

## GIVING AND TAKING

Remember the fashion when to make the social scene you had to politely reciprocate dinner invitations with people you would normally cross the road to avoid? In those days, my wife and I dutifully criss-crossed our social diary with these dinner invitations. We thought we'd better do the right thing in order to belong, myself having just returned after a long time from overseas, and my wife being a foreign bride.

She was better at this game than I was. It was usually just before I was about to fall asleep, that she would provide me with my insomnia pill, "It's about time we invited the Lewises again". Sensing my body stiffen, and to pre-empt me punching the pillow, she provided the unassailable argument, "Look, they've invited us twice to our once, and we really can't leave it any longer."

My sleep emptied mind grappled with the strange rules of giving and taking. It became filled with the corpulent John Lewis, whose pompous voice lectured me through lips shiny and wet with our food, about his successful business deals, which at another dinner party I learned were illusory. His adoring wife Phillipa twittered in the background detailing the developmental milestones of each of her children, as if they were the sensations of the century.

We met John and Phillipa Lewis by chance at a holiday resort. The fact that their three children and our own three played on adjacent trampolines, and that John and I had gone to the same school and knew some people in common, made them feel that we were soul mates, and we responded by inadvertently inviting them to dinner. Then they invited us twice. To not invite them now would be almost aggressive.

Most of those early dinner parties felt like horse trading, though money was not overtly exchanged. At most, there was only business talk, and sharing information on how to make or save money.

Covertly, however, the value of the host's house, dress, jewellery, food, and value of gifts given and received, were carefully assessed. I was often tortured by the big question of my symbolic offering. "What will I take?" Will a two year old red from the Wine Society do? What did they bring us last time? "Make sure that you do not take the bottle they or anyone who may be there, gave us." My wife was careful about such things.

I was reminded of the ritual exchanges of gifts between Polynesian tribes, and the inordinate amounts of time that went into exchanges of ceremonial gifts and favours in ancient Confucian cultures.

While giving and taking you were not punching or spearing people, I considered. You were establishing instead a network of security and mutual favours.

These days we try to visit and invite only people we cherish; like the Drews, whom we have known for twenty years. We know Lew's and Peggy's backgrounds, foibles, and wit. We still bring small gifts to each other, such as personally baked cookies, or flowers from the garden.

Unlike those other dinner parties, we derive pleasure from each other's company, and with each meeting we learn something new and feel closer. After we part, my wife and I digest the added depth we discovered, like our taste buds savour the originally spiced Moroccan chicken that we ate with them.

What is the difference between these interactions?

It is the thought that counts, we are told. Well, thoughts at those early dinner parties were ultimately self-centred. Gifts given had a price tag of return obligation. Even thoughts devoted to the aesthetics of the party, were like the deliberate enticements of an Arab bazaar that promoted trade. If peace, social order and alliances evolved from this trade, it was through calculated mutual interest. In retrospect, we also entered the dinner party trail for our own needs for professional contacts, security and allies.

On the other hand, the thought that goes into gifts that feel special and evoke joy is fuelled by generosity, and oriented solely to the other person. "This is just what I wanted! It is me! How did you know this is just what I wanted?" are the responses we want to hear.

More than just thought lies in such gifts, of course. Thought here includes effort and devotion, as in saving up for the gift, or making it oneself. It also includes emotions and feelings.

The gifts need not be tangible or have a price tag. Think of nurturing a bereaved friend through their grief. With the Drews, our friendship intensified after their support during my mother's illness and death, and after we stood by them during Peggy's long (victorious, luckily), battle with cancer.

Think of the innumerable gifts parents give children, and the little gifts children give that mean so much to parents. Here the gift is beyond money, thought, time, and effort. Its currency is love. Love is the emotion at the core of true giving. Love enables immersion in the other person so that we can give the right gift. It is measured by how much of one's life one gives to the other.

Love and its generosity are reciprocated, not through obligation, but through gratitude and return of love. The exchange of love creates more than the sum of the gifts. The paradigm may be love making, which produces the gift of children. Such giving of gifts, through nature, creates a fertile emotional field that produces further harvests of gifts.

So there are two types of giving and taking. The first is as in 'those' dinner parties, which are ritual display and trade within a particular social order, designed for tangible gain. Its currency is monetary worth and favours. The currency of the other type of giving is love, measured by the amount of giving of one's life to another. Its fruits are mutual fulfilment and creativity.

The first should not be confused with the second. That is what I resented about the Lewises. They pretended to be soul mates, when they were only traders.