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The Art of Gifting

Martha Kelly

Last weekend one of my daughters forwarded a picture of a sandwich board in front of Fleurty Girl, a shop on Magazine Street in New Orleans: “Only 53 days until Christmas...#please don’t kill me. © Tan.” Ah, the pressure builds; even Tan (the messenger) tries to distance him/herself from the message. This is merchandizing’s season. All year they’ve waited for the holiday shopping spree. It’s the “black” in Black Friday – after eleven months of barely making ends meet, it’s the day their balance sheets turn from red to black. The “social fact” of Christmas moves from the objectivity of a sandwich board to a subjective reality. As Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) writes, “social facts,” such as frenetic holiday shopping, are phenomena which, although “I did not create them...I merely inherited them through my education...they conform to my own sentiments...I feel their reality” (78). He continues: “Endowed with coercive power,” tension builds, and the pressures of holiday gift shopping endeavor to control us and “impose themselves... independent of [our] individual will,” and we “conform” to these powers (78). One would look like a schmuck arriving empty-handed, without a hostess gift, at a neighborhood holiday party. Family expectations are entrenched with thick and significant histories that include symbolism, motivations, ceremony, guilt, kinship relationships and indebtedness with their obligations to give and repay – all entangled in a potentially explosive material vs. moral morass. The emotional repercussions from not participating in this rite can be divisive and personally deleterious, with honor and status devalued and self-esteem lost.

Religious and secular celebrations of Christ’s birth have evolved throughout the centuries, and one can admire and be intrigued by diverse cultural customs that have taken root. Scratching our heads, trying to justify the ideology of purportedly altruistic gift giving to mark this occasion, many recall the line in the carol, “We three kings of Orient are; bearing gifts we traverse a-far” (Hopkins). The basis for this sentiment is St. Matthew’s reveal that “wise men from the east” followed a star in the eastern sky and presented treasures of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus (Matt. 2.1-11). The “magic” – ancient prophesies, the Virgin birth, protective angels and directive stars -- adds to the mystery and drama of this history-changing event. Neither concrete nor easy to explain, these symbols are organizers of our culture. Durkheim would classify these social phenomena as evidence of organic solidarity: the bond of holiday shopping practices, inculcated with expectations to give and receive collectively organizes society into a shared belief system. Merged is the interdependence of economic, emotional and individual forces. Gift-giving and -receiving “behavior [is] held in common; everyone shares these social facts because they are collective” (Durkheim 82).

Gift exchanges are imbedded as a part of this universally-celebrated holiday: traditions develop within families, among close friends, throughout neighborhoods and between business partners. Reciprocal gift giving is a part of a complex system and includes social, cultural and economic dimensions, but how does the “social fact” of gifting exhibit itself cross culturally?

Durkheim’s nephew, Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), describes the self-perpetuating gift exchange system of practices among various primitive peoples; one arrangement of particular interest to him is the American Northwest Indian potlatch. He observes that Northwest

indigenous groups “have a high standard of material culture” and split their living quarters and associated industries between summer and winter (Mauss 86). More confined in the winter, their “social life becomes intense,” and when together, they are “in a perpetual state of effervescence” -- tribes visit one another, and social events occur, which include a “prolonged series of potlatches...given in all directions” (Mauss 86). The potlatch is “really nothing other than gift-exchange,” although Mauss admits it is “the monster child of the gift system” (Mauss 87, 91).

However, this collective endeavor among tribes enables them to share values, transfer wealth, develop political alliances and balance social obligations. Furthermore, the “essence of the potlatch” is an “obligation to give” (Mauss 89). Chiefs are motivated to give to maintain their authority and prestige. They are coerced by custom and feel obligated to over-gift and “invite friends to share the produce of the chase...which the gods or totems have sent” and to “redistribute” what has been received at a potlatch and publicly “recognize services from chiefs, vassals or relatives” with a gift (Mauss 89). At stake is violating etiquette: one’s identity can be lost – or reinforced – in the potlatch ritual which touches “all spheres, military, legal, economic and religious” (Mauss 89, 90). The potlatch ritual holds repercussions similar to holiday gift exchanges in our country. Motivating us to comply with custom, seductive Christmas-themed decor and products creep into stores by Labor Day, tucked around the corner from Halloween merchandise, eclipsing Thanksgiving. By early November the shopping-days-‘til-Christmas countdown is difficult to avoid. It is time to make lists...and check them twice.

