

The Giving Season

by Jennifer Merlich

I was recently the recipient of an incredible act of anonymous kindness. It came from out of nowhere, at exactly the right time. The magnitude of the gift moved me to tears, and I was so grateful and profoundly moved by the generosity of my unknown benefactor. But I was also sure there had been a mistake. In the midst of this beautiful act, I am ashamed to admit that I was momentarily overcome by feelings of unworthiness. I simply couldn't believe I was deserving of such radical kindness. Had I been face to face with my benefactor, I would have given them 100 reasons why they "shouldn't have", attempting to convince them that they were wrong about me—that their generosity was misdirected. Fortunately, I quickly realized that to focus on my feelings of unworthiness would be to dishonor the gift and the beautiful spirit in which it was so lovingly given.

And I think that's the beauty of an anonymous gift. It gave me the time and the space I needed to process the feelings it stirred up inside of me. I was able to sit with the discomfort of unworthiness and ultimately see it for what it is— a lie—something I came to believe long ago, that no longer serves me. Now, it is nothing more than a habit. It is a "go-to" response that I can either choose to feed in the moment, or not. This revelation was a gift within the gift. As I was unable to speak to my anonymous benefactor and enumerate the ways in which I did not deserve the kindness they showed to me, the only way I could honor them was to suck it up in all its beautiful glory and put my faith in THEIR belief that I was, in fact, worthy.

But how do you thank someone for such a gift? How do you show them even a fraction of the gratitude in your heart when you have no idea who they are? How do you pay them back? Sometimes the only way to pay it back is to pay it forward.

And once again, the timing of life was perfect. While contemplating just how to capitalize on the wave of gratitude and hope I was riding in order to send it spinning out into the world, I was invited to participate in a 40 Days of Giving practice with others at my spiritual center. It was a new take on a familiar tradition. Lent had always been a period of sorrow, penance and self-denial, but this year I would approach it with an attitude of abundance, joy and generosity. And in doing so, I would begin to fulfill a promise I made to an unknown friend, when I vowed that the kindness shown to me would find its way out into the world through my words, my hands, and my actions.

During the 40 days, the gifts I gave were diverse and mostly simple in nature. Some were tangible, like the can of dog food and spare change I gave the young homeless man cradling a puppy so lovingly in his arms. Others were immeasurable in the traditional sense, like the time I bit my tongue and offered compassion in response to an angry outburst from a fearful soul. Or the gift I gave two unknown parents the day I slowed down and allowed their teenager—who was making terrible choices behind the wheel—to dart in front of me and exit the freeway. By consciously choosing to alter my course so

that he could safely change lanes, I diffused a dangerous situation, where tragedy might otherwise have been the outcome from his momentary lack of sound judgement.

And now, as I stand on the other side of the 40 days of giving, I can clearly see how transformational the whole practice—from both sides of the giving/receiving dance— has been. I now understand that I had to first learn the lesson of worthiness in order to appreciate the gift that is innate in the act of receiving with an open heart. When I receive joyfully and gratefully, I allow you, the giver, to experience connection, compassion and grace. And you in turn do the same for me when our roles are reversed. The lines distinguishing the giver from the receiver are blurred, as the giving becomes the receiving which becomes the giving. This infinite loop is where magic happens. By engaging wholeheartedly in this dance, we create exponential possibilities from one tiny little ripple.

I learned so much during this season of giving. In all cases, the commitment to the practice and the mindfulness it created made the difference in how I approached each giving opportunity. Taking a cue from my benefactor, I learned that anonymity can be a form of kindness when it allows the recipient to maintain a sense of dignity, or to practice the gift of receiving in their own time and space. But when applying anonymity to my own practice of giving I quickly learned that it can be self-serving, too. For someone like me who craves intimacy but has also been fearful of it for many years, anonymous giving can easily become just another way to avoid connection. And that kind of defeats the purpose. So my litmus test—or my compass—was to simply ask myself, “In this situation, is the anonymity a gift for my recipient or a crutch for me?”

I learned that any act of kindness, regardless of how big or small, has the potential to change not only the giver and the receiver, but all of those in close proximity to the people on either side of the equation. Because once engaged in the giving/receiving dance, the way in which we interact with our environment and those we share space with changes. We operate from a higher plane of gratitude, enthusiasm and hope, and the ripples we send out gently build in momentum with every soul they touch. This is truly how we will change the world.

And I learned that now, when someone gives me a gift and I find myself struggling with feelings of unworthiness, I can no longer allow those untruths to poison the atmosphere surrounding the exchange. I will not project. Instead, I will allow myself a moment of grace, and I will remember the anonymous soul who challenged me to acknowledge and accept my own beauty as seen through their eyes. And rather than shrink from the light, I will simply say, “Thank you. You and your gift are precious to me.”