The Unicorn’s Bargain:
The Gift and The Environment

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Abstract

"Gifting" or "gift exchange" is an economic practice carried out in cultures worldwide, from so called "archaic" times to the present day. Definitions vary: to some, gifting is a mirror image or a shadow of the current market economy. To others it is the very opposite – generalized, delayed, unreciprocated, unpredictable, both creative and destructive. This Area of Concentration considers the latter definition, and focuses on how gifting economies among human societies can reflect, involve, and merge with cycles within nature.

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Foreword & Acknowledgements

The biologist Dan Janzen once wrote “What escapes the eye is the most insidious kind of extinction – the extinction of interactions” (in Nabhan 1997: 259). Janzen’s words are as pertinent to the lives of humans at the beginning of the twenty-first century as they were to the relationships between pollinators and plants he was describing in the early seventies. Our lives today are rife with disconnection, regardless of the Internet, cellular phones, or any other manifestation of technological prowess we could offer to the contrary.

It often does escape our collective eye just how disconnected we have become from each other and from the big blue ball called the Earth that supports us and gives us a place in the universe to call home. I see this plague of disconnection in ever-expanding, concentric circles. One circle is found in the home, where divorce rates continue to climb. Another circle is visible in the perilous health of our communities, more and more cut off from themselves by trade agreements and the so-called “free market.” This disconnect continues in our relations with the natural world, where we continue to live at odds with, and at the expense of so many other lives – frogs, rhinos, dragonflies, bears, carnivorous beetles, white pines, mushrooms, and so on.

Current economic orthodoxy tells us to be competitive, to outwit others, to look after our own self-interests. It then has the audacity to turn around and assuage those of us with worried looks that this way of interacting with each other and with the rest of the planet will naturally hold us all together in harmonious, ecologically viable societies.

It is becoming increasingly clear that this orthodoxy does not work. If anything, it is the major engine that powers our growing disconnection with everything outside of our own skins, keeping us estranged from one another and from a sense of kinship with the rest of life. The whole effect is of a pointillist painting viewed from six inches away. This is a society where milk comes from a bottle or a carton, water from the tap, electricity from the outlet (or to the astute observer, the power line), and meat from the store. Most of us do not know what is in our food, where it comes from, the social and environmental conditions it is grown or produced under, and the effects of these practices on the skin or seas of the earth. Whole lives can now be played out estranged from the natural world. The average child is incapable of identifying more than a dozen native species to his or her bioregion yet I am sure the average adult would do far worse. Many of us would be surprised to learn that over forty percent of pharmaceuticals are plant-based, that the Rosy Periwinkle from Madagascar is a potent weapon against cancer, and that digitalis, used to treat patients with heart conditions, is an actual plant and not a synthetic chemical compound.

More and more of our lives are spent indoors, plugged into artificial sources of stimulation. On television, a news story about the ongoing Prairie drought follows a story about the worst storms to hit Central America in a century follows a story on opposition to the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, yet no effort is made to link these stories together. In academia, disconnection manifests itself in the ongoing cult of the specialist and in some of the more extreme forms of post-modernism, which often appear as oppressive and monolithic as the modernist discourses they have been attempting to refute.

It is time to put the world back together again. There is an elixir for rampant disconnection. The thesis of this paper is that old modes of gift exchange can offer us hints and clues – in effect an entry pass – to a wholly unique vision of the world and a different set of rules for interacting with it. Gift exchange is a form of economic and cosmological orientation that views the world as essentially a giving place, a place of wild abundance, where drought and scarcity are only secondary. In other words, the exchange of gifts is a metaphor for life itself.

At this time, I would like to advance not one but two quick introductions to the gift – one academic, the other personal.

An Academic Introduction to the Gift

Gift exchanges have been recorded among a staggering diversity of cultures, including our own. Some cultures place a higher premium on gifting than others, and in making gift exchange and other related behaviors the central rule of social interaction, these cultures make the gift more visible to the anthropologist, poet, traveler or layman. In a gift economy, goods and services circulate continuously, according to need, linking every individual to everyone else. Cooperation is valued over competition, the community is valued over the individual, selflessness over selfishness. At its heart, the gift is synonymous with connection. There is only one rule of gift exchange – the gift must always move. Strong prohibitions exist against hoarding and storage. When these prohibitions are ignored or removed, the ethos of the gift economy is jeopardized.

Gifting is not primitive communism, primitive socialism, primitive anarchism, or any other primitive “ism.” Ideas and philosophies of selfless giving have been around for a long time. As we will see in Chapter Two, some researchers argue that giving behaviors have been around since the dawn of our species. As well, some of our most celebrated figures across cultures – Jesus, the Buddha, Gandhi - are those who gave. In the tomes of civilization, these figures have always gone down in history as renegades, iconoclasts, or counter-cultural types who in their actions and beliefs embodied the spirit of the gift, and were highly critical of those who chased only their own ends.

A Personal Introduction to the Gift

Eight years ago, I was one of sixteen participants on a youth exchange organized between Canada and Indonesia. Following a three-month stint in rural Quebec, we found ourselves in a remote village in the dry mountains of West Timor, home to the Atoni peoples (also known as the Dawan). We were a disparate group, hemmed together from different parts of Canada and different islands of the sprawling Indonesian archipelago. Group unity was difficult to forge among such a group of motley personalities.

While in our village, we carried out an activity called “Secret Friend” each week. Names were picked in a blind draw, and we would have to provide anonymous gifts for whomever we had chosen. Our secret friend might receive a coconut, a beer, a candy bar, a flower, or anything else. One item began showing up as a joke – an old pair of children’s underwear, all stiff and caked with dirt from months on the ground. It began circulating among us with comic frequency, showing up at all times. Like a mysterious trinket, it made several rounds before it too disappeared into oblivion. But it became what Lewis Hyde called a “vehicle for the spirit of the group” (1983: 13). It provided us with a laugh under sometimes trying circumstances, and linked us in a truly unusual way. We all have stories like this one – families trading an old chair back and forth, an unwanted piece of clothing that mysteriously finds its way into different closets, or sets of shin pads or other pieces of sports equipment that cycle endlessly between athletes.

The Gifting Environment

What intrigues me, and what fuels this paper is the idea that these gift exchanges of beads, trinkets, and shells (and sometimes discarded underpants) are inspired by the cyclical nature of natural processes. Nature is the template these economies are based off of, whether consciously or not. Because of this, perhaps gift exchange can involve more than just humans. While this may first strike us as a wild leap in logic, we need to remind ourselves that we are in constant exchange with the natural world – whenever we breathe, eat, flush the toilet or fill a garbage bag with refuse that goes… somewhere. All economies interface with the rest of the world in different ways. Some view the world as a set of resources to exploit, while others see the world as inherently alive and full of personality and populated by beings with whom we can enter into a communion with. I do not think it is that strange an idea that other cultures could have organized themselves in a way that honors and mimics their observations of natural processes. Is it that strange an idea to consider that we too could follow the example set by the natural world to balance our own ailing societies?

If we view gift exchange in this light – the sharing of gifts as a metaphor for life processes – then an exciting vision of the world emerges before us. The range of possibilities of beings that we can connect with expands exponentially. A good analogy for gift exchange networks is that of mycelium. Mycelium is the microscopic, cobweb-like substance out of which mushrooms periodically emerge. They form great mats that sit on top of each other in networks that cover most of the earth’s landmasses. They are packed into the first four inches of topsoil to the extent that a single square inch of soil can contain a mile’s length of mycelium. They are a global ecological interface, a “natural internet” that moves through the soil at a rate of two to four inches a day, collecting and exchanging information with their surroundings (Stamets 2000: xiii).

Think of digging our hands down into the soil and grabbing hold of these fibers, if we could. If we were able to give this network a yank, we would be astonished to see that these fibers are connected to everything – trees, flowers, potatoes, themselves connected to the animals and insects and other beings dependent upon them. Gift exchange can provide us with a great economy of all beings. All we need to do is to figure out how the world goes about giving, and then mimic this grand orchestral example.

Structure of the Paper

Chapters One and Two "set up the books" by offering a brief summary of work done on gift exchange in the field of economic anthropology. Chapter One looks at the contributions of Marcel Mauss, a character we can look upon as something of a lonely prospector, for he was the first researcher to move interpretations of the gift away from the shadow of modern economic orthodoxy. But like a character from a Jack London story, Mauss was able to only half-successfully navigate his way to a strikingly new interpretation of the gift before the zeitgeist pulled him back down into the snow like wolves on a caribou. Chapter Two looks at the enigmatic and essential role of reciprocity in gift exchange. It seems that the nature of gift economies is largely defined by the degree of reciprocity at play – too much reciprocity thickens gift exchange into something suspiciously close to market exchange, while too little reciprocity turns gift exchange into sharing. I attempt to parcel out these three terms – gifting, reciprocating, and sharing – and reconcile them in the context of gift exchanges that include and are enveloped by the natural world. Chapter Three probes the relationship between gift exchange and nature. What is the bridge or mechanism that allows gift exchange to plug into the ebb and flow of natural process? Is there such a thing as a free and unreciprocated gift when this exchange is carried out in a larger, all-encompassing spiritual matrix? Chapter Four examines the metaphorical relationship between gift exchange and the hunt, as carried out among "traditional" hunting societies. Here we make our strongest case for gifting as a metaphor and reflection of life processes. If the rule of gift exchange is that the gift must always move, Chapter Five considers the dire consequences of the hoarded gift. When kept from circulating endlessly, I propose that gifts have the tendency to deform whole human societies.

Methodology of the Gift

In a major paper focusing on gift exchange, it is only fitting that my methods reflect the nature of the gift as well. This particular method of inquiry was a gift unto itself, fruit of the rich and intense conversations I have had with fellow Faculty members and students.

In this paper, the gift is both the subject matter and the ethos, guiding the process in content and approach. It is a method that includes and then goes beyond rationality. The gift possesses a logic that communicates itself in instinct, chance encounters, personal experience and intuition – the "tools in the mind" as Robin Ridington (1988) referred to them (see Chapter Four). One idea, conversation or flash of insight leads to another, and we find ourselves passed along from one set of invisible hands to the next. Creativity fuels the process of inquiry. Stories, metaphors and the imagination figure strongly.

Such an approach requires a conscious release of control. This is a road devoid of "thou shalts." Only the sparks and the fireflies are to be followed, and usually these subtle hints and clues run laterally, out across disciplines. Those who travel with the gift usually carry the passport of the generalist. “Those who love wisdom must investigate many things,” wrote Heroclitus. The generalist is at home meandering through any number of intellectual ecosystems rather than specializing in any one.

The generalist has a special office, that of bringing together widely separated fields, presently fenced in by specialists, into a larger common area, visible only from the air. Only by forfeiting the detail can the overall pattern be seen, though once that pattern is visible new details, unseen even by most thorough and competent field workers… may become visible (Mumford 1967: 16).

The gift is all about connection – connecting to other people, to place, to a sense of greater meaning that dwarfs the individual. The generalist aims to root out these larger patterns, identifying what we share and what we can build on together rather than further pursuing what drives us apart.

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At York University, Professors Peter Timmerman and Ray Rogers were responsible for introducing me to the whole idea of the gift. Peter opened the door, and Ray helped me take my first shaky steps through it in our many stimulating conversations on the nature of gift exchange. I would also like to recognize the contributions of my paper’s supervisor, Joe Sheridan, who provided me with the antlers and the creative space necessary to carry out this project, and laid the foundations for my doctoral research in the gift as it is celebrated in story and myth. Of my fellow students in the Master’s program, two stand out as essential in helping me develop these ideas. Tim Leduc has been a fellow courier de bois on this project, a wonderful soul who does his best to live by the spirit of the gift, and I look forward to many more intellectual portages over the years with him. More than any other person, the great-hearted Amy Handyside proves to me every day that a meaningful – and magical - relationship with the other beings we share this world with is indeed possible.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this work-in-progress to my parents. For my father, who brought home a copy of Coleridge’s “Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” to an impetuous seven year old who could barely read, and then kept me surrounded by good books whenever my curiosity demanded it of him in the years afterwards. To my mother, who knows what is written in these pages not as ideas and theories, but as synonymous with her own feelings and experiences. In many ways this paper is an attempt to put into words her own wonderful and selfless connection to life. Thank you both – I am nothing that I have not been given.

Chapter One

Marcel Mauss's Essai comes to us "like an old coin, a token of great value lost and found again" (Martien 1996: 4). And like an old coin or a faded map, Mauss's 1925 "L'Essai Sur Le Don" gives us a hint of a lost world, a half-realized vision of a way of living defined by the exchange of gifts between people, whole societies, and larger entities – spirits, natural processes, and so on.

Mauss was certainly not the first to write on the subject of gift exchange. Emerson, Nietzsche, and anthropologists contemporary to Mauss, like Malinowski and Bogoras, had all written on the subject to some degree or another. What made Mauss's contributions so innovative was that he recognized gift exchange as something that went far beyond economic rationality. He was the first to begin taking steps towards what Jacques Godbout (1998) called the "indigenous interpretation" of the gift, wherein gifting among humans constituted only one cycle of giving in a whole universe made up of cycles of giving. In other words, gifting was a total social phenomenon, belonging within a larger spiritual matrix where it interfaced with larger processes and powers (1998: 130). This version stands in stark contrast to then-prevailing interpretations of the gift, which saw gift exchange as a forerunner to market economics, guided by the same hand of economic utilitarianism that guided capitalism and other forms of economic behavior rooted in self-interest.

In addition to sketching out the broad contours of a new interpretation of gift exchange, Mauss also correctly identified all of the major components of gifting: the presence of a third party, the potential for gift exchange to mimic the life-giving vital energies of the planet, the monstrous effects of storing and hoarding the gift, the idea of gifting as part of a set of "table manners" for interacting with others, and the puzzling role of reciprocity. In the context of this present discussion, I am most interested in examining his early efforts to push gift exchange out into the non-human realm, exemplified in his essay in his elaboration on the texts of the old Maori sage Tamati Ranapiri.

But like an old coin or an antiquated map, the dates are blurred, and large parts of the map are not filled in – for "here there be dragons." While Mauss was successful in tabling a number of innovative ideas that would change our understanding of all that gift exchange could be, he was unsuccessful in escaping the gravity of some of the larger ideas of his times. His passing nod to economic utilitarianism early on in the essay is convincing enough to allow proponents of the economic interpretation of the gift to claim him as one of their own.[1] His argument for gift exchange as a means of generating solidarity among people is sabotaged by his over-reliance on the concept of reciprocity, and his choice of ethnographic examples betray his goal and demonstrate that gift exchanges gone bad can create the mirror opposite of any kind of social solidarity. This over-extension of reciprocity also harms his efforts at establishing gift exchange as a means of connecting with other beings.

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[1] On the subject of Mauss's affiliation with the economic interpretation of the gift, Godbout wrote: "Despite those passages we have quoted that might give the opposite impression, the economic interpretation of the gift did not

Despite these flaws and the sometimes-tangled narrative of his argument, Mauss makes for a fitting point of departure. He may not have fully understood how far down the rabbit hole went, yet he was the first to veer far enough from then-prevailing economic interpretations of the gift to discover there was a rabbit hole in the first place. While his efforts fell short at realizing the wild magic of the indigenous interpretation of the gift, Mauss is responsible for that crucial first discovery; we continue where his trail runs cold.

Ranapiri's Text

In his analysis of gift exchange, Mauss divided the process into three major components: giving, receiving, and reciprocating. Of these three, it was reciprocity that impressed him the most – too much so, argued his critics. Defined briefly, reciprocity is a rationalistic exchange pattern that involves the intellectual calculation of returns (Price 1975: 8). Mauss elevated it to the status of "prime mover," making it the component that drove the exchange of gifts. But by singling out reciprocity, Mauss was faced with a tricky question: Why give back? "What rule of legality and self-interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?"(Mauss 1990: 3). In other words, how was Mauss to reconcile reciprocity with giving, and in the process, hold his theory on gift exchange together?

In one of the more esoteric twists of an essay filled with esoteric ideas, Mauss turned to a passage transcribed by a missionary ethnologist, Elsdon Best, who had worked among the Ngati-Raukawa tribe of the Maori people of New Zealand in the late nineteenth century. In Best's passage, an old Maori elder named Tamati Ranapiri holds court on the subject of the exchange of materials and possessions among the Maori. It is a unique piece of work; it proved to be as influential to Mauss's thinking as Mauss's own essay was to later anthropologists and researchers of gift exchange. Mauss found in Ranapiri's monologue the master concept he needed to complete his theory on gift exchange – the concept of the hau. For us, Ranapiri's monologue is the rabbit hole - our first glimpse of how gift exchange connects to larger forces and processes. Here is the text as Mauss translated it (from the French):

> I will speak to you about the hau… The hau is not the wind that blows – not at all. Let us suppose that you possess a certain article (taonga) and that you give me this article. You give it to me without setting a price on it. We strike no bargain about it. Now, I give this article to a third person who, after a certain lapse of time, decides to give me something

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really find favour with Mauss. He seems to have given it some credence in passing in order to guard against the pitfalls of idealism and to avoid lapsing into an ideology of disinterestedness that would only be the mirror image of the economicist utilitarianism he was battling" (1998: 122).

> as payment in return (utu). He makes a present to me of something (taonga). Now, this taonga that he gives me is the spirit (hau) of the taonga that I had received from you and that I had given to him. The taonga that I received for these taonga (which came from you) must be returned to you. It would not be fair (tika) on my part to keep these taonga for myself, whether they were desirable (rawe) or undesirable (kino). I must give them to you because they are a hau of the taonga that you gave me. If I kept this other taonga for myself, serious harm might befall me, even death. This is the nature of the hau, the hau of personal property, the hau of the taonga, the hau of the forest. Kati ena (But enough on this subject) (Mauss 1990: 11).

This passage is a whirling windstorm of the hau, the taonga, and the utu, and it left Mauss spellbound. In Mauss's opinion, Ranapiri's text provided the answer of what compelled a return gift that kept gift systems running. He latched onto the idea of the hau, arguing that it alone empowered the gifts themselves with a magical form of reciprocity that ensured a return gift, and perpetuated cycles of gifting. The hau was the smoking gun that drove the system:

> It (the hau) not only follows after the first recipient, and even, if the occasion arises, a third person, but after any individual to whom the taonga is merely passed on. In reality, it is the hau that wishes to return to its birthplace, to the sanctuary of the forest and the clan, and to the owner. The taonga or its hau – which itself moreover possesses a kind of individuality – is attached to this chain of users until these give back from their own property, their taonga, their goods, or from their labour or trading, by way of feasts, festivals and presents, the equivalent of something of even greater value. This in turn will give the donors authority and power over the first donor, who has become the last recipient… Finally, the thing given is not inactive. Invested with life, often possessing individuality, it seeks to return to what Hertz called its "place of origin" or to produce, on behalf of the clan and the native soil from which it sprang, an equivalent to replace it (Mauss 1990: 12-13).

To Mauss, the hau became a kind of material karma or "mystic cement," a superman's version of reciprocity that ensured gifts would migrate back to their original owner in one form or another. Metaphysics made the gift move.

On one hand, Mauss's reading of Maori gift exchange is quite narrow. He keeps spiritual powers restricted to particular objects; the end result is a kind of mercantilist's version of animism. Ranapiri indicated that hau was not restricted to possessions; the meaning of hau can range much wider to include the forest and other natural processes. Mauss"s interpretation of the hau, with its emphasis on direct reciprocity, seems to have more in common with Emile Durkheim's ideas about primitive religion than it does with the cosmological implications of gifting as Ranapiri saw them. As Durkheim described it: "Sacred things are simply collective ideals that have fixed themselves on material objects" (Lukes 1973: 25).

On the other hand, there appears to be a significant omission in Mauss's reading of Ranapiri's text that changes how the hau, and Maori economics in general are to be understood. In a compelling piece of detective footwork, Marshall Sahlins (1972) returned to the key primary text Mauss worked with, an obscure item called Transactions of the New Zealand Institute (1909), and pointed out the following oversight:

There is a very curious difference between the several versions of Best, Mauss, and Tamati Ranapiri. Mauss appears to deliberately delete Best's reference to the ceremony in the opening phrase. Best had cited "I will now speak of the hau, and the ceremony of whangai hau"; whereas Mauss has it merely, "Je vais vous parler du hau…" (ellipsis is Mauss's) (Sahlins 1972: 157).

It appears as though Mauss tailored the old Maori's text to suit his own usage of the concept of hau, for Mauss deliberately omitted mention of the ceremony of whangai hau. The ceremony of whangai hau is of critical importance to the idea that gift exchange moved beyond mere human activity. Whangai hau is the ritual by which restorative power is returned to the forest by Maori priests, ensuring that the forest will remain a source of fertility. Reciprocity does not fuel gift exchange; in the case of the Maori, the forest itself fuels gift exchange. The source of the gift's power is the forest! Only if Maori priests give ceremonial items (among other things) to the forest will the forest then continue giving to the Maori in return. In this second passage transcribed by Elsdon Best but overlooked by Mauss, "mauri" means the physical embodiment of the forest hau, like a talisman or offering of some kind (1972: 158):

> I will explain something to you about the forest hau. The mauri was placed or implanted in the forest by the tohunga (priests). It is the mauri that causes birds to be abundant in the forest, that they may be slain and taken by man. These birds are the property of, or belong to, the mauri, the tohunga, and the forest: that is to say, they are an equivalent for that important item, the mauri. Hence it is said that offerings should be made to the hau of the forest (1972: 158).

