living in relationships of mutuality means not only helping one another in their times of need, but allowing others to help us when we need something.

Learning to receive things with grace and gratitude also requires trust. It requires that we give up some control in our lives, and that we rid ourselves of outmoded patterns of manipulation and obligation.

As Samir Selmanovic writes:

"People know that a gift is almost never just that, a gift. Philosopher Jacques Derrida argues that what we have historically regarded as a gift was actually never a gift. We give to gain. In return, we covet a favor, thankfulness, a sense of

satisfaction in seeing ourselves as a giving person or simply the warm sensation of buying something for someone we love. Our gifts are a form of exchange. We give something obvious, to receive something subtle.

“Sensing this dynamic, people who stand to lose anything don’t easily accept free help, advice, favors or money from others. To receive means to lose control. Gifts change relationships. The recipient becomes a “weaker part” in the transaction.” (Samir Selmanovic, “Spiritual Discipline of Receiving”, found on-line at http://samirselmanovic.typepad.com/faith_house/2007/09/spiritual-disci.html)

I am going to argue that Derrida was wrong. I believe he was just wrong if he really believed that people give only with ulterior motives of selfishness. Do we really believe that community and relationship work like those seen in *The Godfather* (You probably remember the famous scene: “Someday—and that day may never come—I’ll call upon you to do a service for me.” -- Don Corleone in *The Godfather*)? Really?

This way of looking at the world is just plain harmful. It encourages distance, it encourages walls being put up between one another. It encourages us not to give to each other unless we want something in return.

Instead, let us learn to trust. Let us learn to trust one another. Let us learn to give up a little bit of control. Let us learn to accept what others are giving to us by assuming the giver’s best and most pure intentions.

We can help one another do this. We can help by having those good intentions when we give.

We can help by cultivating within ourselves the strength and self-worth to receive, the trust and generosity to be grateful.

Buddhist nun Pema Chodron encourages her followers to show gratitude to everyone and everything—even those things that we dislike. She writes:

“ ‘Be grateful to everyone’ is about making peace with the aspects of ourselves that we have rejected. Through doing that, we also make peace with the people we dislike. More to the point, being around people we dislike can be a catalyst for making friends with ourselves.” (Pema Chodron, “Slogan: ‘Be Grateful to Everyone,’” in *Comfortable With Uncertainty*)

Chodron understands that gratitude requires not only awareness of the world around us, but of ourselves as well. We have to, in her words “see when we’ve pulled the shades, locked the door, and crawled under the covers” (Ibid.)

She understands that gratitude requires us to connect with our own inner self as much as it requires us to connect with others.

Today, I am asking to you learn how to receive.

I’m asking you to make some changes in how you react to people. I’m asking us all—I’m in this, too.

From now on, let’s try this: when someone gives us something, be it a compliment, a present, a gift of their time and energy, or the gift of their ministry to your pain, we will respond simply with “Thank you.”

Acceptable variations might include: “That is very kind of you,” “I appreciate that so much,” or “What a lovely thing to say.”

They do not include anything with the word “but” in it.

Acceptable responses to a gift do *not* include anything that implies that we are not worthy of the gift. They do not include anything that implies that the gift is part of a business transaction, to be settled in the future. They only include words of our appreciation and gratitude. Maybe a smile, or even a hug.

And then we stop talking.

If you find yourself thinking something different—if those tried and true denials of other peoples’ generosity work their way to the tip of your tongue, I want you to think in your head the words to today’s mediation hymn:

From you, I receive, to you, I give, together, we share, and by this, we live.

Remind yourself that building real relationships takes mutuality. It takes trust. It takes giving—and receiving.

If we all do this, I think we will find that our lives will suddenly be a lot richer. Our relationships will be better. Our hearts will be filled with gratitude and joy. Our

Maybe—just maybe—we’ll get the help we need.

Maybe—just maybe—we’ll like ourselves more, and understand our inherent worth as members of this giant human family.

And once we’ve mastered receiving, then—and only then—can we move on to giving. Stay tuned.