

Charles McCabe

Himself

How to Spot a Gift

ONE THING is for sure, if you feel a deep sense of obligation, sometimes called gratitude, chances are you haven't been given a damned thing. Chances are, you have been emotionally defrauded.

This matter of giving, which I've alluded to before, is immensely important and immensely mistaken. The dictionary is unhelpful here. A gift is something given, but the definitions of give are v. slippery.

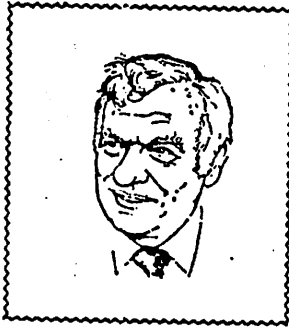
A good definition of giving was given in Joyce's play "Exiles." "If you give a thing," Joyce said, "it is yours forever."

It has long been my contention that more people are killed by kindness than by bullets. This lethal process begins very early in life, when the recipient of these attentions cannot do anything about them.

The old lady clucks the blond child. She makes over him, as the saying goes. All of this says, on the surface, "I love you, you beautiful and worthy little boy." Or, in the even more ghastly phrase, "I love you to death."

BUT OFTEN the real message behind all this, as more than one perceptive psychologist has ascertained, is: "You smile and laugh at me when I pick you up, you little bastard, so I can convince myself and the other people in the room that I am a pretty okay character."

A Berkeley clinical psychologist who is interested in this matter of giving, Dr. Abraham Levitsky, reports out of his personal and clinical experience:



... so much of our relations with each other is poisoned by fear, anxiety and the melancholy effort to win each other's approval that genuine instances of loving and unselfish giving are less common than we would think."

A lot of recluses and misanthropes have been created by "love" that is merely a form of emotional extortion to keep a child in childhood forever, cute and sweet, an eternal assurance of the charm and adequacy of the adults around him, or her.

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LEVITSKY touches on the indeed important idea "that an excessive demand for emotional response can be profoundly upsetting to the biological human need for equilibrium."

"If the social structure and social relations have constantly called for an uncomfortably high and uncomfortably frequent level of emotional response, then the social world and everything in it will come to be perceived as a burden and a nuisance."

The feeling of permanent indebtedness, which many of us have as a result of being over-fondled in our childhood by people who didn't really love us, is a source of deep guilt. This is guilt of the worst kind, guilt for something we did not do ourselves, since we were incapable of volitional action which would involve conscious guilt. We are guilty about not being grateful.

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IHAD this kind of childhood, with the result that I actually resent many kindnesses, even when my coherent, mature self tells me that they were not given with any mental or emotional reservation.

I have a quirky passionate resistance to writing thank-you letters, especially when the hospitality has been exceptionally congenial. There is still that ineradicable thing, out of my childhood, which tells me that there is something fraudulent about demonstrations of love.

As a perverse result of this kind of upbringing, I'm often actually afraid of being kind to the young, lest I inflict on them that kind of sickness from which I still suffer.

People, as a fact, often give you something for nothing, though not nearly so often as they give you something for something. Not to be able to distinguish between the first and the second is a form of emotional fracture. The test is still the simple one: If you don't feel grateful for a kindness, chances are you have been truly done one.