Sahlins maintained that Ranapiri all along was trying to demonstrate a cosmological principle to Best by means of an economic analogy. Taking both of Ranapiri's passages together, it becomes clear that gift exchange is not supposed to be restricted to a binary relationship between two people. Gifts are not supposed to be directly reciprocated to those who gave them in the first place. Acts of giving are meant to take place within a larger cosmological matrix.

While Mauss pointed out the presence of a third party in gift exchange, it appears as though he did not realize its importance. A third party must be involved in the transaction so as to open up the transaction from the very form of reciprocity Mauss insisted held the system together. In his analysis of whangai hau, Lewis Hyde (1983) observed there are three gifts given in this hunting ritual: from forest to hunter, from hunter to priest, and from priest to forest:

With a simple give-and-take, the hunters may begin to think of the forest as a place to turn a profit. But with the priests involved, the gift must leave the hunter's sight before it returns to the woods. The priests take on or incarnate the position of the third thing to avoid the binary relation of the hunters and the forest which by itself would not be abundant. The priests, by their presence alone, feed the spirit (1983: 18).

What is critical here is the presence of a third. Whether this third entity is a priest, an ancestor, a forest spirit, an animal, or some other being, the role of the third entity is to generate a veil of mystery around the gift. The gift must pass out of active control, away from the very calculation of reciprocity, and into some degree of numinous mystery in order to keep the spirit of the gift alive. This is the mechanism that allows gift exchange to include other beings and leap out of an exclusively human realm. A more detailed description of this third entity will take place in later chapters.

Mauss's brand of reciprocity-heavy gift exchange transformed gifting into something that, despite his intentions, contained shades of economic rationality. This is ironic; all along Mauss had been working within an anti-utilitarian platform, joining the likes of his uncle Emile Durkheim, Alexis de Tocqueville, Benjamin Constant and others. Gift exchange was an attempt on his part to add to this platform; he felt it was a viable alternative to market economics as a means of generating solidarity between people.

His over-emphasis on reciprocity drew him to a set of examples of gift exchange that further contradicted his deeper anti-utilitarian agenda. The examples of gifting that he chose – the nineteenth century Potlatch, and the Kula shell game of the Trobriand Islanders in particular – were characterized by a high degree of reciprocity. So instead of showcasing gift exchange as an instrument for generating healthy ties between people, the "wars of property" and "contests of honor" of the Pacific Rim and elsewhere did just the opposite. These gift exchanges placed the debtor in a subordinate position; the aim of the transactor was to acquire as many debtors as possible (Gregory 1982: 19). Interest rates were sky-high, ranging from thirty to one hundred percent a year (Mauss 1990: 42). The effects of these exchanges were remarkably similar – they served as a mechanism that pooled wealth, prestige, and power around key individuals, who then battled other key individuals for even more power and prestige, like multinational corporations during rutting season. An Inuk man accurately summed up the ethos of this form of gifting with these words: "With gifts you make slaves just as with whips you make dogs!" (Kelly 1995: 167).

When the veteran mythologist Paul Radin is on record describing the cultures from which Mauss drew his examples as "the capitalists of the north," it is clear that Mauss's efforts to advance a new, wild interpretation of the gift have slid off the tracks (Godbout 1998: 119). Mauss knew the Potlatch, Kula and others were not representative of gift exchanges; he even went so far as to call them "monstrous products" of gifting (Mauss 1990: 42). But he seemed at a loss to identify the reason why these gift exchanges went sour. As Ranapiri reminded us: "If I kept this other taonga for myself, serious harm might befall me, even death. This is the nature of the hau…" (1990: 11). The gift must always move. As I discuss at greater length in Chapter Five, those societies that keep the gift can be deformed and eventually destroyed by it.

Conclusion

The issues posed by Ranapiri in Best's transcription transcended the tit-for-tat reciprocity that Mauss picked up on and made central to his thesis. There is an element of reciprocity in every gift economy; on that note Mauss is correct. But its proper role eluded him and serves as the subject of the next chapter.

Echoing Ranapiri, Godbout insisted the hau needs to be interpreted as something so much larger than just the vital essence inhabiting exchanged goods. "The concept of the hau here takes the form of positive magic. It embodies the life force – breath – that which brings into the world and nurtures, the source of all growth and ripening" (Godbout 1998: 133).

In his discussion of the whangai hau, the Maori elder was hinting at the existence of a set of "table manners," a "gifted subsistence" or a "sacred pact" of some kind that stands as a nexus point through which humans interface with the rest of the world. This is the focus of this major paper. Mauss got us halfway to this point before succumbing to the ideological dragons he inevitably had to fight in order to clear space for a new interpretation of the gift. In my eyes, this remains his greatest achievement. Like an antiquated map left in the study of an old explorer, Mauss's trail tapers off here, and fades into the bush. We leave Mauss for now, taking with us his preliminary findings on how gift exchange intersects with the non-human world. Picking up his trail and following it through is the work of the rest of this paper.

Chapter Two

In the seemingly endless process of writing a major paper, I have come to appreciate the satisfaction of easily completed tasks – jobs that I can start and finish in a matter of fifteen minutes or so. Washing the dishes has become a favorite of mine. The hot, soapy water is relaxing, and it puts me in a contemplative mood. Some of my more lucid major paper-related thoughts have come while up to my elbows in soap bubbles, when my mind is free to roam and graze about the intellectual countryside.

For a while, out of a mixture of procrastination and restlessness, I often did my roommate's dishes as well. Not all of them - only the ones that happened to be lying in the vicinity of the sink. I figured that doing a few of his dishes from time to time was a friendly gesture. Ours was a cramped apartment, and every friendly show of cooperation surely would help make ours feel less cramped. As well, many things were shared in our house – the odd vegetable, a bit of hair gel, an egg or two. Why not do a few dishes too?

When living in such close quarters with another person, duties and responsibilities can often blur. Doing a little extra work now and again is a good way to keep the atmosphere supportive and friendly. The anthropologist John Price (1975) called this kind of economic behavior so characteristic of households and other tight groupings the "intimate economy":

> "Intimate" here means a social system which is small in scale and personal in quality, such that the members have extensive knowledge of one another, inter-personal sentiments have developed, and changing the identity of the persons would change their relationships (1975: 4).

Some time passed before I learned that my well-intentioned dishwashing was making my roommate feel uncomfortable – so much so that he took to hiding his dishes in a cupboard under the sink where I would not find them. He told me later, somewhat sheepishly, that whenever I did any of his dishes he felt like he owed me something, and that I had something on him. Hiding his dishes was a way of preventing his obligation to reciprocate (from the Latin reciprocus, "to return the same way").

I was surprised, to say the least. I did not expect any direct reciprocity for my dishwashing. I did not expect him to do my dishes in return. But in retrospect, I did expect something from him – a kind of deflected reciprocity – that when other things needed doing, he would not hesitate to jump in, regardless of where particular responsibilities lay. I expected that he too would contribute to a kind of ethos of sharing.

This story makes for an interesting parable for the discussion that makes up the rest of Chapter Two. My roommate confused my sense of a shared, intimate economy with the hard exchange mode of reciprocity. I made the mistake of assuming that the two of us indeed made up an intimate economy in the first place. We both confused sharing and reciprocity – the former is a kind of economic behavior found most predominantly among those are close, while the latter is a kind of economic behavior for those who are not close. Sharing seems to thrive within the intimate economy, while reciprocity lives between intimate economies.

In discussing the character of gift exchanges, sharing and reciprocity are the two synonyms that are used the most frequently. We saw in the last chapter how Marcel Mauss stumbled and eventually lost his emerging interpretation of the gift due to an over-reliance on the concept of reciprocity. But because of the popularity of his essay, gift exchange remains closely linked to reciprocity in most circles. Mauss is not alone in smearing gift exchange with either one of these two concepts. Others have overextended the concept of reciprocity at the expense of the gift. In his discussion of indigenous cosmologies, Wade Davis (2001) referred repeatedly to the “spiritual reciprocity” that develops between a people and their surroundings over time. David Abram (1996) wrote of the “sensorial reciprocity” between human beings and our surroundings. Michael Pollan (2001) described the web of life that connects all beings to one another as reciprocal in nature (2001: xxv). These authors, among many others, err in confusing reciprocity with something else – something much larger, diffuse, generalized, and mysterious.

Confusion over the nature of gift exchange remains because sharing and reciprocity have not yet been reconciled with one another within the body of the gift. What is the place of sharing in a gift economy? What is the place of reciprocity? And is it possible to reconcile them in the context of the gift? Therein lies the debate. Crossing this typological swamp is the focus of this chapter.

The Emergence of Sharing

Among many anthropologists, sharing is considered a kind of social glue that has held people together since time immemorial. “Reconstructions of hominid evolution have long assumed that evidence of sharing and especially the sharing of meat was critical in establishing the first appearance of humanity among Plio-Pleistocene hominids” (Kelly 1995: 162). Price adds: “Sharing has probably been the basic form of economic distribution in hominid societies for several hundred thousand years” (1975: 12).

The archaeologist Glynn Isaac (1978) argued that food sharing was one of humanity’s first key evolutionary steps. Food sharing was a cornerstone, an “evolutionary platform” that incorporated into one package the organization of a home base, the provision of plant and animal foods, and a division of labour (1978: 102). Sharing provided a rallying point around which people could come together. While sharing revolved first and foremost around the exchange of food, it also connected people to each other’s ideas, opinions, and feelings, opening up different avenues for all kinds of exchange: “We should not, of course, confine our understanding of sharing to the exchange of food. In addition to material goods, people share tasks, dwelling spaces, company, stories, and memories. In a word, they share each other” (Ingold 1999: 408).

Isaac goes on to argue that sharing constituted the foundation upon which other more “advanced” systems of exchange developed. “Food sharing and the kinds of behavior associated with it probably played an important part in the development of systems of reciprocal social obligations that characterize all human societies we know about” (1978: 106). From his perspective, there is a qualitative, evolutionary difference between sharing and reciprocity. Food sharing was a necessary phase in human development, one that was replaced as soon as humans got a better, larger part on the evolutionary stage. Modern humans do not share, they "reciprocate," a notion aided by Mauss and Marshall Sahlins' highly influential "Stone Age Economics" (1972). Sharing is something that we were to have mothballed. It was bulldozed over by reciprocity. Sharing is for proto-humans; it is what we did during our evolutionary kindergarten, and we left it when we left the carpet.

Map of the Heart

The anthropologist John Price has been my most helpful guide in crossing the typological swamp. Contra Isaac, Price (1975) felt that sharing is by no means a fossilized form of exchange. It is not restricted to any window of cultural evolution, nor has it been replaced by reciprocity as the cornerstone of economic allocation among humans. He argues the opposite: sharing is the most universal form of human economic behavior (1975: 3).

Sharing reflects the belief that our chances for survival are bolstered if we stay together. In its' strongest and most intimate form, sharing is for those whose fortunes and well-being are bound up with one another. It is a "within" relation, an economics of "us," of the fire circle, the hearth, the family. Sharing enforces a sense of belonging at a very basic level. It does this by recognizing the unique character of everyone involved in a so-called "sharing sphere." Potluck dinners would be dull, boring and starchy if everyone only brought potato salad. Sharing tells us that we are unique and different for a reason: to complement each other. Through sharing, a mosaic of personalities, lives, talents, and abilities are fused into an organic, diverse, yet complementary whole. In so doing, a field of symbiosis is generated between individuals, for it is an economics of connection and empathy, serving the emotional and sentimental bonds that grow between people.

Sharing also has a strong moral dimension to it – "We share because it is the right thing to do." Little thought is given to direct returns on shares given. This is the philosophy of "It will all come out in the wash," meaning that we should not count on a direct return from any particular individual, as I demonstrated in the story at the outset of this chapter. It is the system or the sharing ethos itself that will reward us. I am helped, I help others, but the relationship need not be a direct, binary one between the original party and myself.

The Intimate Economy

Sharing is the central rule of interaction in the intimate economy. The intimate economy is a social system small in scale and personal in quality, where members have developed extensive knowledge of one another and where interpersonal sentiments have formed (Price 1975: 4). Here sharing is constant and low key, a background noise of giving and receiving without much fanfare. Exchanges within the intimate economy are often unequal and flow in one direction, as in the case between a parent and child. "The economic roles of parents, husbands, wives, and children are usually framed as explicit social values in terms of sharing, rather than in terms of reciprocity or redistribution" (1975: 6). Some contribute more than others because they are in a position to do so. From each according to ability, to each according to need.

In North America, the intimate economy is found mainly at the household level, within the boundaries of the nuclear family. It occasionally forms in other small clusters – sports teams, theatre groups, music bands, circus troupes – the ghosts of tribal life. In other cultures, the intimate economy can be much larger. It can include any number of relatives, close friends, and so on. Whole bands can function according to the philosophy of the open pot:

Nayaka give to each other, request from each other, expect to get what they ask for, and feel obliged to give what they are asked for. They do not give resources in a calculated, foresighted fashion, with a view to receiving something in return, nor do they make claim for debts (Bird-David 1990: 191).

Sharing and Distance

In our own lives, we can recognize that we do not share equally with all people. Some people are closer to ourselves than others. Different degrees of sharing correspond with different degrees of distance between people – physical distance and emotional distance. Marshall Sahlins writes: "The span of social distance between those who exchange conditions the mode of exchange" (1972: 196). In a cross-cultural study of food sharing, Yehudi Cohen (1961) found a significant decrease in sharing correlated with increased spatial distance between households. Writing on north-west Alaska Eskimo cultures, Burch adds:

> The north-west Alaskan data also suggest why it is so easy to conclude that sharing was ubiquitous in traditional times. "Everyone in the village used to share" is a view that is often expressed by native elders today. But of course everyone in most villages used to belong to a single local family, which is the precise context in which generalized reciprocity (sharing) did occur (Burch 1988: 109).

As distances grow, rules around sharing can increase and become increasingly rigid. I witnessed a variation on this kind of rule-bound sharing while observing a three-day funeral ceremony in a small Toraja village in the highlands of southern Sulawesi in 1999. Two elderly members of a small hamlet community were being honored, drawing in relatives from around the surrounding countryside. Fourteen water buffalo were slaughtered on the last day of festivities, their souls meant to accompany the souls of the two deceased individuals to heaven. Once all the buffalo had been killed and the soil had soaked up most of the blood spilled, village elders descended upon the bodies of the buffalo with their machetes and every part of each buffalo made its way into piles that formed for every family represented at the ceremony. I got the impression that relationships between the families varied in intimacy and social distance. Perhaps owing to this, a tremendous amount of attention went into the appropriate division of meat. Piles of meat were carefully measured, haggled over and adjusted continuously depending on the family who would receive that pile. This process spanned a couple of hours, watched over judiciously by the whole community.

Leveling Mechanisms

Sharing should not be confused with altruistic generosity. Sharing may be the central rule of social interaction in intimate economies, but it is by no means the natural condition of humanity, nor is it the inevitable outcome of any one kind of social organization.

A whole range of leveling mechanisms can be used to enforce the sharing ethos to make sure that everyone stays onside. Lorna Marshall (1961) examined a litany of these mechanisms among the !Kung, including the use of songs, gossip, stories, meat sharing, and even the ownership of the arrows used in killing game to make sure that the hunter bringing back high ranked game has no choice but to hand out parcels of meat to others, even if this is done through insult or ridicule. “The society wants to extinguish in every way possible the concept of the meat belonging to the hunter” (Marshall1961: 73). Nicholas Peterson’s formulation of “demand sharing” further questions the dynamic of unsolicited generosity cited by some anthropologists. Peterson reminds us that much sharing is in response to direct verbal and non-verbal demands (Peterson 1993: 860). As we saw above, sharing is not always voluntary; it is often mandatory. Sharing rarely takes the form of unsolicited giving, and almost invariably takes place in response to requests, directed from those who lack something towards those whom they perceive have something they want (Ingold 1999: 408).

> Cigarettes, purchased through the cash economy, are a popular item among Western Desert Aboriginal men… A young man came into my camp and asked if I had any cigarettes. Aggrieved, I replied with some anger that people had taken all of mine, more or less including him as one of those who had taken advantage of me. Instead of taking offence… the young man sympathized with the fact that I had been taken advantage of, and offered me some of his cigarettes! Further, he took it upon himself to explain that I should not give my things away so easily. Instead, I should hide what I had – he showed me how he hid a packet of cigarettes in his socks under his trousers – and then I could simply tell people that, unfortunately, I had no cigarettes (but would surely give them some if I had). Giving me a whole packet, Jimmy told me he had several buried near his camp (Myers 1988: 56).

Demand sharing reflects the tensions that inevitably develop between an individual’s autonomy and relatedness to a larger social group (Peterson 1993: 870). While we all have the ability to share with others, this quote reveals that some people may chafe at the social control exercised over them in order to maintain the system.

The emergence of demand sharing and evidence of leveling mechanisms revealed by Western anthropology does not suggest that under the façade of well-intentioned sharing lies the understructure of calculated economic rationality. These societal “devices” are not against the rules of sharing; they support them. Just because sharing can be informed by self-conscious strategy and by an assessment of what is appropriate in a given situation does not make sharing into something negative (Peterson 1993: 870).

The Land of Tit-For-Tat

Reciprocity is the most common form of economic allocation beyond the intimate sphere. It is a “between” relation, involving sides or parties acting and reacting across a particular economic or social boundary (Sahlins 1972: 188). Intimacy is not a part of reciprocal relations. But reciprocity integrates exchange between households, communities, or societies in a more effective way than sharing could (Price 1975: 20).

Exchange is primary and social relations are subservient in reciprocal exchange. "Bands and tribes… developed the reciprocal principle that things should be equal in exchanges beyond the intimate sphere" (1975: 21). Reciprocity is an economic lingua franca or traders' pidgin; it is for people who are not close nor are members of the same intimate economy. This is the land of tit-for-tat, of "You do this and I"ll do that," where the certainty of a direct return replaces the uncertainty of "It will all come out in the wash." Another interesting but confusing tour guide through the typological swamp is Marshall Sahlins. In his book "Stone Age Economics" (1972) Sahlins describes a whole suit or "scheme" of reciprocities that account for all economic transactions across human societies.

> It seems possible to lay out in abstract fashion a continuum of reciprocities, based on the "vice-versa" nature of exchanges, along which empirical instances encountered in the particular ethnographic case can be placed… the spirit of exchange swings from disinterested concern for the other party through mutuality to self-interest (1972: 193).

According to his map of the typological swamp, the three key guideposts to watch for along the way are "generalized reciprocity," "balanced reciprocity," and "negative reciprocity."

Generalized reciprocity matches Price's definition of sharing covered above. It is synonymous with hospitality, free gifts, help, generosity, kinship dues, chiefly dues, noblesse oblige, and "weak reciprocity" (1972: 194). According to Sahlins, this type of reciprocity involves little or no expectation of a material return. This is the economy of the suckling child: "The material side of the transaction is repressed by the social… the expectation of reciprocity is indefinite" (1972: 194).

In contemporary life, we are most familiar with his second category, "balanced reciprocity." This involves a direct, equal exchange on an immediate or near immediate basis. Parties confront each other as distinct economic and social interests, and any social relations between the two are secondary to the material flow between them. This is less personal, and decidedly more economic than generalized reciprocity (1972: 195). This relationship is at the heart of modern market economics - money that changes hands between a grocery store clerk and a customer exemplifies balanced reciprocity. I give to make you give.

Finally "negative reciprocity," the "unsociable extreme," involves the interaction of opposed economic interests. It is also known as haggling, barter, gambling, chicanery, theft, and other forms of seizure (1972: 195). Each participant is looking to maximize gain at the other's expense; transactions are conducted towards what Sahlins called "net utilitarian advantage" (1972: 195).

As with different incarnations of sharing, Sahlins' distinction between these forms of reciprocity depends on the social distance between parties involved.[2] He sketches out a floor plan for reciprocal relations, a set of "kinship residential sectors" beginning in the home with generalized reciprocity and ending in negative reciprocity in the intertribal sector (1972: 199).

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[2] Reciprocity works best when we consider it as a "between" relation, providing an economic *lingua franca* connecting disparate and far flung groups together. One of the best documented examples of balanced reciprocity comes from Polly Weissner (1982) and her work with the !Kung of the Kalahari. From an intra-tribal perspective, sharing is the norm among the !Kung, and band economics match Price's definition of the intimate economy. But

The Trouble With Reciprocity

To some degree, Sahlins' floor plan is useful. Degrees of social distance do seem to condition the character of the exchange between individuals. Yet for starters, I question his use of the term generalized reciprocity. I agree with Price that Sahlins has overextended the concept of reciprocity. Sahlins noted that it is a long way from a suckling child to a Plains Indians' horse-raid, perhaps too long a distance for his classifications to bridge (1972: 196). His rigid emphasis on reciprocity as the sole means of crossing the swamp makes for reckless traveling. If reciprocity is the intellectual calculation of returns across an economic or social boundary, then how can this explain the heaps of selfless acts performed by everyone from nursing mothers to firefighters to children who share their toys and strangers who pick up hitchhikers? How does this account for individuals who give for the intrinsic pleasure of giving?

