

“THE GIFTS WE BRING TO LIFE”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

On September 17, 2006

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

Here it is, our first regular Sunday of the new church year, and I want to talk about gifts, about the gifts we give and receive, the gifts that we are, or can be, gifts to each other, and to the world.

I read a book about gifts this summer called *The Gift* by Lewis Hyde. I was assigned to read this book for a ministers’ study group I’m in, and it is not an easy book to read -- so I look forward to some pay-off in the sermon. But don’t worry, I will not make nearly as many points as the author does.

And I will include other books I have recently read as well on my way to the actual topic, also related to its being a re-gathering time. The first is by a college classmate of mine, Alan Powers, an English professor in Rhode Island and an amateur but devoted ornithologist – a bird fancier – no, more - - a man who talks with birds in the wild. In fact, he wrote a book, published in 2003, entitled *BirdTalk: Conversations with Birds*.

In it he offers such observations as the fact that the most common song among songbirds involves the first two notes of the Star Spangled Banner, either in their declension or the reverse. And the next most common involve the first and third notes of our national anthem.

Alan, who lives in Westport, Mass., writes that “Some birdcalls function as simple greetings, others as choral matins, ...even road signs and roadways, ‘flight paths,’ roadside route numbers, vegetable-stand signs. At the same time they can be ... performed to impress. Seasons dictate much. Spring call-notes roughly translate, ‘Get out of my tree!’”¹

But, he says, “Probably half of all birdtalk, like people on cell phones, is locative. ‘I’m here. Where are you?’”² I’m here. Where are you?

In the conversation at most coffee hours – especially at this time of year, after a summer apart, last week and probably still today, and on some important level at many social gatherings all year long – many of our conversations are basically the same, though they invite a deeper level of engagement: “Hi. I’m here,” we say [“I’m Ok – or not.”] inviting a response to the question, “Where are you?” [I’m OK – or not.]

But more.

This summer I reread Kurt Vonnegut’s science fiction novel, *The Sirens of Titan*. It contains this description:

“The planet Mercury [it’s still a planet] sings like a crystal goblet.

“It sings all the time [because of the heat on one side and the cold on the other]....

“Mercury has no atmosphere, so the song it sings is for the sense of touch.

“The song is a slow one. Mercury will hold a single note in the song for as long as an Earthling millennium....

“There are creatures in the deep caves of Mercury.

“The song their planet sings is important to them, for the creatures are nourished by vibrations....

“The creatures cling to the singing walls of their caves....

“The creatures in the caves look very much like small and spineless kites. They are diamond-shaped, a foot high and eight inches wide when fully mature.

“They have no more thickness than the skin of a toy balloon....

“They [do] have weak powers of telepathy. The messages they are capable of transmitting and receiving are almost as monotonous as the song of Mercury. The first is an automatic response to the second, and the second is an automatic response to the first.

“The first is, *‘Here I am, here I am, here I am.’*

“The second is, *“So glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are.”*”³

The creatures are called harmoniums.

For three years, along with the harmoniums in the deep caves of Mercury are two male Earthlings, stranded, living largely apart. One of them, Malachi Constant, the book’s main character, “was at war with his environment. He had come to regard his environment as either malevolent or cruelly mismanaged.”⁴ But the other man, named Boaz, thrived there, enjoying his life with the harmoniums, just as they loved the chance – a few at a time – to live on him and draw nourishment from the vibrations of his pulse.

Now the whole book is a pondering on the nature and purpose of life, “a seeking after clues ... as to what life [is] all about.” (44)

As one very wealthy man wrote in a letter to be read after his death by his son, Malachi Constant, “What I want you to try and find out is, is there anything special going on or is it all just as crazy as it looked to me? ...

“I tell you even a half-dead man hates to be alive and not be able to see any sense to it.”⁵

In the novel, human events are all being manipulated, but not by God and for a purpose both obscure and trivial, which I won’t give away. People, meanwhile, have to figure out how to find meaning in a universe that seems

random, and mostly is, luck in particular, and a universe “not schemed in mercy.”⁶

Which brings us back to Boaz and the harmoniums.

“I don’t know what’s going on,’ said Boaz in his thoughts, ‘and I’m probably not smart enough to understand if somebody was to explain it to me. All I know is we’re being tested somehow, by somebody or something a whole lot smarter than us, and all I can do is be friendly and keep calm and try and have a good time till it’s over.’

“Boaz nodded. ‘That’s my philosophy, friends,’ he said to the harmonium stuck to him. ‘And if I’m not mistaken, that’s yours, too. I reckon that’s how come we hit it off so good.’”⁷

Constant, the other man in the deep caves, escapes and has many more adventures, resulting in his living on Saturn’s largest moon with a woman he hates, who hates him back. But when she dies, he tells this alien (don’t ask), “I miss her.’

“You finally fell in love, I see,’ said [the alien].

“Only an Earthling year ago,’ said Constant. ‘It took us that long to realize that “a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved.””⁸

Lucky us, there is a whole world of people around to be loved, and smaller groups in more immediate ways, like this congregation, for example. And one of the ways we can think about being friendly and loving others is in the exchange of gifts.

