



The Gift of Giving

Now, there is no mystery about the purpose of that short article. Plainly, Lewis' amusing story of the "Niatirbians" was intended to draw vivid contrast between the true meaning of Christmas and the manner in which many ostensibly Christian people have come to celebrate it. Yet it is important to note that Lewis does not go too far with this. Although he is nettled, he does not carp. Lewis never strikes one as a person who was given to priggishness or pietistic glumness. The chief object of his irritation is not that cards and gifts are exchanged, or that people indulge themselves in a holiday supper and other merriment, but rather that too much emphasis is placed on the mundane aspects of the Christmas celebration, to the detriment of the inward meaning of the day, and to the disadvantage of a public that annually makes itself miserable trying to cope with what has become an altogether daunting set of social conventions. Thus, his some-what peppery satire is designed neither to lambaste the impious nor to extinguish the glad spirit of Christmas, but simply to restore a sense of balance to the occasion, to place the accent where it belongs, and thereby to retrieve some of the true gladness that is nowadays so often lacking.



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Since all of us do well if at the start of each Christmas season we strive to restore this sense of balance and joy to our own preparations and celebrations, and since that is not always an easy thing to accomplish, let us therefore examine one of the main customs that has come to characterize this time, one dealt with by C.S. Lewis in his engaging essay: the giving of gifts.

The exchange of gifts has come to signify the very heart of the modern Christmas, although the exaggerated emphasis on this practice is of comparatively recent origin, beginning its evolution about 150 years ago and increasing with the rise in the general level of prosperity in the West. It is seldom remembered that we give gifts at Christmas in commemoration of the supreme Gift that God gave to us 2,000 years ago, His only Son. That gift encompassed several other matchless gifts, including forgiveness and eternal life. We put stress on giving in imitation of the first Christmas, but, what is more important, we put stress on *selfless* giving, on satisfying our own wish for happiness through the



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conveying of happiness to others. In that way we imitate God's love by expressing our love for members of our families, for our friends, and, if we aspire to keep the true spirit of Christmas, for strangers in need. "Selfishness makes Christmas a burden; love makes it a delight," an aphorism says. Clearly, the gifts themselves are not the point — unselfish love is.

It is frequently the case that the greatest gifts are those that have no monetary value. For instance, parents who give their children generously of their time bestow a gift of measureless value. The last 40 years or so have seen the rise of juvenile crime and other grave problems involving the young. It is rank hyperbole to ascribe such evils to any single cause, but one does not overstate the situation in saying that a principal cause is that parents do not pay heed to their children, concerning themselves instead with transitory distractions. Children in such circumstances, though they may be endowed with all the things that money can buy, and though their parents may be attentive to such needs as health, food, clothes, and good schools, are yet destitute in the things that matter most. Parents may spoil youngsters with material goods and may try to win their affection by showing excessive leniency in matters about which they should not be lenient, but precious time they do not give. Careers, money-making, television viewing, sports, outside obligations, and innumerable other things, when carried to excess, steal time that rightfully belongs to children.

Conversely, children who receive this gift of time, who gain this opportunity to visit with their parents and to speak of their hopes, their fears, their plans, their aspirations, their problems, their pain, and so forth, more often than not will grow to be responsible citizens as they mature. Their growth in wisdom, honesty, self-reliance, confidence, decency, a strong sense of honor, and a love of God will correlate precisely with the time given them, and will reflect the assimilation of the values and of the cumulative knowledge and experience of their elders. The lack of assimilation by young people of their parents' moral outlook and way of life has helped create what we have today — great numbers of rootless youth, lacking any direction. The degenerative process can only be reversed by the unsparing bestowal of the gift of time.

This gift may appropriately also be given to others — to one's spouse, from whom one might otherwise drift apart; to aging parents, who often needlessly suffer loneliness; to those who are enduring the pain of some loss or debilitating illness, who wish only to exchange pleasantries and hear a friendly voice; and to many others. Time is one of the most precious things we possess in this life, and so a gift of time is truly a gift without equal.

Another priceless gift is the gift of friendship. There are people known to us all who are not particularly bright, who cannot paint, or sculpt, or write, or cook, and who seem to have no aptness for much of anything. Still, as friends they are patient and loyal, they defend our good name against the calumnies of our enemies, and they are ever there when we need them. These are true friends.