Other researchers are to be criticized for floating these blank cheques and over-extending the concept of reciprocity. Contra Abram (1996), how can the exchange between our senses and our surroundings be considered a reciprocal one? How is seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, feeling, or sensing a matter of calculation? Or conscious intellect? I apply the same criticism to Wade Davis (2001) and his use of reciprocity to describe spirituality, and as well to Michael Pollan (2001) and his description of the food web as reciprocal in design. Too often these individuals are using the term reciprocity to describe something that seems to also involve elements of sharing and gifting. While I do agree that some measure of reciprocity is involved in these interactions, not every form of interaction on the planet can be broken down and accounted for exclusively with "tit-for-tat" relations. To do so is to draw the pall of economic rationality out even further over all of life.

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inter-tribally a different economic arrangement prevails, in the form of a set of reciprocal relations called the "*hxaro*" that cover the !Kung like a social security blanket. The *hxaro* is a systematic way of ensuring that needs are met on a regular basis. It is an exchange network used to keep a wide range of contacts and possibilities open in the face of a highly variable climate (Wiessner 1982: 62). It involves the near-constant exchange of ceremonial items in good times, which serves to facilitate the availability of food during bad times. Through this unique system of reciprocal relations, access to faraway crops, goods, watering holes and portions of large game kills in neighboring camps can be secured when needed. A continual balanced flow of reciprocated gifts is important to let each partner know the relationship is still intact (1982: 67). The flexibility of the *hxaro* cannot simply result from a spontaneous bending to meet the needs of others as they arise, as in sharing, but must be the product of a structured set of social relations (1982: 61). Working out who has and who is in need is the tension that holds the system together, and an estimated sixty percent of topics of conversation revolve around who had what and did or did not give to whom (1982: 68). Prestige tokens circulate through !Kung society, linking individuals across considerably long distances into a vast collective security net. One group, the /Xai/xai !Kung, have approximately seventy percent of their *hxaro* partnerships in their own area and in adjacent ones up to fifty kilometers away, and thirty percent of their partners in more distant areas anywhere from fifty to two hundred kilometers away. Thus the *hxaro* is a social method of pooling risk through the storage of social obligations.

The Biology of Connection

Gift-giving is not an "either-or" phenomenon with regards to sharing and reciprocity. Contrary to popular interpretations of the gift, sharing and reciprocity are not mortal enemies but allies united within the embrace of gift exchange. There is an enigmatic relationship between all three components, one difficult to decipher, yet it is this relationship that shapes the many-sided character of gifting. "Gift exchange draws both the principle of sharing and the principle of reciprocity, with quite a wide continuum of the expectations of return" (Price 1975: 22). Gifting is part of a process that complements a coupling of sharing and reciprocity. Any discussion that leaves out any one of these three components by overextending another misreads the biology of the gift, leaving us with a false sense of its anatomy.

In some ways, gifts and shares mirror each other. They both have a heavily weighted social dimension, yet shares tend to be accepted without comment or expressions of gratitude (1975: 23). Sharing involves a low level of protocol, and is ubiquitous to the point that it makes up a near ever-present background hum. In contrast, gift exchange is high in symbolic weight and involves more social formality (1975: 23).

Gifting resembles sharing; they are as close as a wolf and a dog. The big difference is that sharing takes place mostly within the intimate economy, while gift exchange takes place across the membrane of the intimate economy and connects its members to the larger world. If we can consider sharing as a kind of social communion, then some forms of gifting act as an invitation to join the source of that communion. Gifts offer to us the possibility of closer relationships with one another, however temporarily.

For example, food is often given as a minor gift to people who are usually beyond the sharing sphere (1975: 21). "Make yourself at home" is another way of saying "Let us share the same needs and let us share a sense of well being." Acts of hospitality extend patterns of sharing to outsiders for a short period of time. But guests only get a free ride for so long before they slip into chrysalis and emerge, transformed, as moochers. Long-term visitors are expected to participate in the group's economic activities and become part of the sharing circle (1975: 23). Gifts open the door to the intimate economy but they cannot hold it open indefinitely.[3]

According to this interpretation of gift exchange, gifting is the mechanism that allows our intimate economies to connect to the rest of the world. The intimate economy is not a closed system; like any other being, it requires respiration with what lies outside it in order to survive. Gift exchange allows participants to cycle in and out of this sphere. In a sense, gifting, reciprocating, and sharing can be used in varying combinations and in varying degrees to regulate our social contacts that fill our intimate economies. A willingness to reciprocate the attentions and gifts of others brings other beings into our inner rings. A slow or sudden withdrawal in communication allows that being to pass back outside and into relationships and obligations with others. The word “communication” is used here in its original sense – the root of this word is “munus,” Latin for “gift.” To co-muni-cate, as Genevieve Vaughan (1997) pointed out astutedly, is the sharing of gifts (1997: 37).

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[3] In this sense, gifts mimic the same function as the song-lines of aboriginal Australia. The song-lines are metaphysical paths expressed through song that link sacred site to sacred site across the continent, surely one of humanity's great works of mythic cartography.

This is not to say that all forms of gift exchange lead to healthy, intimate, egalitarian relationships between people. Gifts can be refused, and offers of friendship can be declined in favor of hostile relations, neutrality or loose alliances. We are not always open to the attentions of others. Societal forces at work can influence the motivations of those doing the giving, turning gift exchange into a competition for prestige or an enslavement device. And even if we embark on a gift exchange with someone else that leads to a sperm and egg-like union inside the intimate economy, there is no guarantee all will be bubblegum bliss – we might find a manipulative partner, an abusive spouse, a tyrannical chief, a domineering parent, love, murder, slavery, bliss; the options range as wide and as far as the human condition does.

The Returning Echo

Reciprocity rounds out the troika. It is the necessary third element in the process, neither more nor less important than gifting and sharing. In the context of the form of gift exchange that serves to bring people closer together, to reciprocate is to acknowledge and to some degree accept an invitation to that closer connection. Reciprocity is response; it is a feedback signal, like the use of echolocation that allow bats to know where they are in relation to other objects, other bats, and other beings. It is a reminder that we must give back, and in the return signal from others, we are able to locate ourselves. We cannot join the intimate economy of another being without that being joining our own. We cannot only take; we must give in return, and this return gift is how our membership is secured and how our dues are paid. Reciprocity allows the cycle or as Godbout described it the “spiral” of gifting and sharing to continue (Godbout 1998: 132).

Keeping gifting, reciprocating, and sharing in balance is a precarious pursuit. Gift economies can surge out of balance when one component is favored over others – the likely reason behind the development of Mauss’s “monstrous examples” mentioned in the first chapter, wherein reciprocity (with inflation!) became the central rule of interaction between gift partners. By itself, reciprocity does promote a particular kind of connection, and as Mauss indicated, any connection is preferable to a state of war between peoples and nations. But the connection reciprocity generates is weak and tenuous. To rely solely on reciprocity overextends and overburdens the mechanism.

Reciprocity moves like a clumsy dancer when used as a proxy for sharing within the sphere of the intimate economy. Whenever I see it practiced at this level, I am always struck by how counter-intuitive it looks. I once knew a young couple that had been dating for several years and the guy kept detailed notes – a ledger sheet – that accounted for who had paid for what, stretching back over their entire courtship. It was all there, in dollars and cents. This ledger sheet became a financial compass that determined who ought to pick up the next tab to right the ship. Reciprocity can reduce intimate relations to business interests.

Current waves of neo-liberalism seek to repeat the dynamic of my friends' relationship by expanding the role of reciprocity within our society at the expense of the intimate economy. Modern market orthodoxy elevates reciprocity to the status of a "prime mover" in the development of human societies and as an intrinsic part of human nature. In many Western societies, this aggressive form of economics has eaten back the intimate economy to the circle of the nuclear family, and threatens to push further in like a rainforest under siege to loggers, especially if current divorce rates and other signs of familial dysfunction are taken into account. No one knows if this experiment in social engineering conducted by our politicians and their patrons will work. Their research question is this: in the absence of an intimate economy, can economic transactions based solely on reciprocity hold our societies together? How small can the intimate economy be shorn before it too starts to unravel?

The Ecology of the Intimate Economy

Taken as a sequence, sharing is the end result when someone or something reciprocates a gift given, and joins us in the warmth of the intimate economy. Gifting, then reciprocating, then sharing. Through this process, lives are blended. To some degree, it is a matter of where we get off on this merry-go-round sequence that shapes the character of gift exchange. If we follow the process only so far as reciprocity, using gift exchange solely for impersonal, economic, or political ends, then we will end up with a form of gift exchange potentially competitive in design, patterned by degrees of reciprocal returns. But if we take gift exchange to its natural end, and use it as a personal and cultural tool with which to negotiate intimate relationships with other people, then we can "thread" ourselves closer together as gifts become shares.

I remain most interested in this form of the gift – the gift used as needle and thread to stitch the world together. In arriving at this pocket-sized definition of the gift, the typological swamp has for the most part been crossed. In reaching the other side of the swamp, we meet a wholly different challenge. As indicated in the first chapter, and as my language above indicates – to stitch the world together – I feel that this kind of gift exchange is not restricted to the realm of anthropology books and human affairs, as Mauss foresaw. Gift exchange involves more than just humans. How gift exchange escapes the strict confines of the human realm is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three

What role does the rest of the world have in gift exchange? Lead actor? Bit player? Painted backdrop? According to Jacques Godbout (1998), the answer to this question depends on which of the two major interpretations of the gift we reference. The economic interpretation keeps the gift bound to the realm of human economies like a muted prisoner, while the indigenous interpretation follows the gift into the larger rhythms of the world, a captured circus elephant returning to the wild.

Once again, reciprocity is instrumental to this discussion. Interpretations of the gift can be distinguished from each other by varying degrees of reciprocity. As levels of reciprocity go from high to low, or from "direct reciprocity" to "deflected reciprocity," the role of nature is transformed from land of scourge to provider, from a place of scarcity to the source of all abundance. Like fratricidal brothers, these two interpretations are at odds with each other. Both interpretations are part of vastly different narratives concerning the purpose of exchange and the character of the earth.

Savage World

According to economic interpretations of the gift, the world is not to be trusted. It is a violent backdrop to human activities, a place seething with unpredictability. Food supplies could run out at any moment; scarcity reigns over the landscape like a flock of hungry vultures. Game disappears. Earth is like a frontier outpost, where life is hard and without mercy. Life has to be scratched from the soil. Humans are lone carriers of intelligence and reason, surrounded by incomprehensible darkness; we are like shipwreck survivors on a deserted island or inhabitants of a lonely garrison. I am again reminded of the films of Howard Hawks - one of the recurring themes he explored throughout his career is of a group of brave and courageous people, huddled together in a cabin somewhere, taking refuge in whatever warmth human camaraderie can provide while outside the elements swirl around menacingly.

The so-called "reciprocated gift" is a safe bet in this kind of a world. This is tit-for-tat exchange. It is a response, an insulating mechanism and a protective buffer against the vagaries of a world in constant flux, reflecting a sense of distrust or unease with the world as it is. It perpetuates a bunker-like, prepare-for-the-worst mentality that promotes a separation of humans from nature.

A person has a lot more control over whether or not a neighbour can be made to reciprocate a gift than he or she does over weather patterns, or hunting and farming returns. In this kind of system, we exchange with others as a matter of self-interest. Exchange has to be a sure thing. There is no room for a margin of error; the caprices of nature will not allow for it. We give so that we receive – do ut des – and lines of exchange are as close to direct as possible. By charging interest on gifts, as we saw in the first chapter, we could make our way through the world living off of our returns, a concept that finds a modern-day incarnation in foreign currency speculation and the stock market.

Direct reciprocity encourages "me first" utilitarian thinking (Vaughan 1997: 38). It encourages the safeguarding of interests, and the calculation of the value of return. "Am I getting a fair deal here?" In so doing, direct reciprocity also encourages fierce competition between people. In its most dangerous incarnations, patterns of direct reciprocity can lead to escalations in conflict, encouraging an eye-for-an-eye Old Testament formula for violent retribution (1997: 37).

Even free or "unreciprocated" gifts are utilitarian and self-serving according to this interpretation of the gift. Nothing is free in this world. The gift is "…the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest" (Mauss doing his typical Jekyll and Hyde act on the nature of the gift; 1990: 3). The altruism of the free gift is nothing more than just another avenue to pleasure for the individual (Godbout 1998: 7).

He Who Stumbles Along

Proponents of the economic interpretation of the gift would find a character like St. Francis of Assisi bewildering. He was the "radical gift giver par excellence" (Timmerman unpublished). Instead of insulating himself from the world through exchange, material possessions, wealth, and standing, St. Francis turned to poverty in order to draw nearer to God, and to embrace God's Creation as it was. Like a snake shedding its skin, he left his old life behind with his clothing in a memorable confrontation with his father, a merchant, in the square in Perugia when he sloughed off his clothes and gave them away on the spot.

This would be a recurring motif in his life – giving away the clothes off his back without a second thought, regardless of weather, circumstance, or the fact they would be left naked without their clothing. This signature act was at the core of his philosophy for interacting with the world: everything was to be given away, without any form of reciprocation other than the knowledge that they were living according to God's true counsel.

> …If they were traveling along the road and found the poor begging from them for the love of God, when they had nothing to offer them, they would give them some of their clothing even though it was shabby. Sometimes they gave their capuche, tearing from the tunic; at other times they gave a sleeve, or tore off a part of their habit, that they might fulfill that Gospel passage "Give to all who beg from you" (Legend of the Three Companions: 94).

A key tenet of his philosophy was the belief that no thought was to be taken for the future – no plans, no stockpiling of goods, no bank accounts, nothing. Like an immediate return hunter-gatherer, sustenance was to be drawn on a daily basis from whatever God saw fit to provide for them. For St. Francis, this went so far as to forbid the softening of beans in water the day before their consumption:

> Therefore he told the brother who did the cooking for the brothers, that when he wanted the brothers to eat beans, he should not put them in warm water in the evening for the next day, as people usually do. This was so the brothers would observe the words of the holy Gospel: "do not be concerned about tomorrow" (The Assisi Compilation: 152)

In one episode that encapsulates the feast-or-famine nature of an existence lived fully in the moment, St. Francis ordered his brothers to provide a meal to a wealthy visiting doctor. Ashamed, his brothers tried to tell him that they had nothing on hand to offer the man, save a bit of bread and wine. St. Francis told his companions: "O you of little faith! Don't make me tell you again!" The story continues:

> The brothers went and set the table. With embarrassment, they placed the little bread and wine they had as well as the few greens they had prepared for themselves. When they had sat down at the table and eaten a bit, there was a knock on the door of the hermitage. One of the brothers rose, went and opened the door. And there was a woman with a large basket filled with beautiful bread, fish, crabcakes, honey, and freshly-picked grapes, which had been sent to brother Francis by a lady of a town about seven miles away from the hermitage… "My brothers," the doctor told them, "neither you nor we sufficiently recognize the holiness of this saint" (The Assisi Compilation: 171).
>
> Little thought for their future survival was taken, lest their plans interfere with God's plans for them. A quote from James Joyce comes to mind: "Chance furnishes me what I need. I am like a man who stumbles along; my foot strikes something, I bend over and it is exactly what I want" (source unknown).

St. Francis and his brothers did not carry or accept money. To accept alms that could have gone to those more in need was shameful, for they had willingly accepted poverty – Christ's poverty: "Above all they trampled upon money as if it were dirt under their feet, and, as they had been taught by the saint, considered it as equal in worth and weight to the dung of an ass" (Legend of the Three Companions: 94).

This was a life lived by the grace of God. Nothing was to be taken; even on his deathbed he told his brothers that he would not take any more nourishment, yet if they wanted to give him some, he would not refuse it. In Wade Davis's eloquent words, St. Francis and his brothers demonstrated that it was possible to cast oneself out upon the benevolence of the world and emerge not only largely unscathed, but transformed (Davis 2001: 24). We can walk out into the world and be taken care of. They refused material wealth for a deeper, arguably more fulfilling wealth – internal riches, the gold within – the rewards of a life lived dedicated to a larger spiritual matrix, and to a vision of the world as a place of frequent plenty and occasional famine.

The Gifting Environment

Like St. Francis, there have been many other individuals and other cultures who believe or have believed that the environment itself is a giving entity, capable of providing for the many needs of the human being. Writing on the indigenous peoples of the northwest Amazon, ethnobotanist Mark Plotkin (1993) noted: "When a Westerner looks at the jungle, he sees green – herbs, vines, shrubs, trees. When an Indian looks at the jungle, he sees the basics of life – food, medicines, and raw materials to build shelters, weave hammocks, and carve a hunting bow" (1993: 78). The world can be seen as a place of primary abundance and secondary scarcity. It is possible to cooperate with the world instead of railing against it.

This version of the gift is called the "indigenous interpretation" by Jacques Godbout. According to my dictionary, "indigenous" means a person, animal or plant native to an area (Gage 2002: 457). To be indigenous is to have lived in a place long enough to become intimately familiar with the intricate ebb and flow of life processes passing through that area. The indigenous interpretation of the gift is based on a long-standing, long-maintained storehouse of ecological knowledge built up through many lives, experiences and observations. It views gift exchange as a phenomenon that mimics natural rhythms. Human cycles of gift-giving are only one form of gifting found among an infinite number of other cycles of gift exchange, large and small, radiating out in all directions, connecting each being to every other being. Thus gifting is a total social phenomenon in the broadest sense of the word "social."

Here the role of reciprocity is markedly different. While the economic interpretation placed a premium on direct or near immediate reciprocity and the demand of an equivalent or greater return, this version loosens the reins on reciprocity and relaxes the need for a direct return. Lowering the degree of expected reciprocity opens up the system, making it less mechanical and more organic. Suddenly gift exchange is no longer a binary, tit-for-tat, carefully monitored program.

"Deflected reciprocity" as I call it forces us to re-think the nature of gift exchange. As the example of St. Francis demonstrated, the giver does not give away in order to reduce uncertainty. The giver does the opposite – we create a permanent zone of uncertainty around ourselves (Godbout 1998: 189). The idea is to leave the other as free as possible to reciprocate or not, and free also to choose what must be given in return (1998: 188). Gift exchange is not used as a collective social safety net or as a buffer mechanism. Calculation of returns is consciously abandoned; there is no guarantee of reciprocation. We honor this system in the following way: we are free to receive, but we must reciprocate. On this note, however, we are also free to reciprocate to whomever. As long as the gift continues to move, and we continue to give, then the system continues to function, and gifts flow to where they are needed. What emerges is a particular stance towards the world – a gifting ethos – based on a set of observations about how the world operates.

When we relax demands of direct reciprocity, we allow gift exchange to be bathed in the creative forces of imagination and unpredictability. As a result, the return gift can often change shape as it moves from person to person. The gift of fifty cents to someone on the street is "reciprocated," we could say, by the return gift of a cup of coffee offered by a gracious host, or an invitation to dinner by friends. A prized magazine accidentally left on a city bus may offer a flash of insight to the next person who picks it up.

There are no free or unreciprocated gifts in this system if we consider it in its entirety. Everything ends up somewhere. We only have to re-adjust our perceptual scales and points of reference to see that this is so. It is the system that we give back to and offer service to, the larger metaphysical and spiritual infrastructure that wins over our belief and devotion – not any one individual. People are constantly working out their pact with the world: testing it, honoring it, trying to squeeze as much as they can from it, disrespecting it, returning to it humbled. People screw up. Early success can swell participants' sense of themselves – a promotion, an election, a great heroic feat – this can trick them into the mistaken belief that the creative power responsible for their success lies within them. Thinking they are the One, they no longer do what is necessary to honor the pact – to give, selflessly and with humility, guarding against pride, self-importance, or vainglory.

To place our faith in the gift's larger spiritual matrix is to accept that everything happens for a reason, that everything has a place. This is the bargain of unicorns: I will believe and trust in you if you will believe and trust in me. We give and reciprocate in order to honor a vision of the cosmos that involves the circulation of all things and all beings (Goldman 1975: 124). Everything goes somewhere.

Implicit in this view of the world is the belief that everything happens for a reason. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of the indigenous interpretation of the gift because those reasons behind what happens to us are not necessarily revealed to us on the spot. Finding meaning in tragedy, in disaster, in holocaust, in the death of a parent does not come easily. Meaning can be hidden from us for years, and revealed in a single, glittering instant, out of nowhere. This is the spirit of the gift. The gifting cosmos asks us this: “Can you find the connection? Can you find the meaning?” In other words, can we hang around long enough to find the meaning of events before we drift into nihilism and despondency? Learning the way of the gift means learning how to spot these emerald buoys of meaning, true Inukshuks of the spirit that in a single moment can provide our souls with much needed light.