The reverse side of the giving coin is receiving. Although one may have been taught that “it is better to give than to receive,” among tribes in Alaska and British Columbia, there is an obligation to receive *and* to participate in future gifting. Refusal to accept would demonstrate that one is not willing to counter-gift. Reciprocating is “the obligation to repay” and is an essential part of potlatch; redistributing potlatch is “imperative” (Mauss 91). Not participating can result in loss of dignity and sanctions: “loss of rank...[and] status of a free man” (Mauss 91).

Objects traded have underlying meanings. The give-take-give exchange cycle reinforces powerful productive cultural bonds. During our native ritual Christmas gift exchanges, property is exchanged, reciprocal giving and receiving forge relationships, balance power, assure continuing contact, maintain customs – and peace.

Halfway around the globe, in Papua New Guinea and throughout the Trobriand Islands’ archipelago north and east of New Guinea, another gifting routine, observed by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), is detailed in his ethnographical account about the Kula exchange. On the surface, the trade cycle appears ceremonial and simplistic: “long necklaces of red shell,... *soulava*” are traded in a clockwise rotation among islanders, while “bracelets of white shell,... *mwali*” move counterclockwise throughout the various islands (Malinowski 155). These objects are displayed and worn during special tribal feasts and at other important gatherings. His careful observations of these transactions reveal a sophisticated process, inherited by long-standing custom and imposed on the islanders, “independent of their will” (Durkheim 78).

Malinowski observes the Kula works because the exchange is regulated, and trading partners are dutifully obligated to one another. Similar to the coercive power to gift and reciprocate that we (and the Northwest natives) conform to, “bestowing of a ceremonial gift...has to be repaid by an equivalent counter-gift” (Malinowski 164). Elements of Kula trade are that the gift must be repaid after a reasonable amount of time by another generous gift of equivalent value. The giver must determine the appropriate exchange. An uneven trade will mar a man’s reputation and devalue his standing with his peers (Malinowski 165). Unlike traditional Christmas gift-giving and -receiving, temporary ownership of gifts among the islanders is “a

special economic” state (Malinowski 163). Not being kept for a great length of time permits necklaces and armbands to be interchanged. More like a tournament trophy than a gift, it is obligatory that arm shells and shell necklaces be handed off to a trading partner in the appropriate direction.

Fieldwork investigating this inter-island trade reveals an integrated series of events of institutional size, spread over an immense geographical area. In fact, this well-structured process is personalized. Men who are chosen to participate in the Kula exchange form permanent, life-long partnerships (Malinowski 155). As they exchange ornamental shell necklaces for bracelets, or vice versa, and maintain partners on disparate islands, a secondary trade is instituted. Island-to-island dual-trading – of ceremonial beads and essential products – reinforces allegiances, deepens the definition of the Kula and assures its continuance. The New Guinean inter-tribal networks of overseas trading partners “obey definite rules” and can be trusted to equitably exchange relevant Trobriand goods. Meanwhile, a similar trading pattern exists intra-island among extended families who transport gifts throughout an extensive network of family members (Malinowski 162). Not only material goods are exchanged. “Customs, songs, art motives and general cultural influences travel” along both routes (Malinowski 162).

Throughout generations of Christmas celebrations, families maintain and develop their own customs, assimilating traditions brought into the family by new members. Commemorative food indicative of the origin country of relatives may be prepared, religious ceremonial meanings abound, favorite carols are sung, memories from former generations’ practices are passed via stories told by the present standard bearers to their children, and new elements are added as well.

