

The Joys of Compulsory Giving
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Reading: The Lanyard by Billy Collins

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word *lanyard*.
No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.
I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.
She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light
and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.
Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

SERMON :

When I was seven, I wanted an electric football game for Christmas in the worst way. Does anyone remember electric football games? For those of you who never experienced the days before digital games, when dinosaurs roamed the earth, electric football games were like those old hockey game boards where you pulled the players up and down the board on metal rods and made shots by spinning those rods. In electric football games, however, there were no rods. You lined the players up on the board and turned on a switch and electricity in the board moved the players forward until the ball carrier was stopped. I kid you not – this really existed! I was so desperate in my cloying and constant expression of my deep need for this electric football game, and far enough along in my own maturing relationship with Santa Claus, that my parents finally got so sick of me that they dropped a big hint that there would, indeed, be an electric football game in my future. The delicious uncertainty of that Christmas changed at that point to an expectation. I was confident that the game was on the way. I developed a sense of entitlement to my game. I started to whine about whether I had to wait till Christmas. When this finally became intolerable to my parents, they surrendered again, or perhaps it was a strategic move in spiritual training. Because they finally said – OK, we will bring the game out for half an hour and you can play with it if you will not mention it again until Christmas! I eagerly agreed. And I'm sure you know what happened. My expectations of the joys the electric football game would bring to my life could never match what really happens when you play electric football. Before the half hour was up, I was already bored with it. And that was my major Christmas present!!

I mark that year as the beginning of my downward spiral towards being a conscientious objector to Christmas gifts by the time I grew up. I would spend many a November and December stewing in resentment about the expectations of gift-buying and gift receiving that the season lays upon me. My negative attitude was not just based on the personal time and financial strains involved, mind you – oh no – nothing quite so mean and selfish as that – instead I could tell myself, and rattle off to anyone who would listen, many eminently rational sensible arguments why holiday gift buying is a tradition we could do without. Here are just a few:

First: more useless and unwanted articles are exchanged at Christmas than at all the flea markets all over the country. Our obligation to go out and buy supports the continued manufacturing of huge numbers of unnecessary superfluous products.

Second: this binge of buying is a wash or a net loss for most of us. We end up spending equivalent amounts of money on each other but the products we receive as gifts are usually not those we want or would choose were we to spend the money on ourselves. The retail stores get the real Christmas gift.

Third: Christmas giving isn't spontaneous. It's required! Who wants a gift that someone had to give you? That's not a gift, it's a duty!

Fourth, it's socially irresponsible to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars on Christmas

gifts when there are so many other worthy non-profits seeking to bring more justice and equity into our world that are available to support. Why buy gifts when you can make donations instead in the names of your loved ones?

Fifth, my family knows I love them. Do the holidays have to be some kind of test that I pass to demonstrate my continuing love and affection? Do I sound like a fun guy to spend the holidays with? Don't get my wife started on that!

The good and rationale reasons for being a conscientious objector to holiday gift-buying were many. However, as time passed, I have accepted that we live in a world that doesn't run on good reasons. I am even beginning to understand that there might be some value in a world in which "good reasons" are not the only criteria for making decisions, or acting together.

When I counsel couples in anticipation of their marriage ceremony, I often feel like a dentist doing an initial examination, poking around in intimate areas to see if I can find any spots that are sensitive. Attitudes towards gift giving, and family traditions at the holiday season, can often be one of those sensitive areas. They are sensitive because we have differing styles, attitudes, and degrees of comfort towards gift-giving. Some of us enjoy it, and do it smoothly and well. Others struggle with every aspect of it: with the tradition that requires it, with getting the gift ideas, with the selection, with the payment, with the wrapping, and with the suitability of the thanks.

Why is this? Why is gift giving and receiving so hard for some and so easy for others? I thought first that some of it might have to do with gender differences. While there are plenty of men who are great gift-buyers and receivers, I was convinced that there are more women who do the gift rituals better than men. Maybe that's just another example of gender-specific socialization. Women find themselves being set up for nurturing and care-giving roles in families that lead to taking responsibility for managing the gift-giving. It is also well-documented that women tend to see moral decision-making and action as relational, rather than following rules and duties. Instead of seeing holiday gift-buying as an duty handed down by the High Court of Christmas Traditions, more women view the holiday as an opportunity for affirming connections and relationships through shopping for appropriate gifts.