Creative Mystery

When we move between interpretations of the gift, we can say that direct reciprocity and the certainty it brings are traded for uncertainty and a life lived by whatever the world puts before us. We can also think of it in terms of exchanging certainty for mystery. But mystery is not just an add-on to the indigenous interpretation of the gift. On the contrary, the gift requires creative mystery like a fish needs water.

Lewis Hyde (1983) argued that in order to escape the shallow boundaries of direct reciprocity, gift exchange requires the presence of an unseen third party. The gift needs to pass out of sight, given blindly around a corner and out of our control before it can come back to us:

> The smaller the circle is – and particularly if it involves just two people – the more a man can keep his eye on things and the more likely it is that he will start to think like a salesman. But so long as the gift passes out of sight it cannot be manipulated by one man or one pair of gift partners (1983: 16).

La Petite Parisienne

The importance of the role of the unseen third is perfectly captured in the recent French film Amelie (2000), directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Amelie is about a young reclusive Parisienne who uses anonymous good deeds to restore peoples’ faith in the world as a meaningful and beautiful place. Her adventure begins when she discovers a tiny toy box hidden behind a loose tile in the bathroom of her apartment. With some effort, she tracks down the owner of the box, Monsieur Brotodeux, a man now in his fifties who lived in the same apartment as a child.

Instead of outright giving Brotodeux the toy box and the childhood treasures it contains, Amelie plants it in a telephone booth for him to find. Lured over by the ringing telephone, he discovers the box. It is a moment that staggers with meaning as Brotodeux’s childhood rushes back upon him, moving him to tears. Before her eyes, a soul is brought back to life like a Christmas tree plugged in. For Brotodeux, he gains a new perspective on his own life quickly passing, and vows to right past wrongs by reaching out to his estranged daughter and grandson. A vital connection with the world is re-established.

Yet Amelie refuses to take credit for her deeds. She does not reveal herself to him. She is the unseen third party to him, the unseen other. Perhaps his rediscovered sense of wonder in the world would have been defused by a confession on her part. The wild mystery of how a piece of his childhood ended up in an empty phone booth beside a ringing telephone would have been diminished if the instigator of that mystery had been identified. The gift of the toy box would have been less powerful. Had Brotodeux known of Amelie's strategem, he could have directly thanked her, perhaps even reciprocated somehow in some way, and balanced the score. It would have come from her, from another person, and not from the world at large. "The gift leaves all boundary and circles into mystery" (Hyde 1983: 20). To believe in the unseen other is to believe in the possibility of mystery, and that anything can happen.

Reciprocation for him is now deflected and indirect. Filled with blind gratitude, the only score left to settle is with his life, and the people in it. His example illustrates the idea that deflected reciprocity grows exponentially. A single rock causes many ripples that touch the whole pond.

It would be too easy to discard Brotodeux's rejuvenation as something that was all in his head – an act of assisted social construction. The world isn't really a giving place, we could argue, Amelie only made it look that way. But she was only the vehicle through which this connection took place. It was no act of calculation that brought the box to her attention in the first place, nor was she alone in her efforts to track him down. Others intervened when she stumbled, and assisted her as was necessary. Amelie was only going about giving the way the world itself goes about giving. Humans can make the connections and provide the stimulus required to stitch lives back together, but we cannot fully comprehend the ramifications of these restored connections. We can build bird houses in our backyards and rehabilitate wetlands near bicycle paths, but we can never know what species will find solace in these gifts, nor can we know the long-term, cumulative effects of these gifts on the health of species and ecosystems.

Eyes Wide Open

The unseen other is the key to a broader perceptual orientation. Because of the unseen other, our eyes can open to a canvas of the world filled with more than just concrete, computer screens, televisions and tract homes. By acknowledging the mysterious unseen third party in gift exchange, we recognize that the gift must leave human control and pass out into the world. In so doing, we also expand the range of potential reciprocators. "When we are in the spirit of the gift we love to feel the body open outward," Lewis Hyde wrote (1983: 17). The unseen other is the mechanism that opens us up to a whole host of interactions with other beings.

Tim Ingold (1999) argued that the concept of "society" as it is used at present is divisive in nature, "parceling out" instead of "drawing in" others (1999: 408). It is an exclusionary concept. "Society" carves the world up into blocks of humans. Writing on the social relations of hunter-gatherers, Ingold suggested that they demonstrate the possibility of a perceptual orientation towards others in the social environment that is direct and unobstructed, rather than mediated or contained by structures of control (1999: 408).

> Perhaps we could go further to suggest that this perceptual orientation is not confined to relations among human beings. It also extends to non-human components of the environment: to animals and plants, even to features of the landscape we might regard as inanimate (1999: 409).

The social environment is exactly that – a whole environment that is social that we can interact with, regardless of the particular species involved. This coincides perfectly with biological and ecological definitions of community that take into account all species in a given area, not only human beings. E.O. Wilson (1999) defines community as: "All the organisms – plants, animals, and microorganisms – that live in a particular habitat and affect one another as part of the food web or through their various influences on the physical environment" (1999: 394). Organisms interact with one another, their lives intermingle, they are connected. It is interesting to hold Wilson's definition next to Vaughan's (1997) deconstruction of the word "community", wherein she recognized that the root of "community" is "munus", meaning "gift." A community, therefore, is also a collection of individuals who come together to share gifts. Ingold noted that our very definition of sociality could be flawed:

> In short the rigid division that Western thought and science draws between the worlds of society and nature, of persons and things, does not exist for hunters and gatherers. For them there are not two worlds but one, embracing all the manifold beings that dwell therein…There are, of course, as many kinds of relationships as there are kinds of beings, but the differences are relative, not absolute (1999: 409).

If we engage the world with our eyes opened by the potential of the unseen other, we can recognize that gifts can come from anywhere, for everything is able to reciprocate or give back, even just by showing themselves to us, or through the tasks they perform that we benefit from. Rescuing worms off the sidewalk after a rain is a gift to the worms, to the soils they invigorate, to the birds that feed off them, and to ourselves because we again feel connected to this web of connections.

Letting a dragonfly land on your arm or on the brim of your cap instead of swatting her away is a gift to that dragonfly. It receives rest and a perch from which it can study the landscape through bulbous eyes. A little natural history reveals how we are the lucky ones in this exchange: the dragonfly is a living relic of the Paleozoic and one of the few survivors of the Permian extinction two hundred and forty five million years ago, the greatest spasm of death of all time. She is also one of the great innovators: with her stiff wings, she was one of the first to take to the skies during the very dawn of flight hundreds of millions of years ago, putting the Wright Brothers and the flight of the Kitty Hawk less than a century ago to shame (Wilson 1999: 95). We can consider it an honor and a gift to be accepted into such illustrious company.

I once asked a colleague of mine who had a particular love of ornithology just why he loved birds and bird watching. His response was lovely and simple: "Because I see a bird and it makes me happy." These too are gifts – the sight of a bird, a flash of color off to one side, or its song drifting through the trees like mist. Gifts move quickly, creating connection on an exponential basis wherever they go. I never understood bird watching until this conversation with him. Slowly over the last few years my own enthusiasm has grown. My friend's words were a gift to me because they awakened in me a growing love for birds, and now the presence of birds is a gift as well. Where there was once dull incomprehension and disinterest, there is now a child-like popping open of my mouth at the sight of a great blue heron or a turkey vulture spotted on high from the cliffs of the Escarpment.

The Spirit of the World

This perceptual orientation allows us to become slowly aware of the presence of others, of environmental feedback, of the mind-bending size of the sky on a day filled with billowy clouds. Nature communicates in signs. All of these signs are gifts, full of meaning and information. Being able to recognize that we live in a gifting cosmos is a perceptual orientation often referred to as “animism.”

Animism is one of anthropology’s oldest puzzles (Descola 1996: 82). The concept of animism was first introduced by Edward Tylor in his 1871 work, “Primitive Culture,” and it is one of anthropology’s earliest concepts. Animism has been traditionally defined as a shared pattern of ideas about a pervasive life-force found in living beings and inanimate objects (Waterson 1997: 115). In other words, the world is alive – all of it. Animism has long been thought of as a colossal conceptual mistake on the part of “primitive” peoples, nothing more than a laughable misreading of the environment.

Perhaps a more nuanced definition of animism is required. According to the cultural historian Thomas Berry, animism unites humans with all other components of the universe in a single integral-entity universe (1999: 193). Nature becomes contiguous with society and together they constitute an integrated order represented in some cultures as a grand society or a cosmic nature (Arhem 1996: 185).

Animism removes the boundary between the human world and the rest of the world. It creates an “ouverture” – an opening – through which other beings can enter into our lives. It involves more than anything else the expansion of relations out into the non-human world. It opens up the possibility that we can connect with any beings, “animate” or “inanimate.” It expands the range of options of whom we can interact with.

Animism reveals the possibility that we are never truly alone. “Traditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature – however wild, remote, even desolate the place may be – is never truly alone. The surroundings are aware, sensate, personified. They feel” (Nelson 1983: 14). To look at a forest is to be looked at by that same forest. To touch a tree is to be touched by that tree. If the surroundings are considered as sensate beings themselves, then it means the whole world is watching and participating in life processes. “The country knows. If you do wrong things to it, the whole country knows. It feels what is happening to it. I guess everything is connected together somehow, under the ground” (Nelson 1983: 241).

Animism demonstrates that relatedness and relationship surpass the human world. What is being called “animism” by Western anthropologists is better thought of as a willingness to open oneself up to other beings. “It is not an article of faith in any Indian religion that everything has spirit. What happens in the different Indian religions is that people live so intimately with environment that they are in relationship to the spirits that live in particular places. It is not an article of faith; it is part of human experience” (Deloria 1999: 224).

The Nature of Intimate Economies

To many peoples, the world is a cooperative enterprise between humans and other forms of life (1999: 226). Animism is the perceptual orientation required to extend intimate, close relations of a familial and familiar nature out into the world. It is the way we can invite other beings into our intimate economies.

Neither in North America nor elsewhere is the intimate economy restricted to human beings. It is in the intimate economy where the harsh lines of the human/other dichotomy are smudged. Notions of what constitutes "sociality" can be bent outwards and extended into the world. The intimate economy is a highly flexible organ for social interaction, perhaps better described as a social ecosystem than as an economic sphere.

Like the cantina scene in Star Wars, populated with a whole menagerie of humans, beasts, and aliens, all intimate economies are unique, highly personalized constellations of characters. Different beings come together in a wondrous feat of social construction to form a metaphorical hearth to gather around for sanctuary.[4] Among the Penan hunter-gatherers of Borneo, monkeys are often adopted by bands and like house pets in Western countries, treated lovingly as family members. Lawrence Blair (1988) noted that in Bali, it is taboo to move into a new home before the gecko lizards and spiders move in first (1988: 19).

As a child, my own home proved to be an interesting nexus point for a number of beings. My mother liked to take in injured birds, and our backyard was filled with boxes and cages. Our house was a jumble of six children, two adults, an army of houseplants, and the usual coterie of domestic pets including budgies, cockatiels, turtles, guinea pigs, and dogs. Then there were the wild ones: a dive-bombing blue jay named Arthur who liked to strafe strangers, passer-bys and overly enthusiastic real estate agents; a trio of abandoned chicks that we fed milk to out of eyedroppers; a particularly loud and gregarious crow with a bad foot named "Crow" whom we would feed by pushing fingerfuls of dog food down his gaping throat every time he would call for it. My parents began taking in foster children soon after this "summer of birds," swelling the ranks even further. Such was the nature of the intimate economy at my house.

St. Francis of Assisi engaged with other creatures with a set of preconceptions and associations that were unusually positive for his era (Sorrell 1988: 46). In addition to his notoriety as a radical gift-giver, he is perhaps best known as a friend to the animals. Well-cited stories include the sermon he delivered to the birds, his friendly and conversational encounters with fish, and his relationships with various natural elements like fire, wind, rain, and so on. All creatures and elements were called "brother" or "sister": Sister Cricket, Brother Fish, Sir Brother Sun, Brother Wind, Sister Water, and so on. This was not done out of a pantheistic view of creation but rather as a poetic and emotional way of showing his affection for and affinity with them (1988: 128). All of creation was united into one single family, a single intimate economy, before the eyes of God.

In his last major work, "The Canticle of Brother Sun" (1224-1226), St. Francis sketched out a complex vision of the intimate interdependence between all creatures. A code of honor and of mutual respect united humanity with the rest of creation (1988: 74). Animals, natural forces, and humans ought to serve God together, with the honorary deference of brothers.

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[4] This congregation isn't always voluntary, as in the case of the domestication of plants and animals. Domestication and its implications for gift exchange will be covered in a later chapter.

We have to question if there is any connection between St. Francis the radical gift-giver and St. Francis the patron saint of the animals. Is there a link between his pact with the rest of the world, and how this pact translated itself into action and gesture before other beings? Perhaps other creatures could sense that he was a "safe" person to affiliate with, owing to some quality in his demeanor, body language, tone, or in the cumulative energy or "vibe" that he gave off.

David Abram noted a similar dynamic in his interactions with other beings in his book "The Spell of the Sensuous" (1996):

> And gradually, then, other animals began to intercept me in my wanderings, as if some quality in my posture or the rhythm of my breathing had disarmed their wariness; I would find myself face-to-face with monkeys, and with large lizards that did not slither away when I spoke, but leaned forward in apparent curiosity. In rural Java, I often noticed monkeys accompanying me in the branches overhead, and ravens walked towards me on the road, croaking. While at Pangandaran, a nature preserve on a peninsula jutting out from the south coast of Java, I stepped out from a clutch of trees and found myself looking into the face of one of the rare and beautiful bison that exist only on that island. Our eyes locked. When it snorted, I snorted back; when it shifted its shoulders, I shifted my stance; when I tossed my head, it tossed its head in reply. I found myself caught in a nonverbal conversation with this Other, a gestural duet with which my conscious awareness had very little to do (1996: 21).

Vine Deloria argued that: "Traditions in many tribes recall a time when all organic forms talked to each other and married each other in an exchange of communication" (1999: 228). According to Abram, and evidenced in St. Francis and animal lovers everywhere, the language that all beings once shared, and still share to some degree is the language of the body. This is a form of communication – the sharing of gifts - composed of gestures and physical cues, of voice and vibe.

The intimate economy can extend into the metaphysical realm as well. For the Nayaka of South India, economics and cosmology intertwine. Patterns of giving that characterize human-to-human relationships also characterize nature-to-human relationships in what the anthropologist Nurit Bird-David (1992) called a "cosmic economy of sharing." Similar to other groups of "immediate return" hunter-gatherers like the Mbuti of the Congo basin and the Batek and Chewong of peninsular Malaysia, the Nayaka view their world as an integrated entity. They see their forest home as a supportive parent that provides food and other essentials of life on an unconditional basis. Together the Nayaka, the forest and the other beings that inhabit the forest are perceived of as a large, all-inclusive family. The land is not an object to be owned or manipulated on human terms but rather as something that people can associate and relate to.

For the Nayaka, giving among humans reflects general characteristics of their surroundings. Bird-David argues that their economy is based on observations of the functioning of the environment. Just as the forest gives unconditionally, so do goods circulate freely among its children, the Nayaka. Other beings are not only acknowledged, but are actively engaged with in social and economic relations. In this sense, Nayakan economics with their emphasis on familial relations with many kinds of beings comes close to blending the idea of the intimate economy with the original Greek for “economy,” “oikonomia,” the management of the household (Price 1975: 3).

Yet even among the Nayaka, personality is not ascribed haphazardly to absolutely everything in the environment. We are still limited in the number of relationships we can sustain. We cannot be friends with everyone at school at the same time. The ethnographer A. Irving Hallowell, writing on the Ojibwa, noted: “I once asked an old man: are all the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while and then replied, ‘No! But some are.’ This qualified answer made a lasting impression on me” (Hallowell 1960: 24).

Humans are not the only species to open up their intimate economies to other beings. Close relationships can develop across species lines throughout the larger community of life, from fish that act as living toothpicks cleaning the mouths of hippopotamuses to giant clams that act as living gardens for different forms of algae (Margulis 1999: 10). Some of these relationships are the products of a long, shared history. Others have been forged in single lifetimes among individual organisms.

The Ecology of Childhood

Imagine a childhood so beautiful it could make you happy for the rest of your life. This is my paraphrasing of how one film critic described My Father’s Glory and My Mother’s Castle, a pair of outings released in 1991 that were based off of the memoirs of the French writer Marcel Pagnol. Set in Provence at the beginning of the twentieth century, the child protagonist of the film, Marcel, spends his summer vacation wandering the wild hills near his home on day-trips with his older friend, Lili. The film emerges less as a plot-driven narrative and more as a series of episodes that add up to a childhood. Wrote Roger Ebert:

> These hills are to become the focus of Marcel’s most enduring love affair. He loves the trees and the grasses, the small birds and the eagle that rests high in a crag, the pathways up rock faces and the way that voices carry from one side of the valley to the other… The days with Lili are spent learning the names and ways of all the living things that share the valley. Then autumn comes, and school begins again, and Marcel must leave his beloved hills (Ebert 08/09/91).

While it has become something of a cliché, the saying “It takes a whole village to raise a child” rings true. The films based on Pagnol’s memoirs and our discussion on the intimate economy above suggest that it not only takes a whole village to raise a child, but a village or a community of life, not just of human beings. “Human beings are incomplete without the rest of the world” (Deloria 1999: 226). It takes the input or the gifts from a number of beings to make a single human or a single anything. An organism is the product of a community, not of any one species.

The beings we know in the world around us become part of us, in the same way that a loved one becomes a part of us. What surrounds us physically becomes a part of us metaphysically or spiritually. We are only amalgams of all we have known. I am a richer human being for the brief episodes I shared with orangutans in the Gunung Leuser rainforest basin of Sumatra where I worked for two years. Orangutans share close to ninety-eight percent of human DNA; looking into their all too familiar faces was a difficult to express reminder that the Great Apes of the world share close kinship ties with humans. The more beings whose lives intersect with our own, then the richer our lives become. A scuba diver is richer for her encounter with a graceful manta ray, and a child's world is richer for the presence of a friendly dog or a garter snake glimpsed from time to time in the garden or on the trail. "Every species needs to give to every other species in order to make up a universe" (1999: 226). The intimate economy is a mosaic both inside and outside our physical selves; if a species disappears from the earth then we have also rendered extinct part of ourselves. The sum of who we could ever be is lessened.

Within this larger pattern of kinship with other species, there are certain animals that enter into a kind of "medicine exchange" with certain humans. Specific animals have powers to give to us. These gifts complete the individual; "One's humanity is incomplete and unhinged without empowerment from something explicitly other than human" (Martin 1992: 8). It is not necessary to go out and embrace nature because nature is already inside of us. We are not from another planet. The animals have given us powers, the landscape has given us powers; they are inside of us.

The Return Echo of Japasa

Asah Japasa was an old Dunne-za elder living in northeastern British Columbia when Robin Ridington, a young anthropologist from Vancouver, first met him in 1964. Japasa (Athapaskan for "Chickadee") was dying of heart failure. Despite the objections of local whites, he left the hospital in Fort Nelson and was brought back to his people's hunting camp to die in a place and in a manner that still made sense and held meaning for him and his people.

As a boy, Asah had undertaken a vision quest, as most young people among the Dunne-za do. While deliberately lost in the woods, the wind and the rain beings had given him as gifts their powers to use in his lifetime:

The first night out in the bush
He was cold and wet from the rain.
In the morning he woke up warm and dry.
The wind came to him too.
The wind came to him in the form of a person.
That person said,
"See, you're dry now. I'm your friend."
The wind has been his friend ever since.
He can call the wind. He can call the rain.
He can also make them go away.
(Ridington 1988: 58)

Other beings presented themselves to him:
A pair of silver foxes had come and protected him.
After that, the foxes kept him and looked after him.
He stayed with them and they protected him.
Those foxes had three pups.
The male and female foxes brought food for the pups.
They brought food for my dad too.
They looked after him as if they were all the same.
Those foxes wore clothes like people.
My dad said he could understand their language.

> He said they taught him a song.

As a dying man, it was time to put his affairs in order, and once back in the camp, Japasa sung his medicine songs back to these natural beings. Writes Ridington: “I did not know, then, that a person could sing his medicine song only when death was near to him or to the listener. I did not know that the song had power to restore life or to take it away” (Ridington 1988: 58). While the old man lay in his tent, singing away his medicine songs that had provided him with special powers throughout his life, strange events began swirling about the hunting camp:

> At 10:30am something remarkable happened. I heard excited voices and saw people looking down the seismic line to where it passed over the crest of a hill beyond the river. To my astonishment, a bull moose was walking slowly in plain view across the open space. Never before or since have I seen a moose within sight of a hunting camp. We all stared in disbelief… Later, Bella said that the moose had come to say good-bye to Asah. This moose, she meant to say, would nourish us more as a living presence than with its meat (Ridington 1988: 53-54).

