

A Deep Dive Into The Gift Ecology by Audrey Lin

From various corners of the US and globe—from CA to North Carolina, Boston to India, Dubai to China—a crew of our October Laddership Circle tuned in on Tuesday for a deeper dive breakout call on Gift Ecology.

"Holding the Questions"

Prior to the call, everyone shared initial reflections online. Then, after an opening couple minutes of silence, we each tossed in a question for the conversation—ranging from practical implementations and sustaining gift-based systems to notions of an “inner gift-ecology” and how to honor our families’ wishes along the way.

Chris, who comes from many years of monastic living, questioned how to share about his work without marketing. Xiao humbly noted that, before operating in gift, she’s still wondering how best to serve: “How do I get out of my way to find my calling? How can I make myself useful?” Melissa—calling in between classes at the middle school where she teaches—noted that she’s creating a course for next year with a culminating project in gift ecology. “How do I thread that into the school?” she wondered.

She, Jennifer, and Becky also touched upon the sustainability element of gift. “Are there tools or habits that we can cultivate to help us through times when the fear of lack creeps in?” Jennifer asked. Laughing, she noted that while Mother Theresa would say, “Oh, just pray,” not all of us are there yet. :) Becky candidly asked how to reconcile living from the head to shifting towards the heart. After a less-aligned career in marketing, she’s been diving full-force in her gift offerings for the last 18+ months, and holding questions of how to best support her family and finances in that mode of operating.

Others of us wondered about an inner gift-ecology. “What is the inner life of a gift ecologist?” Yaniv posed, as Neerad wondered how we can overcome our blind spots along the path, and Natasha offered, “In this moment, how can I be a gift? How in this moment—with whatever I’m asked to do, in whatever ways I’m asked to serve—can I be able to show up and say, ‘Yes’?”

And Micky and Zilong brought up the element of relating to gift when loved ones may feel otherwise. “Has anyone had push-back from people closest to you, about wanting to throw yourself into this?” Micky asked, while Zilong calling in from China questioned, “How can I share this and not let parents or family worry for me? And how to gradually and skillfully invite them to open up to these values, without creating a ‘holier than thou’ feeling?”

With such a rich field of inquiry, we transitioned into some stories and insights from Nipun—who graciously joined us in the midst of a week+ of nonstop circles. :)

Nature and 'Survival';

On the question of how to 'survive' in a gift-economy, he noted, "There is abundance in nature... How do we reconnect with nature's abundance? How do we reconnect with this principle that sages have talked about for so long: 'It is in giving that we receive?'" Three key elements could be:

Service: "Take this moment, and do whatever small thing you can." Find a way to deliver value (not the value you want to offer, but what people want to receive).

Social Capital: "You can't do an act of kindness without creating an affinity. Without creating a connection, a relationship." You can't do this alone. Sustain networks of people that support the values you stand for, by paying-forward what you receive, and sharing stories as an expression of gratitude.

Surrender: "Trust that if you plant a seed, it will bloom. It will take time and require a lot of different nutrients and conditions until it rises up." Trust the mystery of self-organization; have a context for suffering (i.e. Answer to 'why do bad things happen to good people?'), and if you suffer/fail, use it to break new ground and adjust yourself and your offerings.

What it Means When Things "Work Out"

Later on, Nipun noted how when things "work out," it often refers to financial sustainability: How is my financial sustainability in an equilibrium? But, he pressed, "The penetrating question is 'What does it mean to be working out?' ... To me, working out, is: How can I have an equanimity—how can I have a mental equilibrium-- so that no matter what comes my way, it feels like it's working out? That I have my capacity, my mind is so strong and stable, that all these things on the outside are not going to shut me down. They're going to keep my values intact."

He went on with the example of Gandhi:

"If we look at someone like Gandhi, this was how he changed the world. He said, 'I'm going to love you no matter what.' He didn't say, 'If you love, you'll never get shot.' He said, 'If someone comes to shoot me (as Godse did put 3 bullets through him), it's going to work out, because I'm going to bless you.' That's what he did. 'Ram. Ram. Ram.' He blessed the guy. And so 'working out' for him—and his whole model of social change—was not that you're going to be okay in a certain metric of compassion, but that your mind has such infinite capacity that you can redefine what it means to be okay. You can actually be equanimous through all that comes your way. That's a tough process. We can't all be Gandhi. I'm not a Gandhi. But we can say, 'Well, when I get weak, what gives me resilience?' And this is it. This is what we're doing here—we're sharing and connecting with each other."

Practical Questions of Design

And, on a practical level, Nipun remembered how someone once asked, "How do you 'manufacture' abundance?" While abundance is not necessarily something we can manufacture, there is an idea that for everything we give over time, we do receive in different currencies. Three other possible ways to approach it:

Past: How can we innovate already-established things (systems, groups, processes) from a new lens?

Present: How can we look at what is in front of us, and waste less? Oftentimes, we compensate for lack of a certain resource. For example, Karma Kitchen wouldn't be possible without leveraging technology (i.e. the internet) to coordinate volunteers contributing small amounts of time.

Future: What can we unlock? What is an untapped potential that we can unlock through this gift ecology process? Gratitude can unlock connections between people that are powerful. How do we design for gratitude? How to leave a space for the gratitude to bloom and connect with others?

