

Choices with Giving and Receiving Gifts

by Ralph C. Martin

In my early university student days I wanted to impress a dazzling classmate. I had overheard her telling friends she wanted a blender for exotic-sounding recipes. Within a week I found a used blender at a yard sale, that still stretched my budget. When I gave it to her for Christmas she smiled and swallowed and smiled again with less enthusiasm and said something that I may have heard but wanted to forget. I knew for sure that I had missed the mark.

Resources embedded in gifts can be wasted since many gifts are deemed inadequate or are not wanted and may be seldom or never used. It could be more efficient to give cash so that receivers can buy what they need and want. Of course this may reduce the element of surprise and tangible demonstration of consideration and care by a giver offering kindness in making or choosing a gift that is treasured. Perhaps delighted gift openers would never allow themselves the freedom to acquire such an affirmation for themselves or might not even have thought to ask for it.

Gift givers, whether for personal or charitable purposes, can assume they deserve to choose and influence the receiver by what they give. Is this then an actual gift or an indirect payment? The organization, GiveDirectly (www.givedirectly.org), challenges established notions of responsible giving. Their vision is “to reshape international giving, making direct transfers to the poor, the benchmark against which other, more expensive approaches are evaluated.”

A friend, recalling cash-strapped student days, wryly recalled that “when rich people help you out with money they like to tell you what to do.” How often do those of us who give, unnecessarily embed our expectations in our gifts?

According to Huffington Post (www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/04/givedirectly-cash-transfers_n_7339040.html) “GiveDirectly transfers about \$1,000 to very poor families over the course of a year. It makes no rules or even suggestions about how to use the cash. Since launching in 2011, the group has distributed about \$15 million to communities in Kenya and Uganda.” GiveDirectly provides compelling evidence that families in poverty spend their donation to not only improve their lives in the short term but that they invest in ways that

improve their capacity for the long term. For each dollar donated to GiveDirectly, 91 cents goes directly to selected families.

Some gifts improve our lives, even when the giver is a critic with a sharp comment, who cracks our cemented world views. Although not intended as a gift and even if unkind, such comments can lead to growth, after mature evaluation. There is value in becoming unstuck and appreciating the gifts which jar us.

Perhaps the greatest gift is the development of the universe and our place in it, now. After the great flaring forth of the universe, 13.5 billion years ago, the one year story of Earth begins, about 4.5 billion years ago, on January 1, when Earth formed. On February 18, 3.9 billion years ago, photosynthetic bacteria appeared.

It took until June 11 or 2.5 billion years ago, for oxygen and ozone to become apparent and a longer period yet until 600 million years ago (November 12) for multicellular organisms and animals to grace our planet. A short while later, 440 million years ago (November 25), plants emerged from the sea.

Although often considered to be from the distant past, dinosaurs arrived relatively recently in Earth's story, 145 million years ago (December 19) and then disappeared in an extinction event, 67 million years ago (December 25 at 10:30 am).

Out of this darkness on Earth, the Cenozoic era of amazing creativity began 65 million years ago, on December 25 at 5:30 pm, a time when many celebrate the joy of a new beginning, with a Christmas feast.

Our species of wonderful creative genius, and also, unfortunately, horrific destruction, first walked on Earth about 200,000 yrs ago (December 31 at 11:37 pm).

In this current Earth moment of human knowledge, how will we choose to respond to the grand gift of our incredible inheritance? We could choose, in neglect or in hubris, to be immersed in daily pursuits of acquisition to extract yet more from Earth, with a sense of entitlement.

Alternatively, as awakened and aware creatures of the Cenozoic, we can humbly proceed with the higher purpose of our place on Earth, at this time. That will include addressing climate change and reducing our impact on Earth, while alleviating poverty.

The ending of the first year of Earth's story and how we have been gifted, awaits our participatory authorship.

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