Conclusion

The gifts of the world come in all shapes and sizes. Plants, animals and natural elements can give us gifts of the spirit, and as we will see in the next chapter, gifts of flesh too, drawing us into the most intimate of communions.

The gifting ethos elaborated upon by the indigenous interpretation of the gift can be found around the world. It is not an area-specific phenomenon, reserved for northern Athapaskan hunters, Melanesian elites, or French waifs. Such striking similarities in modes of giving are due to the inescapable fact that we are all working from the same point of reference: the world. St. Francis and the Koyukon hunter are not aliens from different planets, ruled over by different natural laws. That said, important social differences do emerge on top of this larger matrix because environments differ in their conditions and compositions.

In his foreword to Jerry Martien’s book on gift exchange entitled “Shell Game” (1996), Gary Snyder wrote: “Although the old gift exchange modes have expired, they still offer insights for social, spiritual, and moral life” (1996: viii). But the gifting ethos did not disappear with the mothballing of the last wampum belts in Onondaga, New York. The old gift economies cannot be our points of reference, as majestic and as refined as some of them are. We must look to the processes – to the greater entity – that inspired them. What is the place of the world in gift exchange? To restate our findings from this chapter, the world is the source and inspiration for human gifting. This is key: that the natural processes that inspired these modes are still with us, and all around us. The palette that inspired earlier canvases of shell and bead has been badly damaged, but it is not anywhere near exhausted. The template has not been lost or broken. The old gift modes that ordered entire societies may be gone; the inspiration for the creation of new modes remains, a gauntlet thrown at our feet.

Chapter Four

My Quebecois host father Robert was my introduction to the hunt, though I failed to recognize it at the time. What I do remember is that we were bewildered: Muga was from urban Indonesia, I was from urban British Columbia. We were a couple of soft skinned city boys billeted with a hardworking Quebecois woodsman on a cross-cultural exchange between our two countries. Robert would take Muga and I out early in the morning to set copper snares to catch hares. The three of us would be on our hands and knees, crawling through the bush and looking for telltale signs that the hares had been through – a bent twig here, some slightly ruffled grass there.

Some mornings when we had evaded our duties, and while we still lay in our warm sleeping bags, Robert would come sprinting up the side of the house with the day's catch of wild rabbit. I awoke one morning to the sound of gently creaking floorboards to see Robert softly and almost tenderly lay a dead rabbit on Muga's pillow, inches from where he slept. Muga's terrified shriek sounded like a fire alarm moments later.

Muga and I became boys made of hares – those rabbits we caught wound up in meat pies, soups, sandwiches, and so on. Every variation of rabbit was tried. Eating was a special thing in that house. I found that one out the hard way after leaving a few scraps of food on my plate one day at lunch. Robert seized my plate, shoveled whatever tidbits were left into his mouth, slammed the plate back down on the table, looked at me accusingly and announced emphatically, "La nourriture, c'est sacre!" Food is sacred!

There have been times since when I have looked back on these three months in rural Quebec with scorn and derision. But having fully digested this experience, I realize now that for the most part, Robert was right. Food is sacred. There is something sacred about accepting with gratitude the gifts of the forest, and catching and eating my own food.

The Worldwide Hunt

As a species, our longest tenure on this planet has been as hunter-gatherers. Richard Lee and Richard Daly (1999) estimate that humans have been interacting with their surroundings in this manner for at least ninety percent of human history. "A hunting and gathering economy – spirituality is a better way to put it – is the oldest game known to humanity, known and practiced by our evolutionary ancestors as far back as we dare go" (Martin 1993: 17).

The gift and the hunt are reflections of each other. The hunt clearly articulates the ethos and protocols of the gift, while the interconnected network of life is reflected in networks of giving and gift exchange. Both possess the same dynamic. Writes Kaj Arhem: "Cultural representations of predation as exchange have an extension which is common among indigenous peoples worldwide" (1996: 201). Strikingly similar approaches to hunting can be found among the so-called "Bushmen" of southern Africa, among different groups of Inuit in the high Arctic, among the foragers of Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and among several different nations of indigenous peoples in North and South America.

The hunt is a form of communication between humans themselves and between humans and the larger community of living beings. It secures and serves a vitally important relationship between two beings (Brody 2000: 132). Hunting is a social and sacred occupation, involving "co-muni-cation" (the sharing of gifts) with other beings. It can be argued that the most vital transformation in all of living existence is when plants and animals become food. To eat another being is to receive the gift of life from that other being. Through this exchange, lives are physiologically and spiritually fused together, for eating is the most direct route into a participation with the rest of life. "Meat is a sacred substance and a medium of exchange between oneself and the world" (Nelson 1989: 267). To hunt is to remove our blindfolds and witness firsthand that our lives are made up of gifts – the gifts of flesh and tissue – we are nothing we have not been given.

If the hunt is a metaphorical expression of the gifting relationship, how do we go about giving and receiving? If we take another being's gift of life, how ever do we reciprocate, and to whom?

Rules of the Game

There appears to exist a rough, worldwide pact between eater and eaten in hunting societies. "Nature's life forms are astonishingly willing to furnish themselves to humans to satisfy human needs of survival" (Martin 1993: 19). These gifts of the animals are not given in an ethical or metaphysical vacuum. Life depends on maintaining the right kind of relationship with other beings, and charting this relationship can be difficult (Brody 2000: 289). While details vary from culture to culture and from individual to individual, the main tenets of this relationship are recognition, respect, and reverence. These constitute a kind of "table manners" that humans must use when interacting with other forms of life and the landscape in general. "An animal's agreement to become food is secured through the respect that hunters and their families show to the land in general and to animals in particular" (2000: 132). Those humans who show their respect through the use of such table manners can expect success in future hunts.

These table manners are echoed in the many taboos held by hunting peoples that regulate their relationships with the larger world. In his examination of the Inuit seal hunt, David Pelly lists a number of customs and taboos that swing into force when a seal is captured. These customs and taboos involve a wide range of activities, from a prohibition on working with wood and stone to not combing one's hair, not spilling oil from a lamp or wiping rime from an ice window (Pelly 2001: 70).

A crucial tenet in the hunting practices of many cultures is the understated belief that humans are not in a position of superiority to the rest of life. There are laws and forces beyond human control that regulate the cosmos. We can piggyback onto natural processes and subtly work with them, but we cannot force life's vital energies down concrete canals and dikes – the world was not made to serve humans. Humans participate as equals in the great round of eater and eaten. We hold no superior status and we are subject to the same rules that govern other beings. "It is not through his own power that a person takes a life in nature but through the power of nature that life is given to him" (Nelson 1989: 266). The power in the hunter's relationship to the rest of the world lies not within the hunter, but outside the hunter (1989: 32).

Richard Nelson, an anthropologist who carried out over a decade's worth of fieldwork among the Koyukon peoples of Alaska, distilled Koyukon principles towards nature into a simple list in his 1989 book "The Island Within": move slowly, stay quiet, watch carefully, be humble, and show no hint of arrogance or disrespect (1989: 277). In a world where our surroundings have power over us, we must conduct ourselves with humility and deference. A Koyukon elder told Nelson: "A good hunter… that's somebody the animals come to. But if you lose your luck with a certain kind of animal – maybe you talk wrong about it or don't treat it with respect – then for a while you won't get any, no matter how hard you try" (1989: 3). Another elder advised him: "The most you should say is that you'll try to catch a fish or better yet don't say anything at all. Otherwise it sounds like you're bragging, and the animals stay away from people who talk like that" (1989: 117).

Feelings of arrogance, power and pride must be resisted on the part of the hunter. To brag, boast, or overhunt is to position oneself higher than the rest of the community of life, and such hubris is often rewarded with disaster. Among the Inuit, a mistreated seal's spirit will tell other animals who will then avoid that hunter and his people, not allowing themselves to be caught (Pelly 2001: 21). In most cases when the rules are broken, the animals retreat to unhappy places and stay there until the rules are once again respected.

In some cases, the animals take a more active role in punishing transgressors and reminding hunters of their responsibilities to the pact they carry with the rest of life. Among the Makuna of the Northwest Amazon, offended animal spirits will send sickness and disease out among offending human villages for their failure to honor the pact between species (Arhem 1996: 196). A failure to give thanks, express recognition and bless food on the part of humans actually blocks the circulation of regenerative powers that each species needs to reproduce itself (1996: 196).

Occasionally the animals themselves will show up to punish offenders. Lamalera is a small island to the southwest of Timor in eastern Indonesia. It is one of the last places on the planet where whales are still hunted by hand in a spiritually charged seascape version of the sacred hunt. When rules are broken, remains are not disposed of properly and other traditions are unobserved, whales will not only avoid being caught but they can also physically attack the Lamalerans or their whaling boats (Severin 2000: 183).

Rules of the pact must be respected in both ways. Transgressions and punishments for abusing the rules of the game can affect either party involved, human or otherwise. I discovered quite late during my two and a half year tenure in Sumatra that one of my employees was an animal caller, part of an old order of mystics known locally as the "pawang." Each pawang had a connection to a particular species of animal, reptile, bird, amphibian, and so on. In a holistic sense, their role was to maintain peace and stability between human communities and the larger community of life – in essence to guard the pact. My friend had often dealt with rogue deer, especially those who were repeatedly nibbling on local crops and causing the usual havoc among farmers. After a lengthy demonstration of the pawang's art one morning in his living room, he explained to me that before killing the offending animal, great care had to be shown in explaining clearly to the animal what rules it had broken to warrant its punishment.

This pact does not only exist between humans and other beings. Its rules are also meant to govern human societies in our relations with each other, providing us with a moral compass. Social cohesion through sharing and giving is emphasized. People need to respect and follow the examples given to them by the animals. People need to give to each other, just as animals give themselves to humans. “The animals will not give themselves to people unless people are equally willing to accept that human life depends on people giving to one another” (Ridington 1988: 78).

Social relations among the hunters must be harmonious before they interface with game as individuals. The whales of Lamalera will stay away from a quarreling boat. Bad feelings among the hunters will keep the animals away. “Cleverness, skill and stealth are nothing without harmony” (Nelson 1989: 36). A sense of communalism among the hunters is as critical a tool in ensuring success in the hunt as any technological advantage. “Their ability to act together without a system of superordinate authority was astonishing to me,” wrote Robin Ridington on the hunting practices of the Dunne-za of northeastern British Columbia. “Hunters manage to coordinate their activities through shared understandings and careful attention to the actions of others” (1988: 277). The hunt becomes a kind of collective ecological theatre – an ensemble piece involving hunters, game, and the living, sentient environment itself.

Social cohesion and the gifts of the animals are woven seamlessly together during the resolution of the hunt, when large game is brought back into the community, and carefully divided up and distributed among members, a practice common to countless hunting societies. “The point of life is learning how to give away, something demonstrated on a daily basis in the sharing of meat” (Shepard 1998: 65). In many of these societies, huge efforts are made to extinguish the concept of the meat belonging to the person who hunted the animal (Marshall 1976: 297). The person who made the arrow, spear, harpoon or other kind of weapon that ultimately ended up doing the killing also receives a sizeable portion of the catch. A considerable amount of chiding and ridicule directed towards the successful hunter also helps to keep that hunter’s sense of self-importance in proper balance with his or her sense of obligation and belonging to the community.

“The sharing of meat at the community level parallels and symbolizes the exchange cycle of hunting itself” (Feit 1994: 298). Even in its death, in drawing together people to share a meal of its body, the animal reinforces the pact. The gift of flesh is also the gift of social solidarity. The sharing of flesh among a community draws that community closer together, both physically and metaphysically. The animal is killed and brought back to life at the community level just as the community is reborn through the gift of its nourishing flesh.

Like a series of Russian dolls, one inside the other, we end up with a sacred pact that reverberates through the human community, shaping interpersonal interactions through its emphasis on sharing, and then continues on to shape the larger relationship between the human community and its surroundings.

The Animal Masters

In many cultures, the relationship between humans and other beings is monitored and regulated by certain figures often called "Animal Masters," "Spirit Masters" or "Guardians" in ethnographic literature. The powers of nature are often manifested in the form of these beings. They control the disposition and the very ecology of the animals within their domains (Ingold 1986: 245). They are also thought to have a dominant relationship over the creatures they steward, "in the same way a hunter looks after and controls his dogs" (Tanner 1979: 139). It is the Animal Master that ensures protocols are followed and the animals are respected, both in the hunt, in how they are consumed and in how their remains are disposed of. Thus there are good reasons for humans to conduct themselves in an ethically sound manner. The Masters are watching.

In 1925, the ethnographer Frank Speck recorded a "lure song" used by Jerome Antoine, a Montagnais-Naskapi hunter. The song was used to entice caribou to offer themselves to him. "Because he looks so fine" goes the chorus. Antoine was using the song to catch the attention of Caribou Man, the Animal Master. Similar versions have been recorded elsewhere in eastern Canada by traders and ethnographers: "He comes – he comes – I see him, I see him – he is dressed very fine." Most versions of the Caribou Man story say that he lives in a huge cavern under the ground, and it is here that he exercises governance over thousands of deer. Caribou Man determines which animals will be taken by which hunters, and when the herds will be dispatched on their annual migrations.

If we remember back to Chapter Three, the concept of the Animal Master is strikingly analogous to the concept of the unseen third entity proposed by Lewis Hyde (1983). Hyde insisted that the gift needed to pass out of sight and around a corner in order to escape the will and control of the giver. Only then would its latent powers be activated. Could the Animal Master be a metaphysical manifestation of the unseen third? I think this is very likely. Other examples from Maori hunting practices in New Zealand and the practices of other hunting cultures reinforce this idea. In those societies where animal masters are absent, perhaps it is possible that all of nature serves as an unseen third, an unpredictable entity beyond human control that is necessary to the regulation of the gifting cycle.

Ecological Knowledge

"The fundamental task of all hunting is to bring about the presence of the prey," wrote Ortega y Gasset (1972: 76). Finding game is the hardest part of the hunt. Hunters have several tools they can use to facilitate this process. Of major importance is the collection and use of ecological knowledge. A life lived in close, daily interaction with natural processes supplies one with a wealth of knowledge on par with long-term scientific analysis of the natural world. Hunters have the eyes of naturalists and ecologists. Just as my own senses are sharpened and better attuned with the ebb and flow of natural landscapes after a week alone in the woods, even more so does the hunter benefit from a lifetime's worth of immediate, experiential environmental education. "To move around with safety, to hunt with success, to make the land's resources available and nourishing, the hunter works with a mass of details and the names of many, many places" (Brody 2000: 35). Likewise, Nelson noted that the Koyukon's deep relationship to their natural community comes as a result of careful observation of the same events in the same place repeated over millennia (Nelson 1989: 45).

Empirical knowledge is a large part of the process of finding game, but still only part. Encyclopedic information of hunting territories is meshed together with myth, story and belief – an intricate mix of the real and the supernatural (Brody 2000: 261). To a Western audience, this is the most mysterious element of the hunting process. There are times when empirical knowledge has carried the hunter as far as possible, and something else is required. Next to social cohesion and ecological knowledge, a third element is needed to complete the hunting process.

This point is well demonstrated by Bruce Lamb in his recording and translation of the life story of Manuel Cordova-Rios, published under the title "The Wizard of the Upper Amazon." This extraordinary little book appeared in 1971 and chronicles the events of Cordova-Rios" stay among the Amahuaca Indians of the Peruvian Amazon at the turn of the twentieth century. Cordova-Rios was a young rubber tapper who was captured by the aging chief of the Amahuacas and groomed to replace the chief as tribal leader. The chief was well aware of the modern world's encroachment upon the Amahuaca's hunting territory and traditional way of life, and felt it necessary to provide the tribe with a new leader versed in both the modern and the traditional world – perhaps that would provide the Amahuaca with higher survival value.

During his lengthy apprenticeship that spanned nearly a decade, Cordova-Rios was trained both as a healer and as a hunter. It is his accounts of the hunting practices of his surrogate tribe that feed the present discussion. In line with earlier descriptions of the deployment of traditional ecological knowledge, the Amahuaca made good use out of many lifetimes spent observing the non-human world:

> I became aware of how closely these Indians were molded to their environment. Their muscular coordination and visual sense of their surroundings in the forest made it possible for them to move quickly and with ease through the most tangled undergrowth. They could anticipate the hazards and difficulties and avoid most of them. They reacted to the faintest signals of sound and smell, intuitively relating them to all other conditions of the environment and then interpreting them to achieve the greatest possible capture of game… The Indians had great patience when it was required and they used it, together with knowledge and intuition, to capture game with the least possible expenditure of energy. *Many of the best hunters seemed to know by some special extra sense just where to find the game they sought*… (Lamb 1971: 63)(emphasis added).

Tools in the Mind

It is here, with Cordova-Rios's reference to the role of intuition in the hunt that the methodology of the gift shines through the brightest. "The way to understand this kind of decision-making, as also to live by and even share it, is to recognize that some of the most important variables are subtle, elusive, and extremely hard or impossible to assess with finality… His (the hunter's) course of action must not be a matter of predetermination" (Brody 1978: 37). To complete the hunt, a leap of the imagination is required in order to move with the rhythms of the world.

One of the intriguing qualities of the gift is that it presents itself in the form of fortuitous encounters. Fortuitous encounters are also the basis of the hunt – the crossing of trails between the hunter and the hunted. These encounters cannot be controlled or forced but perhaps they can be anticipated. Space can be created for their emergence. According to this methodology, the world will often give you a hint before something is about to happen. In the case of the hunt, this could be a bent leaf, a blade of long grass slowly returning to form, the footprint of a predatory cat slowly filling with water. Fortuitous encounters could also be preordained in visions, dreams, omens or portents of different kinds. Nature communicates in signs. These signs are gifts that, like my earlier reference to echolocation, allow us to find ourselves in space and time. The world presents itself as a never-ending landscape of symbols, a "vast semiosis" presented to the hunter on every side in which one is not only a reader but a participant (Shepard 1998: 65).

Translating occurrences around oneself into metaphors filled with meaning that one can then follow is what Robin Ridington (1994) called "tools in the mind." To recognize that the world is not only sentient but communicative is integral to the success of the hunt. "The forager's world is rich in signs of a gifting cosmos, a realm of numerous alternatives and generous subsistence, not so much to be controlled by humans as to be understood and affirmed and joined" (Shepard 1998: 60).

Intuition is a way of paying the closest and deepest possible attention to these signs given by the world (Brody 2000: 260). Intuition is purely subjective; it connects heart, mind and hand to the world; it validates direct experience and the role of the individual as the most important "instrument" in any process of inquiry. It is the internal compass.

In the hunt, intuition manifests itself in a variety of different ways: scapulimancy, divination, visions, and dream hunting are common examples from hunting societies. They all have close parallels with the gathering of information about game (Tanner 1979: 133). Intuitive responses and readings provide information that cannot be known in advance from an examination of environmental signs, filling in gaps in knowledge (1979: 134). These are the gifts of unknown things that materialize when rationality has exhausted itself.

Dream Hunting

I first came across the idea of dream hunting while working in Sumatra, Indonesia. I was captivated by the writings of the British anthropologist Lawrence Blair and his stories of the Penan of Borneo, "dream wanderers" who were able to "follow their feelings" and the contents of their dreams to navigate their way through vast tracts of virgin rainforest or to locate long lost kin. Similar variations on dream hunting appears in the ethnographic literature on peoples like the Mentawai of Siberut, the Bugis "Boogeymen" sailors of Sulawesi, and the Temiar Senoi of peninsular Malaysia.

The use of dreaming as a "tool in the mind" is not restricted to cultures of Southeast Asia. Dream hunting surfaces in the ethnographic literature of the !Kung San of the Kalahari, recorded by a number of outsiders including the distinguished cultural anthropologist Richard Lee and Laurens van der Post. In his analysis of the worldview of the Ojibway of eastern Canada, A.I. Hallowell noted the "Ojibway go to school in dreams"(1960: 38). Writing on the hunting practices of the Mistassini Cree, Adrian Tanner wrote "I was often told that dreaming is the most common way for hunters to learn about their hunting successes in advance" (1979: 125).

Robin Ridington and Hugh Brody have given us the best, most elaborate accounts of dream hunting in their analyses of the Dunne-za "Swan People" of northeastern British Columbia. Before the hunt takes place during waking hours, the trail of the animal and the trail of the hunter must first cross in dreams. The physical hunt only concludes the metaphysical hunt. In dreams, the identity of animals is revealed in great detail, complete with individual markings and scars. "The person who wishes to dream… must lie in the correct orientation, with his head towards the rising sun. There should be no ordinary trails, no human pathways, between his pillow and the bush. These would be confusing to the self that travels in dreams towards important and unfamiliar trails which can lead to a kill" (Brody 1978: 48). Added Ridington: "Individual Dunne-za have always followed the intelligence manifest in their dreams in order to make contact with the spirits of the animals that sustain them" (Ridington 1988: 77). Special hunting chiefs could take these "tools in the mind" further. Hunting chiefs could "dream ahead" for the whole tribe and see the whole latticework of dream trails where certain hunters would meet certain animals. Upon waking these hunt chiefs would be able to coordinate the hunt appropriately. Still other Dunne-za, the very fortunate ones, could dream of the very trails that led to Heaven itself.