Whether you think gender has anything to do with it or not, you will admit that when different people evidence different emotional approaches to gift giving, whether they are same-sex or opposite sex, and they are married to each other, family life at the holiday season gets more complicated. The women I have been married to have all tried different strategies of appeasement. One time we agreed that she would think up all the gift ideas if I would go out and do the buying. But that led to my second guessing her about the price or the appropriateness of the gift. Another year we agreed that she would do all the gift-buying and I would be relieved of the responsibility, but that led to me complaining that I didn't feel connected to the gifts we gave – and especially the ones bought and shipped to distant relatives early. Those gifts would be lost to memory when it was time for those after-Christmas thank you phone calls, much to my embarrassment. One year we decided to save on stress by going Christmas shopping in February. We bought the gifts for the more distant relatives early and stashed them away so it would be easy to meet the late November mailing deadline. But when November came, I would be grumpy because I couldn't remember why I had bought those particular gifts, why I thought

they would be appropriate. They all seemed wrong.

The Christmas gift strategies imposed on us by my family in Canada has further complicated this process. We are all chips off the same block and have the same pragmatic and rational attitudes. For many years that resulted in phone calls to say: “We don’t know what to get for ___ (fill in the blank of one to three family members). What if we just sent you the money and you pick out something appropriate?”

When we all concluded that this strategy wasn’t working for us or for them, they proposed the family lottery strategy. Lots would be drawn among the family members and each family member buys one Christmas gift only for the family member you drew, and no more. The rationale was that this would bring focus and limits to the family gift buying and since you only had to buy one gift, maybe you could un-scrooge yourself a little from the tight hold on the wallet and get something really nice as that one gift.

You would think a proposal like that would be my answer to a prayer as a conscientious objector to holiday giving. But the year that this was first proposed I was surprised at my reaction. I felt conflicted, and I told my sister I’d have to think about it and call her back. Sitting with my reaction, I found myself thinking about gifts that my siblings had given me over the years. Of course, many of those gifts were not memorable, but some were, mostly because of how they reminded me of the brother or sister who gave them to me. They didn’t have to be big things. One was a coffee warming element that my sister got me for my office. For many years I’d used it every week. Another was a beautiful jacket that a brother brought me back from a trip overseas. Another brother had given me mix tapes that he’d put together personally. (Mix tapes, for those under forty, were a prehistoric form of playlists.)

Whatever the gift or the reason why it became memorable for me, these associations had become more important than whether or how or how often I used the gift. I started to think about how often I kept up connections and conversations with my brothers and sister, and how the Christmas gifts had become the only routine annual gift giving occasion that we were sustaining. As I felt my way through this, the idea of having this one occasion during the year when you are required to think about the people you love, and who they are and what they like and come up with a gift, started to feel more attractive to me. I began to feel a little melting going on in my frozen heart. I did the math and thought to myself, “If I buy into the lottery system, it means that I might look for a gift for a particular family member only once every six years! Maybe there is something pretty important about making the effort to connect with siblings I only see once a year through this annual ritual of gift giving.

Just about this time, when we were deciding whether to do a family lottery or keep on with a full round of gift giving, I came across a book by anthropologist Lewis Hyde called “The Gift.” Hyde summed up the secret to understanding meaningful gift giving in one phrase “The Gift Must Always Move!” What this means is that gifts are not just the thing, the object, that is given as a gift. Gifts are a living energy exchange. The gift that stops with the receiver and is not passed back or passed on is a gift that dies. Hyde’s book gave me a whole new understanding of what I was missing in my rational analysis of compulsory holiday giving.

Gifts have a life that is far more complex than a scheduled duty. The poem by Bill Collins reminds us that gifts aren't a contest we have to win. When they are given as gestures of love and respect to people that have been important in your life, they usually aren't even close to capturing the meaning that the relationship has for you. As Collins says: "she gave me life.. and I gave her a lanyard." Gifts can also be among the building blocks in creating a relationship, or reinforcing a relationship of mutual obligation that you don't want to fade away. They can be the gateways to achieving a reconciliation with someone whose relationship with you has been broken.