Just as we customize Christmas with compulsive shopping, trips to sit on Santa’s lap, decorate homes and trees, bake cookies, prepare special food, observe religious rites and visit Grandma, the Trobriand islanders also have extraneous preparatory activities associated with the Kula gift exchange. Traveling long distances overseas among islands to trade goods, as well as the customary shell appurtenances, requires adequately rigged canoes which need to be outfitted, proper secondary-trade supplies and cargo have to be gathered, male traders must organize themselves as a social group, and the travel time has to be set (Malinowski 166). Similar to annual Blessings of the Fleet that occur among coastal fishing fleets, before setting out to sea, the canoes are subjected to “magical rites” – “in order to make [the canoe] swift, steady and safe...and lucky in the Kula” (Malinowski 168). These details are all governed by the circular, regenerative Kula trade, the impetus for the ancillary trade-of-usable-goods mission.

While I have included general comments about Christmas and its relationship to indigenous customs, I have not dealt with the psychological and physiological dynamics of personal gift giving behavior. Social capital is accumulated and dispersed in various ways, extending throughout my sphere. My heartfelt attention is concentrated on my daughters and husband. And I casually shop all year. When I find something unique, I jump on it. I have passed this intuitive always-on-the-prowl to my daughters. Durkheim notes that such social behavior is “inherited...through [their] education” (78).

My husband engages differently with our girls. When they were younger, the three of them would hand-make a gift. Now they accompany him on shopping trips. Throughout the years, these efforts strengthen father-daughter relationships, support their sacrificing time and effort to make or find a certain something for an important person (which gives them satisfaction), and impress on them the importance of creating or searching for meaningful gifts to be appreciated by the receiver -- whose pleasure is important to consider. The desire for the love of family encourages us to perform as our family members would expect. So, when gifts are

opened Christmas morning, they are often accompanied by a story about the artist or the circumstances, which embellishes the meaning of the item received. Each present becomes a gift. Malinowski observes that Kula trade includes exchanges within their “inner social sphere” – a “chronic, permanent trickling of articles” – where small internal transactions occur (169). Inland trade “passes articles from hand to hand” and reinforces the standing of village traders who venture overseas and exchange valued goods (Malinowski 169).

Close relatives are motivated to preserve familial bonds and, therefore, feel an obligation to preserve family ties and participate in family holiday gifting, and this exchange is a kinship maintenance rite. As family dynamics shift, reciprocal gifting among extended family members becomes more of a ceremonial token or dutiful remembrance but still includes an exchange. The symbolism of not participating would reverberate and signal the disintegration of family unity. The obligation to repay is a basic principle of the potlatch: participation is compulsory. Those who refrain can “lose rank” and forfeit their “status as a free man” (Mauss 91).

Diminished social interaction among kin – and less intimacy -- has an effect on gift appropriateness. Nonetheless, the symbolic value of the exchange is maintained. It is a way to maintain contact and emotional attachment, continue the norm of reciprocity, define familial identity and re-channel Christmases past. So, it was interesting to read that the Trobriand Island traders were careful to groom individual relationships with out-islanders so their gifting would be appreciated and appropriate, whether it be a ceremonial trade or bartering material goods.

To “repay” neighbors who pick up newspapers or help with this or that over the year, a splendid array of homemade Christmas cookies is delivered just before December 25. Carefully chosen and decorated, they are my way of reciprocating to those who pitch in when needed; it maintains our standing and strengthens relationships among our neighbors. Another neighbor holds an annual barbeque. In a busy and disconnected era, these social investments – personalized to suit individual time frames and reciprocal interpretations -- unite our neighborhood within culturally accepted boundaries. Mauss records that “potlatches are given in all directions” and, even though time passes between receiving and giving, indigenous Northwesterners maintain “two traits...credit and honor” (Mauss 86-87).

In fifty-odd days will I meet the Christmas challenge? Breaking tradition and custom can disappoint trading participants. Preparing to gift is a year-long process, and yet-to-be wrapped prospects wait on closet shelves. Feeling the intense reality of Christmas and conforming to its coercive powers is easier than facing a disappointed assemblage of kin who participate in an extensive and highly anticipated gift exchange. Perhaps the “magic” of Christmas will intervene and lighten my load.

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