According to Brody, dreaming is the mind's way of combining and using more information than the conscious mind can hold (Brody 2000: 133). It fuses together empirical knowledge, intuition and memory. Dreaming is a form of knowledge that processes and digests all other knowledge (2000: 260). Dreams are therefore not the displacement of reason but the digestion of reason. For people like the Dunne-za, the Penan, and scattered groups elsewhere, dreams are gifts that hold important knowledge of their relationship to the world, expressed through hunting and other activities. These gifts appear out of nowhere fortuitously, like an island suddenly materializing out of an endless blue ocean.

The Heart of the Hunter

At the campfire, Navarana sang a song about some unfortunate little auks that had to fly south without their young because jaegers and gulls had taken all the eggs. But the Inuhuit are nothing if not pragmatic in their harsh and unrelenting struggle for survival, and so she added, "We children cried and cried for those little auks because we were afraid we would not get any to eat." And it seemed to me that those words could be an answer from traditional societies to those animal defenders who have never had to wonder about where their next meal might come from, and to whom it may never have occurred that the traditional hunter "loves" the hunted creature more than they do, without the smallest trace of sentimentality, because it is not separate from his own existence (Mattheissen 1995: 75).

When the trail of the animal and the trail of the hunter meet, there is often a great deal of emotion involved, for this is the moment when lives are fused together in a physical and spiritual sense. Killing and then eating what we kill is a sacred interchange that brings separate lives together (Nelson 1989: 52). What is death and then consumption is really connection.

In our culture, the word "love" is used to signify a deep spiritual, emotional and often physical connection to another person. Love is, in short, connection. There is an embrace in predator-prey relationships as well. "The Inuit hunter is not extracting from the environment but creating a bond between people and the environment" (Pelly 2001: 106). We have all experienced the intense satisfaction that comes after eating a good meal on an empty stomach. I do not think it should come as a surprise that from this shared experience comes a sense of gratitude to receive what nourishes us. In many ways, we are connected to the world on a very intimate basis through our mouths and stomachs. To give thanks is to take steps towards embracing the metaphysics of eating.

Hunting peoples stress courtesy and restraint in hunting and gathering because they know that at the very core of their being they are in fact the creatures whom they consume… Thus I must hunt walrus with courtesy, with restraint and with the animal being's permission because I am walrus (Martin 1993: 86).

Martin adds that careful observation of other animal communities suggests the animals are aware, at least on some level, of this connection as well. He notes that wolves hunt caribou and other ungulates in a measured fashion, without recklessness or wastefulness. Wolves cull the herds they prey upon, serving as a natural check to remove those animals too old, sick or incapable of holding the course. Wolves also choose to raise their pups in the spring at the same time that caribou are raising their calves, easing off on the hunt of caribou in the process, leading to a kind of "evolutionary truce" between the two species, allowing both populations to reinvigorate themselves. Perhaps wolves are equipped with some intuitive or instinctual sense of their reliance on the herd, and of the dangers of exhausting their major source of food. In such a tight marriage between predator and prey, we have to wonder if each is not stamped with the psychic mask of the other (1993: 87). If wolves are made of caribou, then where does the wolf end and the caribou begin? The metaphysical tenet expressed here is "If I consume it, I am it. It is inside me" (1993: 86).

In this light, everything we take into our bodies is personal, everything is intimate. "All out there is self – to kill for survival becomes a transformation and not a murder" (1993: 86). In this process of endless transformation, it would be unwise to consider oneself exclusively a human being (1993: 18). "Hunter veritas has always expressed the conviction that the thing seemingly out there was not out there at all but part of the same fabric as ourselves, and hence, within – a piece of cosmic insight that has since been spectacularly confirmed by evolutionary biology, molecular biology, physics, Freudian and Jungian psychology" (1993: 104). We are a species that lives by consuming the flesh and tissue of other living beings; they become a part of us in the process. The microbiologist Lynn Margulis noted that there are countless other lives inside each human individual, and for every cell of our own genetic background there are a thousand times more cells of other species within and upon each of our bodies (in Nabhan 1997: 12). Therefore "The meal is sacred!" as Robert insisted to me that fateful noon hour in Quebec nearly a decade ago.

Eating is communion with other creatures, a “co–muni–cation” or “sharing of gifts” as Genevieve Vaughan reminded us. Eating is also a way of entering into a greater communion with a place. It is a way of bringing your surroundings inside of you, literally making you over from the inside out so that the very essence of your being is fashioned from local ingredients. Just like the honey produced by bees always reflects whatever constellations of plants and flowers are found in a given area, so too the land nurtures people in a very real sense. To live on a particular seaside cove and eat of its crabs, clams and oysters is to become a part of that cove just as we could say the birds that do likewise are part of that place too. The places we live grow us and are to be found within us in a very real way.

The Gift of Life

Just as it can be said that there is an element of love in the taking of other lives to nourish our own, so too can predation be thought of as a mode of procreation. “Hunting is one of the great instruments which nature uses to regulate life on the planet” (Ortega y Gasset 1972: 59). Hunting is seen in many cultures as a rite of world renewal, essential for the reproduction of life (Arhem 1996: 192). Humans may depend on other beings for our physical survival, but these Others depend on humans for their metaphysical survival (1996: 198).

Southern Paiute people say that plants need to “feel” a human presence, such as when people walk about on them, or prune, burn, or harvest them. Animals need this same interaction with humans: if they are not hunted, their numbers will dwindle; the animals will sense that people no longer depend upon, covet and show concern for them… If humans cease their predatory interaction with the animals, the animal population will dwindle… These associations are vital for the continuity and maintenance of a healthy world (Fowler & Turner 1999: 422).

The Makuna of the northwest Amazon regard predation in a similar fashion – as a revitalizing exchange. According to the Makuna, every species has “birth houses” of their own, places of origin which are similar to the long houses and malocas of humans. Within the forest there exist whole communities of other species living in villages, equipped with their own traditional costumes, rituals, social organization, and places where they bathe and collect water. Rainforest society is made up of all of these communities interacting with one another. When an animal is killed and consumed by a predator, including a human hunter, this act frees its spirit, allowing it to return to its birth house in the forest where guardian spirits will then re-clothe it in flesh.

According to the Makuna, the life and vitality of individual organisms is exchanged for the life and vitality of the species as a whole. As Arhem describes it, individual vitality is traded for categorical essence (1996: 192). Similar views are found in other hunting cultures. In this constant interchange of energy, human hunting behavior regulates and facilitates the turning of the great cosmic economy. “It is right to kill and be killed in this “game” of the hunt so long as we understand the transformations of life and death as a natural consequence of the gifting cosmos where one receives and gives and in the final hour finally passed the gift on” (Shepard 1998: 61). A single metaphysical theme begins to emerge, expressed countless times in a variety of ways around the world. Through killing, death is harnessed for the renewal of life (1996: 200). Life feeds on life to beget more life. The transformation of life requires death.

While symphonic, this dance of life is often well hidden from the individual organisms involved. At the level of the individual, the Great Economy appears as violent and filled with the evils and terrors of predation. When viewed through the particular lens of a certain scale, life certainly does appear to be nasty, brutish and short. Creatures eat each other, a mother spider is consumed by hundreds of her own babies, a deer is left wet eyed and twitching on the snow while wolves carve out her insides.

In the industrialized world, we are kept largely ignorant of the idea that life needs the gift of death in order to keep on producing life. Many of our fundamental beliefs about who we are as a species are colored by this kind of blinkered thinking that sees only violent predation at the level of the individual while ignoring its more symbiotic qualities at the community or ecosystem level.

Perhaps we need to look with different eyes. Larger patterns of exchange and interdependence, of order and harmony at the ecosystem level are mostly invisible to the individual participant unless he, she, or it is assisted by some kind of repository of knowledge and belief maintained through progressive generations. What is visible at one scale can be invisible on another, higher scale. Some human cultures provide their members with this kind of deep perspective, others do not.

The Hunted Human

“The original chancy game of prey and predator, of eating or being eaten, takes on a more significant meaning in a gifting world where chance is still an element: the only question is when will the gift pass on” (Shepard 1998: 65). Important perspective is gained in a place where we are not only predators but also potential prey (Nelson 1989: 62). Seeing as we are quite high up on the food chain, we often forget our vital role as prey, for we are always potential prey. The meaning of this can be deceptive. Sure a shark might occasionally mistake a tourist on a body board for an obese and slightly intoxicated seal and chomp down accordingly, or a frazzled bear might claw up a hiker who got in between her and her cubs. For the most part, we seem to be doing all of the eating. Or are we?

To better realize how we are involved in that critical transformation from living flesh to food, we need to look down the food chain, not up. We too are hunted – not only by the occasional large predatory cat but most often by insects and worms. One of the most pivotal moments in our lives is when we die and our own gifts pass on. This is the moment of release, of the death rattle. Whether through the belly of a tiger or the body of a worm, what was shaped into human form from the surrounding environment through thirty six weeks of pregnancy and a lifetime’s worth of consuming other beings is now given back. In this sense we are all givers and we are all born to give. The ultimate gift each of us has to offer is of ourselves – through words, deeds, then death.

Coming to terms with our own deaths is a wrenching dilemma that we all face. But allowing ourselves to be hunted is how we become ancestral. When we die and our bodies decompose, our physical selves blur back into the landscape. Our bodies are released into the surroundings in a very real way, summoned bit by bit to the great nutrient cycles swirling about all around us like the arms of slowly rotating galaxies. But we do not move upwards when we die according to this cosmology – instead of leaving the world, we are sung sideways into the land. To die is to be released into the great physiological round of life.

This is how salmon end up as the ancestors of old growth trees in the temperate rain forests of coastal British Columbia. Biologists have made the startling discovery that up to forty percent of the nitrogen found in these old growth giants actually comes from the bodies of decaying salmon, carried into the woods from their spawning grounds by different species of bears. In death even the salmon has gifts to offer the forest. This is a remarkable phenomenon, for bears consume little of the flesh of these fish they carry into the woods. Also amazing is the observation that the bears only paw out those salmon that have already spawned. It is almost as if the bears are carrying out an errand on behalf of the forest as they lumber back and forth, from river to root, carrying these little packets of nitrogen to feed the trees. Unreciprocated gifts are delivered, lives are transformed into new lives, and all the while it is the bear who acts as the unseen third, as his or her identity and his purpose behind delivering the salmon remain a mystery to the tree. To the tree, the bear is the unseen third, the creature on the cosmic errand.

> I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.
> I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
> If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.
> (Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”)

Once Were Shapeshifters

“Reading hunter-gatherer stories and myths, one is immediately struck by the rampant, outrageous shape-shifting. Everything seems alive, sharing a common aliveness and being, and ideally, capable of slipping into the vessel and role of something else” (Martin 1993: 83). Or, as Hugh Brody puts it: “A ghost becomes a boy becomes a raven becomes a feather becomes a man. A man becomes a salmon becomes a spirit becomes a woman. A girl becomes a dog becomes a seal becomes a spirit…” (2000: 245). We can see animals morphing in and out of one another on the totem poles of the Haida Gwaii, a wonderful example of an art form that captures basic ecological truisms. Mythological shape-shifting mirrors ecological shape-shifting. Therefore it should not come as a surprise that the tree’s ancestor is the salmon. The gift of death connects all creatures together in a web of life. In the great dance of life, who is not an ancestor?

An Indian chief once told his European guests: “Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds” (Turner 1992: 64). There is no death, only the transformation of life. David Pelly notes that when a seal gives himself to a hunter, it is an act of sharing which allows the seal to be transformed into a human being. “Being consumed is a form of rebirth and renewal for the seal” (2001: 106). Organisms that die are shaped into other organisms. Death is illusory. Life and death are only stopping points along the cyclical journey of the soul, a continuous process of construction, deconstruction and re-construction of living beings (A rhem 1996: 198). We are all manifestations of the same life force. The building blocks of life, DNA, are in all of us, albeit arranged in slightly different sequencing. Essence is revealed in different forms of vitality (1996: 188). The soul of the whale hunted off the shores of Lamalera, the soul of the Sumatran tiger and my own soul all come from the same place. Our inner beings are molded from the same numinous energy; our physical beings are shaped from the same organic matter that makes up all of life.

There can be no true death in this world. “The fate of all living things is an earthbound mortality” (Nelson 1989: 254). To truly die in this metaphysical and ecological realm would entail some form of transcendence or disconnection. That which is most connected is most alive, that which is most disconnected is closest to ultimate death. Real death could only come in the form of a departure from this world, in transcendence, and an escape from lifeshaping, shape-shifting processes.

Conclusion

Most of this chapter has dealt with the question of what we give back in return for the gift of life given to us by other beings. What is our part of the bargain? Is it restricted to nutrient loads “given back” with each visit to the Victorian water closet?

The hunt is not solely reciprocal. There are no assurances of returns in the sacred hunt. While there is an element of reciprocity in the pact between humans and other beings, neither could we pay back tit-for-tat what we have been given. “Something is only given in nature, never taken” (Nelson 1989: 277). This is the creative, emotional and physiological tension that holds the pact of the sacred hunt together. How do children compensate their parents for at least two decades of support? So too regarding the earth – how could we ever fully pay back all we have been given? The best we can do is give of ourselves in whatever manner – through word, deed, our life’s work. But because we cannot buy our way out of our contract with that which gave rise to us, ultimately we must give back everything that we are in every sense of the word.

Whether vegetable, animal, bird, amphibian, insect or fish, our food is alive. There is no way of escaping the fact that we need other living beings to sustain ourselves. Vegetarians who choose to abstain from eating meat for ethical reasons find themselves on uncertain ground when, as a character in Margaret Atwood’s “The Edible Woman” discovers, even the carrots are alive, and capable of screaming.

A human cannot live without taking other life. But in what manner, within what ethical framework will this be done? Recently I was at a market near my home, looking in at the lobsters in their big bubbling tanks, their pinchers bound with elastic bands. As I wrote earlier, other beings are astonishingly willing to give themselves as food. Life is given so easily. According to the rules of the sacred hunt, those lobsters were willing to offer themselves as gifts but only so long as their deaths are acknowledged – so long as it fits some greater body of meaning that provides them with regeneration.

How we eat is important as why we eat. We must always remember, as Richard Nelson pointed out, that we do not have power over nature – it has power over us. We may have the technological muscle to dig up ecosystems and claim the earth as our own possession to use as we see fit, but this “control” industrial culture feels it has is only momentary on a geological scale. Nature has the muscle to call in the storm clouds, destabilize our societies and shrug us off into the void. The pact between ourselves and the rest of life is broken the moment we do anything that vaults our species over other forms of life. To do anything which severs the immediacy of our connection with nature dishonors the pact.

To recognize that there are table manners for dealing with the rest of life is what we give back beyond the level of the individual. Meat is exchanged for morality, flesh for ethics. We “give back” every time we defecate, we “give back” every time we properly dispose of an animal’s remains, we “give back” when we die and our bodies are overtaken by beetles and worms and mosses. And we “give back” in our stories, myths, songs, and rituals that recognize the earth has mastery over ourselves. But these acts do not complete the cycle and balance the books – they only continue and perpetuate it.

Chapter Five

Looking around us today, whether out at the urban environment of sidewalks and manicured lawns, inside the barnyard community of pigs and cows and sheep, or within my own refrigerator, it is clear that we are now operating according to a different set of table manners than those who lived by the sacred pact of the hunt. We do not live in a society organized around the gifting ethos. It is a long way from the place where the trail of the hunter and that of the sacred game meet to the grocery store where most of us buy our food today.

It is clear a massive cultural transformation has taken place. A world full of hunters and gatherers just over ten thousand years ago has been replaced by a world full of sedentary civilizations, peoples who glean their food from the field or flock. This transition has had massive implications for the gifting way of life. At its core, the gift is a social connection between beings, a connection realized sometimes in dreams, visions, visitations, and everyday in the sharing of food. Humanity's movement away from a gifted subsistence has resulted in a staggering breakdown in connection and "co-muni-cation" between humans and humans, and humans and other beings. For this society and others like it, bound to a vision of the world made over in concrete, cars and modern market orthodoxy, this change in table manners could cost us our chair at the table of the banquet of life.

The sacred pact has not been broken so much as it has been twisted into something else. Its deformation makes it difficult for the gifts of the Others to come through and illuminate our own lives. This chapter explores some of the ways we have been removed from a life lived according to the rules of the gifting cosmos.

Once Were Hunters

Our bodies have not changed much since the closing of the Pleistocene and the retreat of the great glaciers an estimated 11,600 years ago. "My eyes are good at picking up quick movement, the flop of vultures from a lion kill or the scuttle of rabbits into brush. My hands are good for wrenching the joints of carcasses, prizing roots from the earth, plucking leaves and berries. Like my hands, my digestion is able to handle a wide variety of things" (Rawlins 1993: 236). The basic pattern and functioning of the human brain is argued to have been shaped as many as three million years ago (Livingston 1994: 27). When I play ball hockey to keep from losing my mind sitting in a chair surrounded by books, paper and a computer, I am using the muscles of a hunter. Despite minor physiological changes due to our increasingly sedentary way of life and accompanying dietary poverty, the anomie-stricken urban dweller, Left Bank black beret or blistered farmer all share the same core make up of the Pleistocene hunter. "Whoever first cradled an orphaned wolf puppy was indistinguishable from you or me" (Livingston 1994: 32).

As explored in earlier chapters, foragers interacted with a whole menagerie of life forms. We were involved with vast numbers of species on a daily basis, encountered in the hunt, in mythtelling, in visions and dreams. Living within the ebb and flow of the river of life, our human lives were woven together with the lives of other beings. For example, the Haunoo forest dwellers of Mindoro Island in the Philippines recognize more than four hundred and fifty animal species and are able to distinguish between fifteen hundred plants (Davis 2001: 14). In other words, they are involved with at least two thousand different organisms. These other beings are not merely used as food, for they also figure prominently in myth and dream: they are healers, teachers, companions, and the givers of many gifts.

We were once a collection of peoples inextricably connected to our landscapes, and we interacted with the rest of life according to a set of protocols or table manners. These protocols served ideologies inspired by a careful study and long familiarity with particular ecologies. These were cosmologies with tremendous variety, and like Huichol yarn paintings, many of these cosmologies illustrated how all of life is woven together in one great tangled skein.

Hunter-gatherers come in all shapes and sizes. This categorization is used indiscriminately to apply to peoples of all climates and life ways. For this reason (among others) the term “hunter-gatherer” is problematic. It lumps in the food storing, sedentary harvest cultures of the northern Pacific Rim with the non-storing desert nomads of the Kalahari. Small-scale planters of the Amazon are thrown into the same typological boat as the whale hunters of eastern Indonesia. James Woodburn (1980) argued that a more useful categorization could be drawn between those societies where return on labor is immediate, and those societies where there exists a significant lag between planting or harvesting a resource and eating it. This gave rise to the “immediate return/delayed return” continuum.

“The gift must always move” wrote Lewis Hyde (1983:4). Those societies organized around the immediate return are in a better position to realize the potential of the gifting cosmos. Mobility becomes an important part of any life strategy that involves the gift. For most of human history, we accepted that life moved, and we moved with it. Food was procured on an encounter basis. Where sacred game was found one day did not guarantee where it would be found the next.

This flexibility in food procurement mirrors the fluid nature of political and social organization in immediate return societies, past and present. Leadership is fluid, meaning that leaders are rarely fixed and static in their appointments. Different people with different skill sets and charismatic qualities may emerge at different times in varying circumstances. Jerry Martin (1991) pointed out that most indigenous translations of the word “chief” produce a word closer in meaning to “facilitator” than to “leader” (1991: 241)

Just as game disappears and reappears, so too these societies function like amoebas, ever in the process of splitting apart and fusing new members into themselves in a process known among anthropologists as “fissioning.” People still get jealous and try to kill each other in violent disputes; humans of any society can be a volatile and unpredictable bunch. Foragers are by no means “nicer” people than anyone else. But what we find in the immediate return organization is a form of human culture well equipped to deal with the wide-ranging volatility of the human animal.

Richard Gould (1980) once described the life strategies of the Ngadadjara people of Australia”s harsh Western Desert as lives lived “chasing rains”(1980: 69). In the Western Desert, life follows water, and people who wish to eat and drink must follow life. This is another strength of the immediate return system. In addition to accommodating the volatility of the human condition, this form of organization is malleable enough to accommodate the dramatic variability of the natural world. These are societies that run on imagination, societies of movement that dance across the landscape like whirling dervishes.

All human societies, immediate return ones in particular, live and die by the imaginative capacities of their members. Of all the “tools in the mind” that help humans survive, imagination is the most important. It is the equivalent of a rainforest inside our heads. It can be thought of as a kind of cerebral and spiritual biodiversity. It is our most vital link and our most important tool for interacting with the environment. The imagination allows us and allowed our ancestors to seek out and recognize the gifts all around us. And like the gift, the imagination moves constantly.