Lewis Hyde has written wonderful descriptions of the aboriginal cultures that have ceremonial gift exchanges. Necklaces, shells, and drums are passed back and forth among individuals, families or tribes in ritualized ways. Ceremonial gifts are expected, just like a day in the calendar or a season of the year is expected. Being expected is not a bad thing. The particular object that is passed back and forth in this kind of ceremonial exchange is not what is important. The gesture of giving to mark the time is what is important. The gesture of giving represents and embodies the ways that the natural world has its own ritual routines of giving and receiving as the seasons change and living things germinate and grow and reproduce and die.

I heard about a contemporary parallel to this gift exchange ritual in a news story about two brothers who had exchanged the same gift back and forth on their birthdays for years. The gift was an article of clothing, something small enough to be packaged easily, so that it can be delivered in innovative ways – and that was the challenge of their annual gift exchange – to package the gift and have it delivered in the most creative way they could. One year one of the brothers hired a skydiver to land in his brother's back yard with the gift. Another year it was delivered by a marching band. You get the idea. This gift was always moving, and the creative energy that went into the giving of the gift was what made it meaningful.

Maybe our Christmas gift ritual is a parallel to these older religious rituals of gift exchange than we would care to admit. Once a year the culture compels us to participate in or actively turn away from this ritual. Sure – it's not spontaneous – and it can feel impractical and wasteful, as well. But our valued relationships are not constantly spontaneous, and they can frequently involve spending time and money in ways that are impractical and wasteful. Why should the holidays be different from the ways that relationships shape the rest of our lives? We all live in networks of connections, commitments, and obligations. I was not very sensitive early on in my life to the ways that exchanging greetings and gifts with loved ones, friends, and even acquaintances both near and far is a way of gathering up the threads of the networks that bind us together, to remember them, and to renew them, and to make them stronger.

So what I decided to do in response to my sister's Christmas gift lottery idea was become a conscientious objector to that approach. I told my sister that I didn't want to veto the idea, and would be glad to have my name included, and would participate with a suitable gift for the one family member whose name I drew. But I also thought that I would continue to send modest gifts to all the other family members. I hoped that they would all understand and find that acceptable.

They did, and for many years thereafter that was my routine of Christmas gift buying. I learned how to pace myself, to be more sensitive to gift ideas that popped into my head at other

times of the year and in places that had nothing to do with Christmas. I learned about some gift buying practices that have more integrity than mall shopping – including crafts, and food gifts, and donation gifts. And I learned how to surrender to the season, in the sense of letting go of my own resistance, to see whether and how I could find more joy than stress within it, even more joy in compulsory giving.

These days, I try to avoid any judgments about anyone's style of engaging with the holiday rituals and with gift giving expectations – especially my own – because they seem to change from year to year. The best way to do the holidays each year is the way that brings for you the most meaning and the least cynicism. Notice I didn't say "the least stress" because there's a certain inevitability to stress being present because of the time or the money you have available to deal with gift deciding, gift buying, and gift wrapping. But it's stress we can live with if we don't start off feeling bad about the decisions we are making from the beginning.

I've become more successful at not comparing my Christmas with anyone else's, and to lower all my expectations for what it should be like. I delight in both the hand-made holiday cards and the store bought gift cards that come in the mail from relatives. I appreciate the home cooked food gifts as much as I do the store-wrapped UPS gifts that come fresh and hot out of the catalogue. I celebrate the "gift has been made in your name" announcements and try to learn more about the charity that I remind a relative to support.

And what about the gifts I can't use ?? Hurray for them! The givers will be in my mind and heart as I try to figure out what to do with them. The gifts that come three days after Christmas? 3 Cheers for them! It's a wonderful Christmas dessert that makes me glad that the giver made the effort! And the gift that is just perfect, that was exactly what I wanted. I celebrate them just as I always have, even when I know that it's perfect because I was really explicit this year about what I wanted.

It's all good. It's great to be known, and to be loved and to be remembered. It's great to connect with people we love far and wide. And that will always be the greatest joy of our compulsive and compulsory holiday gift giving – that it pushes us towards expressing our love, somehow, somewhere during these next few weeks, and receiving the love that others express generously and graciously. Love is of course the true continuing gift in our lives, the gift we too often don't expect, and don't feel we deserve. This is the season where we remind each other that it is a gift that always there, year round, waiting to be unwrapped and opened and enjoyed.

May it be so for you.

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