Informal Q&A

Yaniv: I had the privilege of visiting the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas monastery yesterday. Part of the conversation we had there was how that monastery also doesn't fundraise, or go after money to sustain themselves and their work. When they were building the monastery, the focus was on keeping precepts of virtuous behavior and then focusing on the inner cultivation. What does an inner gift-ecology look like? If you try to put it in a formula, it probably won't work. But it's still part of the 'secret sauce'. How would you tie the inner cultivation piece and precepts in a non-monastic and non-faith-based setting to this process?

Nipun: For me, a precept I keep is "be kind." And, "be kind all the time." Whenever you have an impulse to be kind, just do it. This sounds like a simple thing, but really, it starts in the mind when we are kind in that way... Although that re-framing seems small, it can lead us to a new orientation. When you shift from me to we, your mind becomes still. As your mind becomes still, you fall into this interconnectedness with all life around you. And when you fall into this interconnectedness, you're satisfied in a way that you never were satisfied before. So you don't feel like consuming that much. You don't have a precept that you will be simple or don't want to consume more. You just feel satisfied... It's not like I'm making a sacrifice, but it's just that my act of kindness has calmed my mind down, and that calmness has dropped me into an interconnectedness. And then I'm just satisfied. And that equanimity is what I take to the next act of kindness. And as you do this in an iterative way, it really starts to change the pathways that you walk on. So your inner ecology is one of quiet, but that quiet you may not get to unless you have a certain practice on the outside. For me, kindness has been a great gateway to find that quiet which ultimately leads to an awareness of our interconnectedness—which is a design principle that changes the entire foundation of all your decision-making and your whole life and circumstances.

Chris: For 13 years, I was able to sustain myself because I was part of the gift ecologies that was part of monasteries. Two years ago, I decided, "I'll still give gifts and find ways to be connect through acts of kindness." Can we give when it's just based on kindness? Without having to take on a belief system? Can we put this inner transformation to work, and let that be our faith factor?

Nipun: There's a great quote—that, ultimately we're all disciples of our own experience. So this is where, to me, kindness—a small act of service—is a really skillful means to go there. It makes it a very real thing. So you're rooted in that experience. Especially with kids, I'll say, "Go out and do it and tell me about your experience. Tell me about the ripple effect on the inside." ... Because you do that act of kindness, and the next day, you're

going to be different. And in the next hour, you're going to greet that person in a very different way. ... You become a disciple of your own experience—and even all faiths—what are they rooted in? Ultimately, they're rooted in principle. In virtue. And if you don't have an experience of that virtue, it just becomes another concept—and that concept is not lived at the level of head, hands, and heart. It becomes, at best, in the head.

Xiao: I realize that service, social capital, and surrender are not first, second, and third steps—they're across the whole path. I feel that everyone's doing all three things—so it's glorious in the beginning, middle, and end. I do notice the inner transformation—even when I smile at strangers, the more I do it, the more it becomes effortless and real. At the beginning it was awkward, but over time, it's gradually transformed me.... Also, thank you for the example of Gandhi and redefining, "What's okay." I feel I could be okay in any situation—it's the fear and the psychological thinking—because if I'm breathing, I'm fundamentally okay.

Nipun: Those are great thoughts. I used to have a job in my twenties, and it paid well, so I had all this extra money, and I would give money. To everybody. Generosity has been a natural part of me, no matter what the circumstances, so I was a giver of things, and then I decided to walk on this path. This path of gift ecology is one of many forms of wealth—many forms of capital, as you say. And now all of a sudden, I couldn't just treat everybody the way I would have before. I couldn't do so many other things in a material way. There was a period where I was missing that. Where I was kind of saying, "Man, should I just go out and make a million bucks and then do this?" I had a blind music teacher when I was really young. His sense of hearing was amazing, because he was blind. He was attuned for other kinds of resources, in particular, hearing. So I said, "How can I optimize for other kinds of resources?" And I learned. ... This is an invitation to broaden-- and an invitation to radically broaden. I'll tell you an example of radical... [more].

Becky: What happens if what we're doing is actually causing pain to other people? Not the person we're doing kindness for, but [if what we're doing is] creating a perceived deficit to [those close to us, like] my parents, my husband? How do we help hold space and honor that they do feel that way?

Nipun: What I've learned is to not take shortcuts there. To not rush it. So many times with these things, we do rush it. When I decided to quit my job in my early twenties, my mom was like, "No just go and make the money and then retire." She said, "No, you can't do this. It's not responsible." ... My commitment to her was that "I am not going to short-change you. I'm not going to run away." ... At one level, I would say, don't rush it. Work with them. Find creative ways to reach their heart. Just believe in love. Love will melt them all. And you'll be surprised at how the pathways that love will take are not linear. I may be doing acts of kindness for strangers in front of me, but somehow, my husband or my wife or my neighbor is going to be completely changed. And we can't always draw the correlation between those things, and certainly not the causation, but things happen because we're all fundamentally interrelated. So I would say have trust, have faith, in love.... "That which doesn't end in love will continue to repeat itself until it does end in love."

Even in drastic circumstances... whenever I get into situations where I don't have that kind of patience or tolerance or love, then I will say, "I'll be back." And sometimes "being back" is the next day, when I'm in a stronger state of mind. And sometimes that is the next year. But, the idea that I don't want to sever this connection—that I'm just going on a

retreat to come back with greater love—changes the way in which we relate.