It allowed us to join the sacred hunt as participants. With it we were able to bridge the interspecies gap and become buffalo, deer, and bear in our stories and in our hunting. It enabled us to recognize the lessons these other beings had to offer us from their own daily and seasonal fulfillment of their life strategies. The imagination opened up a world of ecological insights that rival and surpass the knowledge pieced together by modern science, and then allowed us to encode these revelations in enduring myths, songs, paintings, carvings and other cultural expressions. The imagination also allows us to realize our destiny as shapeshifters. With it, we can see beyond the constraints of our own individual life spans to the glorious inevitability of our biological and metaphysical rebirth, our “earthbound immortality” as Richard Nelson called it (1989: 254).

Insulating Ourselves from the World

During the rough and tumble Pleistocene epoch, the age of ice and storm that lasted an estimated two million years, human societies had to be nimble. This was a world in tremendous flux. Humans had to match larger movements all around them as communities of flora and fauna came together and drifted apart as habitats changed in lockstep with the bitter math of blindingly erratic weather.

Turbulent environments placed enormous pressure on the human capacity for imagination in order to survive. Our adaptive responses varied wildly in form. John Livingston (1994) identifies a number of “buffer mechanisms” or “prosthetic devices” that protected us from the sometimes-harsh caprices of ecological reality. They are designed to lessen the impacts of environmental variability by dampening its effects (Halstead & O”Shea 1989: 3).

Reciting a list of buffer mechanisms used against environmental uncertainty reads like a chronological history of human technological innovation. Fire, food storage, agriculture; these are the very innovations most of us feel make us fully human. These are also the innovations that gave us a sense of mastery, however misguided, over the landscapes, seascapes and skyscapes of the world.

Seen through the lens of the gift, these are the developments that distanced and divorced us from the gifts of other forms of life. The development of “prosthetic devices” can be considered the development of all that blocks the gift out. Early buffers could have begun the process of driving a wedge between humans and the rest of life, signaling the slow transformation of the immediate return society.

"Buffers" involve a degree of distance and insulation from natural processes. Interactions with other beings are muffled and in many instances, eliminated altogether. Prosthetics are designed to generate certainty out of the dross of an uncertain world which cannot be trusted in its natural state. Remember that the gift actually requires mystery in order to function – the necessity of the unseen third – and that makes the gift into the very opposite of these buffers. Buffer mechanisms by their very purpose are designed to keep the gift out of human societies.

Halstead and O'Shea (1989) distinguished between high level and low-level buffer mechanisms. High-level mechanisms include the storage of food, agriculture, and accumulation through exchange, among others. Mobility and a diversification of resources are considered low-level responses to uncertainty.

> Low-level mechanisms are the most efficient and the most reliable, but are of strictly limited scope. High-level mechanisms are more powerful, in terms of the scale of shortage which they can buffer. By virtue of their size and the relative rarity with which they may be activated, however, they can be both costly, in the energy invested in their maintenance, and unreliable, in that they may depend on distant social relations, may entail reversal of cultural norms and, more generally, may fail through long periods of disuse… In this way, high-level mechanisms may be embedded to the point where they are irreversibly transformed, with radical consequences for the articulation and survival of that society (Halstead & O'Shea 1989: 4).

In other words, technological advantages carry heavy costs. The secondary effects of certain prosthetic devices can be difficult to predict, and the risks associated with using them are most likely unknown to those who adopt them. The rate of changes inspired by high-level mechanisms operates on a time scale invisible to the single human lifetime. But over time, buffer mechanisms gain more and more transformative power, capable of exerting more and more influence over human cultures. A synergistic relationship exists between buffers and ideologies; new buffers will inspire changes in ideology that then in turn inspire new buffers and reinforce original ones. This positive feedback loop paves the way for increasingly effective innovations that keep the gift and the rest of nature out. These buffers creep over the cultural landscape, remaking it as they go, taking hundreds, sometimes thousands of years to reveal their full palette of effects.[5]

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[5] Fire was one of humanity's first prosthetic devices (Livingston 1994: 28). While some species of vegetation have learned how to manipulate and encourage fire, no other organism has domesticated fire like we have. Fire has long elevated us over other creatures; it transformed our eating habits, softened our food and lessened our reliance on bulky jaw muscles, developments that may have freed up more space for the expansion of the human brain. It gave us powerful leverage over other beings and magnified our presence in the ecosystems of the world. It created a circle of light in the darkness, the first bubble of technology that lit up the night and gave us room to clear our own place in the world. Anyone who has gone camping without a fire and without a flashlight can appreciate the difference that fire and light make. Perhaps it is here that early distinctions between "in here" and "out there" began to develop in embryonic form. The unknown possibilities of the dark contrast sharply with the warmth and safety of the fire circle. Despite all of the benefits fire has given to human societies, who could have foreseen what we would do with fire in the hundreds of millennia since its domestication? If we had known the fire theft would give us gunpowder and cannons and the doomsday threat of the nuclear firestorm, would we have stolen it in the first place?

The March of the Neolithic

Prior to the onset of the current interglacial, buffer mechanisms were few and far between. Some human groups possessed fire, and others had begun developing what archaeologist Brian Hayden called "gadget technology" to process certain plant foods and a wider range of small animals. There were no known intensifications of plants and therefore no agriculture, and only limited and scattered use of food storage. Most human societies at the time fell under the category of the immediate return, their economies oriented to the here and now.

The playing field changed radically when the age of ice ended. For the first time in tens of thousands of years, the climate softened and the weather became less tempestuous. The human intelligence, sharpened by millennia of struggle with an ever-shifting landscape, suddenly found a less demanding pace of life. Upon this new canvas a full flowering of buffer mechanisms and prosthetic devices developed, ushering in a new era of human society-building called the Neolithic Revolution. It is here we began building our literal and metaphorical protective shelter or "domus" in earnest.[6] And it is also here where enormous pressure was exerted upon the pact humans held with the rest of life. No other constellation of forces – a balmy climate, increasingly sophisticated buffer mechanisms, a growing human population – put more pressure on the ideology of the gifting cosmos.

Controlling Food

The how and why of the Neolithic Revolution is an intricate web of interrelated factors, whole laundry lists of forces mixing with one another, a subject worthy of a whole paper on its own and one rife with contentious debate. The results of new innovations in how we organized ourselves were the same – the emergence of increasingly complex and technologically sophisticated human societies.

Two buffer mechanisms were responsible for the most radical changes in how we live – agriculture and food storage. Both allowed us to do the unthinkable: to take control of our food supply. While we take this for granted today and rarely give our refrigerators and pantries a second thought, this was an unparalleled development for human beings. For me, this eclipses the rise of the Industrial Revolution, the Apollo landing, the development of the computer and the introduction of the Internet, for at their core all of these other innovations stand on the shoulders of a secure and reliable supply of food.

Storing and growing foods triggered one of humanity's oldest dreams – to live in one place (Turner 1992: 22). These two innovations provide the cornerstones for the first sedentary human societies and the emergence of the other half of Woodburn's categorization of human societies – the delayed return society. In these societies, the deployment of storage or agriculture or both triggers a decline in mobility and increasing sedentism. There exists a significant delay on labour invested and reaping the rewards of that labour. Delayed return societies are marked by the appearance of hierarchal, fixed power structures, the presence of administrators, growing (though not necessarily well nourished) populations; in other words, all the hallmarks of civilization. If the immediate return model is the best template for realizing the potential of a mysterious, gifting universe, then the delayed return model is the best template or growth medium for the emergence of complex human societies.

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[6] The Latin "domus" is the root of the word "domestication".

> Today, he said, more than ever before, men had to learn to live without things. Things filled men with fear: the more things they had, the more they had to fear. Things had a way of riveting themselves onto the soul and then telling the soul what to do (Chatwin 1991: 64).

As Halstead and O'Shea warned, the society that wields these high-level, high risk buffer mechanisms runs the risk of being transformed by them. In different ways, agriculture and storage remove us from an interdependent, mutualistic rapport with other beings. The Neolithic can be described as the beginning of an age of great biological loneliness for the human being. Societies organized around the immediate return interact with hundreds and sometimes thousands of species as we saw in the case of the Haunoo forest dwellers, and they are by no means an exception. This stands in sharp contrast with the few dozen species that delayed return societies interact with.

For the storing societies of the Pacific Northwest coast, the one-time harvest of salmon provides a massive boon of food that can be lived off throughout the winter. But with life salted and smoked away, there is an unavoidable decrease in the number of interactions between those peoples and their surroundings in comparison with immediate return hunters and gatherers who find their food sometimes daily on an encounter basis. Storage can fossilize interactions with the others into seasonal, one time events. The less we interact with what is around us, the more likely we are to forget their presence.

Agriculture's effects are similar if not more coercive and control-oriented by design. "Agrarian domestication reduced the life forms of interest to a few score species" (Shepard 1998: 93). As people began to farm, a dichotomy quickly developed between those species that fell under human control, and those categorized as enemies (1998: 85).

Both agriculture and storage inspired a spasm of extinctions of interactions between humans and others. These extinctions have cost us in terms of dietary diversity and overall health. With agriculture comes an extraordinary simplification of the human diet. An omnivore's diet is wide; this brings him or her into an interchange with all kinds of other creatures. To rely only on a handful of food sources amounts to a refusal of the gifts of the others. But the juvenilization of the forest or grassland into a farmer's field has created unhealthy ecologies which in turn create unhealthy humans. "The advent of civilization dealt a blow to man's health from which he is only now recovering" (Neel 1970: 818). Only recently has there been a medical acceptance of the merits of the Paleolithic diet and a recognition of the paucity of the Neolithic diet. "The difference between our diet and that of our hunter-gatherer forebears may hold keep to many of our current health problems… If there is a diet natural to our human makeup, one to which our genes are best suited, this is it" (Shostak in Shepard 1998: 99).

Enslaving the Others

The relationships that do remain between planter and plant or herdsman and animal are for the most part far from mutualistic or egalitarian. For so many cultures, the rise of food control mechanisms has inspired the domination of nature. “What was maintained in the wild by a shifting web of lateral relationships is substituted with a one-way flow of order from above” (Livingston 1994: 17).

Growing a food plant, tending to it, weeding around it, and favoring varieties and traits through seed selection is markedly different from encountering an edible plant in the forest. Reciprocity is strong in farming. Direct, balanced reciprocity is the farmer’s expectation for his or her efforts – the very antithesis of the game of chance that is the hunt. As we noted earlier, reciprocity allows us to control a relationship. A select number of inputs are wagered for a specific output. Water, soil, fertilizer, seed, and maintenance are exchanged for the promises of a bountiful harvest.

Ironically, farming is by no means a guaranteed endeavor. Losses are often heavy and hard work can go unrewarded. Perhaps it is that element of control that is so attractive to the farmer – attractive yet ultimately deceptive, for at any moment the skies could open up and pummel a crop of wheat flat with snowball-sized hailstones, or unleash a plague of grasshoppers that could cover the landscape like a moving blanket.

Among domesticated animals, a similar one-way flow of order and power exists. “Natural social organization is gradually broken down and interdependence is transformed into unilateral dependence on the owner or proprietor” (Livingston 1994: 17). To domesticate plants and animals, human beings become masters.

The Rise of the New Masters

When humans become Animal and Plant Masters, the unseen third so essential to the functioning of the gifting cosmos is eliminated. The mysterious origins of wild game are replaced by the steely intelligence of the farmer or shepherd. We have been preparing ourselves for this take-over in power since we picked up the first whip or hoe.

With the advent of domestication, some creative power now resides in the human being. Harvesting societies show the same peculiar dynamics as farming and herding societies. In the Potlatch, a number of wealthy elites take turns seizing nature’s role as a source of bounty and as providers of fecundity. Gifts of blankets, oils, and foodstuffs are given in great amounts to other people in what amounts to massive debt enslavement contest.

The gods still have a say as we go about domesticating the world, but they are no longer mysterious. They can be bargained with, their favors and tacit approval gained through bloody sacrifices and ostentatious offerings. The gods become gatekeepers.

If leading a sedentary life is one of humanity’s oldest dreams, then one of humanity’s most daring and perhaps most foolish dreams is to replace the Animal Masters with ourselves and seize the role of the unseen third, resulting in the humanization of the natural. Whenever humans become Masters, a core process of chance is replaced by manipulation, finding is replaced by making, and the gifts of others are seen less as sacraments received and more as the subject of negotiations (Shepard 1998: 81). We excuse ourselves as peoples inextricably tied to ecosystem processes. Food control is the key to the lock on our ecological cage.

This desire for mastery is a complete rejection of the rules of the sacred hunt and a complete rejection of the table manners that allowed us to co-exist and co-evolve with the rest of life. It represents an abdication of our responsibility to the world. Becoming an Animal Master has given us the opportunity to define our existence on our own terms and by our own references.

The Botany of Domestication

"The Botany of Desire" (2001) is the title of Michael Pollan's latest book. His thesis is that plants domesticated humans as much as humans domesticated plants: "Did I choose to plant these potatoes, or did the potato make me do it?" (2001: xv). In his opinion, there is little difference between bees and flowers on one hand, and humans and plants on the other. Each is carrying out the wishes of the other in that great dance of co-evolution.

> We automatically think of domestication as something we do to other species, but it makes just as much sense to think of it as something certain plants and animals have done to us, a clever way of advancing their own interests. The species that have spent the last ten thousand or so years figuring out how best to feed, heal, clothe, intoxicate, and otherwise delight us have made themselves some of nature"s greatest success stories (Pollan 2001: xvi).

Pollan interprets domestication as a glorious sharing of gifts between humans, plants and animals. They gave us beauty, sweetness, and intoxication in the cases of the tulip, apple, and cannibis plant; in return we protect them and cultivate them all over the world. If anything, the opposite is taking place. Gifts are not being shared, they are being stripped away. Domestication is not co-evolutionary any more than slavery could be considered a symbiosis between master and slave. Domesticated beings are far less intelligent than their wild cousins and totally dependent upon human inputs as mentioned above.

But in another sense, I do agree with Pollan. The effects of domestication have been as pronounced on us as they have been on plants and animals. But contra Pollan, I feel that both sides lost. Domestication has been a debilitating experience for every being that has fallen into its traps. Intelligence, survival value, imagination and freedom have been lost on all accounts.

Controlling Humans

Just as certain species of plants and animals got new masters with the Neolithic Revolution, so did we. In a strange twist of cultural karma, humans began doing to humans what we were already doing to plants and animals. Domesticating life in neat and orderly rows in the soil or capturing life and saving it for later in granaries or on the hoof can have disastrous consequences for human societies. If we had to draw a symbol of the shape of the social organization of agrarian and pastoral societies, including our own odd hybrid of the two, it would be triangular by most accounts. It is interesting how this mimics power relations in the barnyard, the cornfield or out among the shepherd and flock. Domestication orders, controls and enslaves – not only plants and animals, but people too.

Inequality between humans is a near constant companion of societies that practice some form of food control. Lording over other people and lording over other beings and landscapes are two rungs on the same ladder. Agriculture, storage, and pastoralism all engender some of the dynamics that intensify human societies – demographic expansion, increased sedentism, etc. By doing so, they create the necessary social template through which certain individuals can seize leverage over others.

Again, the how and why are difficult to discern amidst all the factors that shaped early Neolithic communities. We do know that populations were growing, a fact not lost on Jared Diamond (1987) who thought of the Neolithic less as a revolution and more as an invasion as populations expanded and competition between these groups intensified, adding yet another selective advantage for those who began working the soil in earnest. Other researchers pick up on this argument, proposing that agriculture was mandatory during the Holocene (the present interglacial). Were one group to adopt agriculture, others around them would have no choice but to adopt it as well lest they be "plowed under" or crowded out by a burgeoning agricultural population (Boyd et al. 2001: 5). As Diamond noted, one healthy hunter is no match for a hundred malnourished farmers (1987: 66).

Anyone familiar with small group work or organized politics knows that the larger the group, the harder the process. The template provided by immediate return societies was designed and tested over time for small groups of foragers, not large populations of sedentary farmers or herding peoples. There appears to exist some kind of a threshold in the size of a human population beyond which self-organization becomes extremely difficult without some sort of centralized decision-making effort. Add the power base that the storage of food provides, regardless of whether it is on the hoof or in the barn, and it is not difficult to imagine how autocratic management can develop from these conditions. "The rise of centralized authority was the heritage of agriculture, stemming back to storable crops, distributional networks, bookkeeping, currency, territorial protection and war" (Shepard 1998: 93).

If we were to look over the trajectories of agricultural and pastoral societies with the benefit of the academic equivalent of time-lapse photography, we would see that wealth begins pooling around key individuals early on following the introduction of intensive domestication. Kent Flannery (1972) recorded such a transition in the small village hamlets of the Near East. Using archaeological records from the excavations of a number of early Neolithic sites, he demonstrated the movement of granaries away from individual households to a single, centralized location. While a margin for error always exists when our evidence is restricted to excavated ruins, it seems likely that the centralized granary would have fallen under the control of some sort of centralized authority, just as the spoils of agriculture have done nearly everywhere intensive crops are grown in the presence of large populations.

In an immediate return society, sharing is the standard mode of exchange. Goods and services move horizontally across the society. The emphasis is on kinship ties and collective survival. In the delayed return society, wealth moves vertically, and with it so does power, leading to the rise of the administrative apparatus. Domesticating societies quickly polarize as the collective security of the tribe is traded for the individual gain of members of an elite. What I find curious in these societies is that all forms of knowledge and power shrink into the hands of the few. Instead of collective decision-making and consensus-based rule, we get the Big Man complex. Instead of spiritual knowledge shared throughout a community, it becomes consolidated in the hands of magico-religious specialists known popularly as "shaman." "Among foraging peoples, healers appeared spontaneously and did not necessarily hold other powers, sponsor séances, go on vision quests, do magic tricks or wield political influence – all of which are true of the later shaman" (Shepard 1998: 92).

The degree of generalized autonomy among immediate return peoples is startlingly high, because that particular life way involves individuals and small groups foraging on their own. Every individual carries a wealth of the community's cultural DNA, so to speak – knowledge of the proper functioning of its institutions, subsistence strategies, and so on. If even just a few individuals survived some sort of cataclysm, their culture could be "grown back" from their holistic understanding of their own unique approach to community building and from their cosmological beliefs. This stands in total contrast to the specialization and dependency of the members of the delayed return society, a society of experts and specialists isolated within particular pools of knowledge and influence. If we were to isolate me in a petri dish to grow a whole human culture from my repositories of knowledge and understanding, it would be a society shaped around hockey and popular films.

Civilization's Discontents

"Human domestication is nearly enough a synonym for civilization" wrote John Livingston in his book Rogue Ape (1994: 13). As with plants and animals under the hoe and yolk, so too for humans: a linear vertical hierarchy imposes order on a population. The treatment of domesticated animals and the treatment of domesticated humans by society's leaders is marginally different. In Western industrialized countries, our confinement is certainly more comfortable on a physical level than that of factory farmed pigs or chickens. In other places, the similarities between the domesticated farm animal and the domesticated human are stunning.

Domestication involves groups of individuals living at extremely high population densities. We would think that the increased size of a human population would encourage an even greater number of interactions among an already gregarious social animal. The opposite appears to be the case, at least within the present social organization of densely packed human settlements. In Western industrialized countries, those places with the highest concentrations of people are also the areas with the highest degree of dislocation and disconnection between people. Henry David Thoreau wrote that cities tend to be places characterized by "millions of people being lonely together" (in Ponting 1991: 312). To me, cities always feel like the places where a thousand villages were broken open and their populations all lumped in together. To use a modern metaphor, I think of people in cities like the component parts of a thousand transistor radios, all spread out on a worktable, disassembled. A few hundred people together could comprise a relatively self- sufficient village, just as a collection of component parts could be put together into a working radio. But instead of building a thousand radios from all of these parts, we are stuck with a great mess whose functional benefits are vague and unclear.

Like those radio parts lying disconnected from each other on a worktable, so too domesticated humans are kept apart from each other. To some, this is one of the great triumphs of civilized life – the elimination of the nosy, knowing neighbor and the ability to glide through a crowd without getting caught up in a single superficial conversation like a hot knife through butter. Disconnection makes for efficient movement. But it can also make for lonely, unfulfilled lives.

Domesticates are kept weak by an extinction of interactions between themselves. They are experientially deprived of each other. Connections through which the gifts of others pass are fragmented and reduced to ties of dependence and subservience. The communalism of the West Timor village or Kalahari kinsmen is replaced by competition, one of the key tenets of modern economy orthodoxy. Vaughan notes that "the isolation of pockets of community from each other keeps the gift model weak" (1998: 35). Remember the root of words like community, communalism and communication is "the sharing of gifts." Domestication keeps us apart, and prevents us from benefiting from each other's gifts. Each of us is like a puzzle made from smaller pieces given to us by others. With less beings to interact with, we become lesser beings. In this way an individual goes from being a whole to a mere part due to disconnection, stratification and a vertically organized society that vanquishes autonomy and promotes servility (Shepard 1998: 88).

The Power of the New Animal Masters

As human domesticates, we are not only experientially deprived from each other's gifts but also in our relationships with the rest of the world. The New Masters function like metaphysical middlemen, eliminating our sense of mystery of life's grandeur by eliminating our connection with other beings. They interact with nature for us, and then sell the products of these interactions in stores and on television.