Lewis Hyde says “a gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed on us.”⁹ He is thinking of every kind of gift, including talents and inspiration, and he uses the second half of the book to examine the work and lives of two poets, Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound, “in the language of gift exchange.”¹⁰

Running through the whole book is a distinction Hyde wants to make between exchanges that involve commodities and those that involve gifts – things we sell or buy and things we give and receive. In his language, it is the difference between *eros* and *logos*, *eros* referring to the relational aspect of gift-giving. It is “the principle of attraction, union, [and] involvement that binds together,” as opposed to *logos*, meaning reason and logic in general [and] the principle of differentiation in particular,”¹¹ which finds expression in the market economy.

He writes, “It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection.”¹²

At times he can seem to value gift exchange so highly as to disparage commodity exchange, as when things that might or should be gifts – things that would be gifts within a healthy human unit – become commodities. But in the course of creating the book his outlook moderated, and he often speaks well of them both. Near the end he can say, “The problem is not ‘Can gift and commodity coexist?’ but ‘To what degree may one draw from the other without destroying it?’ ... There is no market if all wealth is converted into gifts. And from the other side,... there is a degree of commercialization which destroys the community itself. But between these two extremes lies a middle ground in which, sometimes, *eros* and *logos* may coexist.”¹³

He thinks, though, that in any age, one or the other predominates, and that since the Reformation we have been ever more heavy overweighted to commodity exchange, as well as those other *logos* characteristics of reason, logic, and differentiation.

And by the way, American religious liberals get part of the blame, nineteenth-century Massachusetts Unitarians in particular along with their eighteenth-century forebear, Charles Chauncey. In the story as we tell it, Chauncey did well to resist the Great Awakening, its camp meetings and emotionalism, known as enthusiasm.

We are proud of our commitment to reason. Hyde prefers enthusiasm – it’s less abstract, more bodily. He finds an “affinity between abstract thought and market exchange.... Cash exchange is to gift exchange what reason is to enthusiasm.... The unitarianism [sic] that men like Chancy developed [was] a religion with which the merchants of Boston could be at ease”¹⁴

The domination of our society by commodity exchange – while it contributes to freedom and material prosperity – also results in alienation and weakness of social institutions and personal bonds -- outside of two areas that might qualify as “institutions of positive reciprocity.”¹⁵ “Gift exchange takes refuge in Sunday morning and the family.”¹⁶

However rational we may still be, our church like any other provides the possibility of giving gifts of various sorts to each other – our efforts, our friendship, our pledges, our love without the expectation of direct compensation, but with the common understanding or hope, at least, that the gift will be received in gratitude and passed on somehow.

That is his opening argument, that the gift must be passed on. And lest we forget, he means gift in the broadest sense – not just a toy woolen sheep but the inspiration for a poem, an encouraging word, a meal, a smile.

Or his initial example, an Indian pipe. The phrase “Indian giver” is quite old in Massachusetts. Hyde would have us imagine the scene when a colonist came to visit an Indian lodge. Tobacco is smoked together, and the Indian presents the pipe to the Englishman as a gift. Later, other Indians come to visit the colonist. “To his surprise he finds his guests have some expectation in regard to his pipe, and the translator finally explains to him that if he wishes to show his goodwill he should offer them a smoke and give them the pipe. In consternation the Englishman invents a phrase to describe these people with such a limited sense of private property.”¹⁷

But that Indian giver “understood a cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away, not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead.... As it is passed along, the gift may be given back to the original donor, but this is not essential. In fact, it is better if the gift is not returned but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: *the gift must always move.*”¹⁸ “The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation.”¹⁹

Hyde can provide many examples from many cultures where this is common practice, and he wants to make a case for its importance and examine how the process works, and on many levels. (If you’ve ever had any question about gifts, Hyde has an answer.)

For today, I just want to lift up that notion that here we come and are given gifts, and give gifts, and are gifts to each other, and in some way it’s a matter of passing on the gifts, in many cases even greater, and passing them on not just to ourselves but to as many as we can, to love whoever is around to be loved.

This congregation itself is a gift we’ve been given, one we could hope to pass on to a neighbor we invite to join us here, and to the people who will worship here when they are no longer we.

It means recognizing how many gifts we’re given, cultivating gratitude, and passing the gifts along. And as Hyde observes, “when the increase of gifts moves with the gift ... the accumulated wealth of our spirit [can] continue to grow among us, so that each of us may enter, and be revived by, a vitality beyond his or her solitary power.”²⁰

That is my hope for us in this year, and every other. Amen.

¹ Alan Powers, *BirdTalk: Conversations with Birds* (Berkeley, CA: Frog Ltd., 2003) 14

² Alan Powers 14

³ Kurt Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1959) 184, 185, 186

⁴ Vonnegut 200

⁵ Vonnegut 90, 91

⁶ Vonnegut 295

⁷ Vonnegut 202

⁸ Vonnegut 313

⁹ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Poetry* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) xi

¹⁰ Hyde 143

¹¹ Hyde xivn

¹² Hyde 56

¹³ Hyde 274

¹⁴ Hyde 169

¹⁵ Hyde 38

¹⁶ Hyde 139

¹⁷ Hyde 3-4

¹⁸ Hyde 4

¹⁹ Hyde xiv

²⁰ Hyde 39