We rely on others to find food for us. The New Masters arrange to carry out the slaughter of animals for us, and in surrendering our access to the sacred hunt, we are cut off from the source of our most intimate relations with the rest of life. Know thy food! Looking down at my tuna sandwich, I wonder "Who was this fish? What was he like?" "The interdependence of life, however, is likely to be obscure to those who turn the killing of food animals over to specialists who practice in secret" (Shepard 1998: 98). While many of us still eat copious amounts of meat, a fraction of us are actually involved in that critical moment when lives are taken in the name and for the benefit of other lives. The general public in North America is largely unaware of the cruelty of factory farming and just how their food animals are raised.[7]

Just as domesticated animals are dependent on a proprietor or master, those who control our supply of food also control us. A few years ago, I was researching a short story about an electrical failure that cripples a large North American city. In this story, a group of university students come together in their struggle to survive in a landscape of empty grocery stores (cleared out by rioters), no heating, no plumbing, and so on. Removed from the buffer mechanisms that insulated their lives, these students discovered that they did not know how to satisfy their basic needs.

I visited a large supermarket chain in Vancouver, and asked the manager on duty what sort of a contingency plan the store had in the event of a major power failure. He told me they lock down the store and send everyone out. If the electrical failure were to continue for more than three hours, a fleet of large refrigerated trucks would be dispatched from company headquarters and all perishable foods would be taken off the shelves and out of the walk-in freezers and transported back to a central distributional hub. The same scenario applies to petroleum products. In the event of a major disruption of services, tanker trucks will arrive at all the gas stations belonging to a particular franchise, and all the gasoline will be suctioned up and taken away.

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[7] Vegetarianism is looked to as one possible escape from the moral and ethical sewer of conventional factory farming. But vegetarianism is just another way of abdicating responsibility to the pact with life. The goal is to not cut oneself off further from a world already weakened by disconnection; rather our goal is to re-assess, re-evaluate, and improve our damaged relationship with the beings already here.

If we recall the Caribou Man from the last chapter, he is the Animal Master in charge of dispatching game from his underground home, and he also has the power to take back game if his animals are not being treated properly. It appears as though the New Masters wield this same sort of power, at least judging from the contingency plans of our food and energy providers. Food retreats to unhappy places, out the back of refrigerator trucks, and through loading docks into some hidden hub.

Here in my Annex apartment, I too am dependent on the new Animal Masters, as we all are. Caribou Man is gone; he has been replaced by the Master who dispatches the supply truck that keeps the supermarket near my house well stocked with fresh fruits, meats, and all kinds of foods. Perhaps if I were to make this New Master angry or picket outside of his store for his failure to label genetically modified organisms in my groceries, he too will withdraw those supply trucks to unhappy places as part of my punishment.[8]

The power of these Masters is startling, and all around us. But our dependence on them to supply us with food and look after our lives reaches down to a fundamental level. Does anyone know how to repair a telephone, not including a telephone repairman? Can anyone put one together from scratch? Somebody out there knows, but the information will cost us. Our dependence is growing as each passing generation loses more and more of their survival skills and that imaginative self-reliance so critical to our ongoing adaptation to an ever-changing world. This dependence is echoed in our language. We have even developed a way of speaking in quiet deference of the new Animal Masters with the particular usage of the pronoun “they”: “They”ll fix it”, “They”re coming out with a car that runs on….”, “They won”t let that happen to us." We all talk like this. Who is "they"? We are referring to our New Masters, the "unseen third" that controls and supplies our lives, and has taken the place of the mystery of the world.

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[8] Monsanto is one of the more powerful of the new Animal Masters. Biotechnology represents just the latest buffer mechanism inspired by that synergism between ideology and technology as they bounce back and forth off of each other, building momentum and developing increasingly technology-driven ways to outsmart natural processes and skirt their bounds. Monsanto’s use of genetically modified canola seed is a fantastic and awesome display of their power over the human food supply. Just ask Percy Schmeiser, the Saskatchewan corn farmer taken to court by the agribusiness giant for patent infringement after genetically modified seeds from a passing truck took root in his fields. Monsanto owns the patent to an engineered canola seed called “Roundup Ready Canola”, meaning that farmers using Monsanto’s “products” who keep seeds from their best plants for planting the next year would be breaking the law. Small-scale farmers have been saving seeds to select and develop varieties since agriculture began. Schmeiser lost the case, costing him around $200,000 Canadian dollars. He is appealing, and Monsanto is counter appealing. “The seed companies have said “No farmer should ever be allowed to use his own seeds.” That’s the basis of this lawsuit. It’s all about the freedom of farmers. The freedom to be able to use your own seeds. Because if you give up that freedom and you don’t fight for it, you’ve lost control of your whole farming operation and you’ve just become a serf on the land” (Halweil et al 2002: 10).

The Killing of Unicorns

For the most part, the replacement of the real Animal Masters has been a fait accompli. Most of us do not realize our own bondage and few of us escape it. The Neolithic Invasion is now moving into the metaphysical realm. We fervently embrace the belief that everything has a rational, empirical explanation; we do so by chasing mystery from the world whether by argument or experiment. Leading the way in this slaughter of unicorns is the troika of science, technology, and economics. "Just as the lion and zebra and giraffe and hyena evolved together as an interdependent group, so too our European science, philosophy, technology and assorted belief systems evolved over time. Our ideology evolved as a unit. It is no accident that our science fits our philosophy fits our technology fits the convoluted belief system that sustains them. Like the African savannah wildlife community, they go together…" (Livingston 1994: 58). Science, technology and economics are eaters of mystery. By consuming the unknown and the unpredictable, by bringing the light of reason and certainty to this "demon-haunted world," these eaters of mystery are encroaching upon the space of the gift. Like a Sumatran rhinoceros dependent on its rainforest habitat, they are destroying the gift's habitat. The gift needs mystery like a fish needs water.

Their goal is to replace mystery with certainty, and in doing so, a human elite will take over the unseen third. The portion of the unseen third controlled by humans grows with each patent taken out on a life form, with each bio-prospecting trip carried out in Costa Rica or New Guinea, with each new marriage of unrelated organisms in the corporate laboratory.

Biotechnology builds off the long interplay between buffer mechanisms and ideology. It is only the latest extension of a ten thousand years-long struggle to control the natural world. Biotechnology reworks the rules of the gifting cosmos by trying to design certainty into organisms: pest-resistant crops that secrete their own pesticides, a luminescent tobacco plant produced by inserting a gene from a firefly, and so on. The New Masters are going right after the nature of the gift, species by species. All that is unpredictable and unknowable is to be "modified" and in doing so, as much of the world as possible is to be brought under human control. We can sanitize the world through a generous application of certainty.

The irony is that in all their efforts to make the world over into a place of greater certainty and stability, the New Masters are unleashing even more uncertainty into the world, a kind of anthropogenic or "human made" uncertainty that threatens our food supply, our ability to fight infectious disease, and even the relatively balmy skies of our interglacial era. What will be the outcome of genetically modified super salmon breeding with their wild cousins? No one knows. What about the effects of consuming genetically modified organisms? No one knows either – biotechnology has not been around long enough for any long-term analyses to be carried out. What of the effects of other buffer mechanisms, like the switch to nonrenewable energy sources like oil, coal and natural gas? Already our climate has begun acting erratically, swerving all over the place like a drunk driver. Will we be able to keep up to this anthropogenic uncertainty? To maintain this collective denial of ecological reality will require yet another round of disease resistant crops, weather resistant crops, environmentally resistant crops. The whole thing smacks of a vicious circle, of a dog chasing its tail faster and faster.

The power of the new Animal Masters and the sanitized streets of civilized life are enough to leave us numb. The loss of interaction with each other and with the rest of the natural world is dangerous on a personal level because this loss cripples the imagination and it works like a defoliant on our creative and social capacities to adapt and respond to change.

Yet another buffer mechanism has been erected – the wall we put up inside ourselves to protect us from the life the new Animal Masters have created. These are civilizations full of broken people and broken landscapes. We develop hard, crustacean-like carapaces as our own personal prosthetic devices. The social persona is as much a buffer mechanism as agriculture or fire. The terrible danger of these hard shells is that they can blind us from the gifts of others when these gifts are laid before us. Buffer mechanisms insulate and therefore isolate, from both the good and the bad. Trapped behind walls and scar tissue, we might not be able to feel much anymore.

All these buffers eat at our imagination and strip away our ability to recognize wondrous possibilities like chainsaws in a forest. “The domesticated human is dependent upon storable, retrievable, transmissible knowledge” (Livingston 1994: 14). In a society dependent upon information and information technology, the imagination is reduced to a useless party favor. This dependency on stored information displaces the imagination and can replace the forest inside us with a parking lot. There is little imagination in a concrete parking lot outside of a Chucky Cheese restaurant. Eliminating creativity from our surroundings suffocates the creativity of the human individual. Without the imagination, we can no longer see that the gift is all around us, that we are enveloped in millions of possibilities of connection, that there can be an explosion of creative, life-affirming energy in a chance encounter with an inquisitive animal or a stranger on a bus. Life is a game of chance.

The key to the successful domination of a group of beings is the blinkering or outright elimination of the imagination. In Yevgeny Zamyatin’s cautionary novel “We” (1922), a popular uprising against a totalitarian government is quelled by a mass surgical procedure that excises the imagination and reduces people to vegetative automatons. At the time of Zamyatin’s writing, the idea of an operation that exercised so much control over the personality of the individual belonged purely in the realm of science fiction. Nowadays, the potential for the genomic manipulation of the human is very real. As rudimentary cloning experiments press forward despite legislation in most of the world, it is only a matter of time before humans will be able to select for certain traits and characteristics in their offspring and in the population at large. We are still capable of boycotts, protests and uprisings; we do not always want to sit in our cages watching television or in our cubicles handling investment portfolios. It would do us well to be watchful of any technological innovation that threatens the very character of our species.[9]

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[9] Only insects equal the modern human feat of large, sedentary, highly populous societies. Interestingly enough, insects like the ant, termite and bee only accomplish the feat through the biological manipulation of their members.

A culture without imagination is a culture that is asleep to whatever is going on around it. Such a culture will be unable to realize a connection with its surroundings. The gift reveals itself in many different guises, and it can be argued that environmental feedback – a drought, oddly fluctuating temperatures, and so on – is a form of gifting, a sharing of gifts, a communication between the world and ourselves.

Hunters, poets, outdoor enthusiasts and mystics around the world have long acknowledged the natural world can sometimes communicate in signs. But sometimes the signs we get from nature are bewildering and inexplicable. In January 2002, an estimated two hundred and fifty million Monarch butterflies died off in the mountains near Mexico City. They were the victims of a freak cold snap that hit them on the tail end of a three thousand mile migration, one of the most mysterious migrations known to science. A combination of rain followed by freezing temperatures wiped out eighty percent of the over-wintering butterflies. The loss of the monarchs can be thought of as a memo to the rest of the planet, writes columnist Mark Morford, who added: “The question is, is anyone really listening?”

If a culture no longer listens to the hints and clues of its surroundings, then that culture loses the ability to receive the gifts it will need in order to transform itself to meet the demands of changing conditions. Human societies must be capable of shape-shifting. If they lose this ability, they will no longer be able to adapt to an ever-changing landscape.

If a squirrel pays no attention to the first signs of the coming winter, she would not gather any food to store away for the winter, and starve. We have already seen that among many hunting societies, the environment is studiously analyzed for any number of ecological indicators that can tell of everything from the availability of game to the coming of distant weather patterns.

Nature communicates in signs, and if a society loses the ability to recognize those signs, it is doomed. These are poorly adaptive societies: feedback loops are inefficient and disconnected from those in a society who are running the show. The Hohokam farmer who recognizes the first signs of impending drought and crop failure is in no position to communicate this information to the decision-makers in that society so that a mid course correction can be made. These are brittle societies, societies full of disconnection and sheared of imagination like the wool of sheep.

The gift moves, and in order to survive, life has to move with it. A society without imagination is one that does not realize the gift moves; staying in one place is a particularly risky venture. Storing food and in effect storing the gift of life will work for a while, but sooner or later this inability to travel with the gift will catch up to them. Brittle societies try to cage and contain the gift, to salt it away, to capture what sustains all of life and by its very nature must remain afoot. The remains of societies that tried to capture the gift, to make it stay in one place, litter the globe and can be found on nearly every continent.

Lord of the Rings

The novels and films that make up the Lord of the Rings saga serve as a parable for the gift that must not be kept. Tolkien’s stories revolve around a small band of warriors and misfits assigned with the

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In the case of termites, a ruling elite carefully monitors the size of the populations of workers and soldiers, and a manipulation of pheromones keeps these populations equal and the society in balance.

task of carrying a magical ring forged by the Gods to the cracks of fiery Mount Doom where it is to be cast back into the earth and away from misuse by mortal hands. The ring is so strong and powerful that it disfigures nearly every being who takes it as his or her own, filling them with visions of power and mastery. Feelings of greed and control over others cripple and deform all who wear the ring for too long. Only somebody unaware of its power can carry it.

The gift carries life, for life is built on connections, partnerships, associations and marriages between beings. We only hold the gift for as long as we need it and then it must be passed on so that it can replenish other lives. “Such stories declare that the gift does move from plenty to emptiness. It seeks the barren, the arid, the stuck, and the poor”(Hyde 1983: 24). To hold the gift and to claim it as our own is to be deformed by its power. We ourselves are not sources of fecundity, we only help to channel fecundity into and around this world just as Richard Nelson’s hunter realizes that the only power he has comes from the surrounding environment. Our societies have been transformed by the captured gift, through agriculture, herding, biotechnology and other endeavors of domestication. The captured gift has warped the human soul and distorted our cultural landscape, pitching us vertically over one another in bizarre power relations, allowing us to marshal the arrogance required to build great civilizations that reject nature’s terms, and wage nightmarish wars of Promethean intensity on one another.

Wise cultures are the ones that have learned how to manage buffer mechanisms in order to keep technological innovations from turning around and managing whole cultures. Emphasis needs to be placed on the word “learn”; indigenous peoples have by no means been consistently benign in their relationship with nature. Cultures have to fall on their faces before they get it right. Wisdom comes through experience. Wise cultures also learn that power must be voluntarily tempered. The restraint of power shows more maturity than its reckless exercise. Life is learning how to give away, and part of what must be given away is power.

Afterword

In late December 2001, a strange story began unfolding in the Samburu National Reserve in Kenya. A mature lioness with no cubs of her own seemingly defied natural law and known rules governing predator-prey relations by adopting a baby Beisa oryx, a type of antelope that lions usually eat.

News reports out of the area pointed out that a bond could not have developed between two more distant creatures. In addition to the most obvious glaring difference – that lions eat oryxs – lions are carnivores that sleep a lot, sometimes up to sixteen hours a day, while oryxs are herbivores that maintain the opposite schedule, grazing for nearly the same amount of time. Still, their relationship lasted more than two weeks. Visitors and park staff alike witnessed the two animals roaming around the reserve together, side by side. They would lie down and rest together with all the intimacy of a mother with child, and several times the lioness kept other predatory cats – including other lions – from attacking her young charge.

After the first calf was finally eaten by an old, toothless lion, the lioness turned the trick three more times, adopting oryxs on three separate occasions prior to her own mysterious disappearance at the end of May 2002. Between adoptions, she was often spotted trailing herds of oryxs, though apparently without ever hunting them. Her kills were restricted to warthog and impala.

The story of the lioness and the adoption of the oryxs is a fitting way to begin the final section of this major paper. In many ways, this story acts as a parable for the nature of the gifting world, and as an example for what needs to be done in order to realize a gifting relationship with the rest of the world.

Humans have done well over the last ten millennia to insulate ourselves from the vagaries of the natural world. Unfortunately these efforts, from the invention of food storage and agriculture to the invention of the internal combustion engine, have only generated more environmental uncertainty. It is now without serious question that climate change will be with us for the next several hundred years, if not longer, in ever-increasing waves of intensity. We may have provided ourselves with the tools to bunker ourselves against stormy weather for the interim, but our efforts to fashion these tools has left most other species out in the cold. More importantly, I do not think humanity can survive without these Others – without the spiritual, emotional, and physical nourishment they provide. The evolutionary window these tools opened up for us will slam shut upon us if other beings are incapable of climbing through it as well.

A bold step laterally is required by our species. The “domus” must be extended if we are to make it through the next thousand years or so. As Paul Stamets, the mycologist cited in Chapter One once said: “We need to share each other’s resources in order to survive.” “Domestication” means to bring something under our roof yet it does not necessarily have to imply a relationship based on power, on a loss of fitness or the loss of a creature’s creative capacities to adapt to changing circumstances. Throughout this paper I have listed a number of examples where humans have developed close relations with other beings based on an ethic of mutualism and interdependence. To bring someone or something under our domus is to extend protective care to that being, much like the lioness cared for those baby oryxs, and just as my own parents brought neglected and abused animals and children under their own roof.

We must do what we can to safeguard these Others. A few words are needed to clarify what I mean by this. When I write of extending our domus to share our buffer mechanisms with other creatures, I am thinking more of birdhouses and restored wetlands than I am thinking about bringing back the Tasmanian tiger from old scraps of DNA, or modifying salmon or corn to adapt to different environmental conditions. As Richard Nelson pointed out, in these efforts it is not appropriate to manipulate, control or confine animals, or entertain the illusion of understanding them (1989: 160). We need to safeguard other beings by virtue of their own wild unpredictability and creativity, on their own terms, not ours.

This means stitching back together the skein of life. It means restoring connections and plugging nature back into itself. Our role is as participants, not as stewards with a social program for other beings. Our work must be carried out in the shadow of the immense mystery of natural processes, acknowledging that we will never comprehend the full implications of what it means to put the world back together. Like Amelie, there is no way of knowing how far our actions will reverberate.

While writing this conclusion, I looked down to notice a honeybee crawling up my arm. I was in the middle of a large library, and carefully made my way downstairs, back into the sunlight where I let this little insect climb off onto terra firma. I have no way of knowing the consequences of this cosmic errand – what flowers she will pollinate, and the cascading effects of her actions on other beings that depend on this pollination in whatever form for their survival. We work in the embrace of mystery.

We have undertaken, with our lives, the negotiation of a new contract with each other and the earth – and though it will go by the names of conservation biology and environmental ethics, family counseling, and community building, it is at heart the reopening of the gift relationship. At heart, and from there outward (Martien 1996: 240).

Our focus must be on the restoration of the systems that sustain us – emotionally, physically, and spiritually, be it the ecosystem of the family, the biome of the heart, the wetland, rainforest, and beaver meadow. Intimate economies must be pushed outwards again. The landscape must become our landscape again as we strive to become native to place and weave a quilt of intimate economies out of our surroundings in layers so thick they dwarf Stamets' mycelial mats. Bogs must be rejuvenated, and rivers reinvigorated to find their wild magic again. All the while, our role in these places must be participatory. We want symbiotic development, not sustainable development or the fences of protected areas.

What Then Must We Do

In Peter Weir's 1983 film The Year of Living Dangerously, a young Australian journalist named Guy Hamilton is on his first overseas assignment, finding himself in Jakarta in 1965, just weeks prior to the coup d'etat that forced then-incumbent President Sukarno out of power. One of his only companions on this adventure is the diminutive Billy Kwan, his cameraman and moral guide.

While touring a slum typical of Asia's poverty stricken metropolises, Kwan tells Hamilton that a single gift of five American dollars would be a fortune to someone there. Hamilton chuckles at Kwan's suggestion, replying that such an insignificant gift would only be a drop in the bucket. It is at this point the redemptive philosophy of Kwan clashes with the cynicism of the youthful Hamilton. "What then must we do?" Kwan says, quoting a line from Luke Chapter Three Verse Ten. The question is universal in its implications. When faced with despair and hopelessness on such a grand scale, what then must we do? Kwan's answer is to give with love to whomever God has placed in our path. Larger issues and forces must be forgotten. It is the immediate – the intimate – that must be taken care of.

Kwan's philosophy is synonymous with the ethos of the gift economy. I was once in a large Indonesian city with a friend of mine native to that area, and as we walked down a little side street, she spotted an older man shuffling along in the shadows of a nearby building, visibly ill and out of sorts. He was not begging; he was barely walking. She walked up to him and pressed a few thousand Rupiah into his hand, enough to buy him a bit of sanctuary, and then she walked away. I have never forgotten this act of such blazing, blind, random beauty.

We must give to whomever – or whatever – has been placed in our path. The gift must always move. It is refreshing to realize that if we want to begin advocating for change, or enter into a communion with the cosmos, or grasp a greater meaning to life - all we have to do is start giving – with words, deeds, gestures, smiles, and otherwise. To say "thank you" to a bus driver, to startle a stranger with a door held open for them, to speak in gushing tones to a dog or dragonfly, to save worms off a street slicked with rain, to offer company and an ear to one who suffers, or give oneself wholly to a cause we are willing to die for – the world of the gift is ever so close, and ever so present.

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