Friendship is variously described, the definitions generally composed of such concepts as affinity, feelings of mutual benevolence, sharing, sympathy, common interests, and a certain level of intimacy. The word "friend" is of Teutonic origin, an example of the Germanic foundation of our English language, and emanates from an old Teutonic verb meaning "to love." Significantly, in ancient Anglo-Saxon legal terminology, to be "friendless" was the same thing as to be an outlaw. Law-abiding people had to have friends in those precarious times and the lawless were invariably friendless. But what of the friendless in our own time who are not outlaws, but who are only the victims of circumstances, who are, without good cause, made outcasts? What finer gift to them than to extend a hand of friendship.

Friendship is one of the keys to a happy and fruitful life. To befriend another person with a genuine



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friendship — that is to say, a friendship that is not self-serving — is to offer gifts of contentment, satisfaction, and cheer. To give the gift of friendship is to build a mutual relationship that does not seek material gain. To find another person who needs friendship and solicitude, kindness and love, and to act on that discovery, is to give, and to receive, a treasure indeed.

Praise is a gift needed by every human being. Praise builds in the recipient a sense of self-worth and of personal significance because true praise is a commendation of integrity or excellence, an expression of approval, admiration, or esteem. The kind of praise we consider here is not hollow praise, detached from achievement or from some other reason for commendation, for false praise is as diaphanous as gauze, wearing thin quickly, and becoming a source of annoyance. It contributes nothing in the way of goodwill to either speaker or hearer.

No, praise must be connected in some way to achievement, or to some commendable quality of character — "praise where praise is due," as we say. The fact is that nearly everyone executes tasks on a daily basis, and nearly everyone possesses qualities of character that are deserving of praise. Praise builds strong families, strong friendships, strong companies, strong neighborhoods, strong communities, and strong nations.

In time of war, a nation bestows symbols of gratitude on its heroes: the Victoria Cross, the Medal of Honor, the Iron Cross, the *Croix de Guerre*. These are visible tokens of the highest praise. Insofar as their intrinsic, monetary value is concerned, such badges of honor are mere trifles. The monetary value is, of course, irrelevant. The relevant thing is that these lifeless medals speak and say to all who see them, "This man is a true hero; regard him as such and honor him accordingly."

Recipients of Medals of Honor and Victoria Crosses are rare exceptions to what we find in ordinary life. Yet in our day-to-day, pedestrian lives, if we look closely, we will find all sorts of heroes — heroes out of uniform — who merit our praise, and would benefit from it: a young student who applies himself more conscientiously than his peers, earning higher grades in school; a mother who stays up all night with her ill child; a father who gives of himself and of his time to lead a Scout troop; a wife who toils to create a splendid dinner for her husband and brood; a postman who takes extra pains to deliver an important letter or parcel; a sales clerk who goes out of his way to give good service; a retiree who dedicates time to public service without any thought of recompense; a neighbor who retrieves a lost pet — the list indeed is endless. To these, and to numberless others, we may give the marvelous gift of praise, and in doing so, we will strengthen the bonds that hold human communities, and countries, together, the bonds that make life worth living.

While it adopts many and varied euphemisms to describe itself, the idea of "charity" has received bad notices of late. Politicians, bureaucrats, and media moguls have conspired these last several decades to exploit Christian charitable inclinations for the sake of their own baneful ends. Rarely a day passes without the appearance of another news story relating the distress of "the under-privileged" and of the efforts of some millionaire liberals in government to alleviate that alleged distress with *your* tax dollars. This is not at all what is meant by charity, but rather is a kind of legalized extortion. As a result, many Americans suffer from what we may style "charity fatigue" or "charity burnout." That is an unhappy state of affairs, for genuine feelings and acts of charity are as elemental to societies that regard themselves as civilized and Christian as strong legs are to the marathon runner, or as wings are to the eagle.

The fact is that the incessant bleatings of the press and the shallow whining of crafty politicians have nothing whatever to do with charity. Charity is simply love, respect, and regard for our fellow men.



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What separates true charity from the counterfeit, politicized species, is that Christian charity focuses on individual, authentic flesh-and-blood people, people with whom we can converse, people we can see and touch. The bogus variety, by way of contrast, is detached and impersonal, obsessed with people *en masse*, with huge classes of human beings as cold and lifeless exercises in analysis and theory.

The poet E. Merrill Root once described charity as "the symphony of life," and went on to say:

Charity is life come at last to life. It is the glow, and the color, and the music of life. It is the heart of light; it is the seed of love that blossoms in the inner Spring; it is reverence and wonder transfiguring life because it brings a second birth and an Eden regained. It begins at home. *All* great things begin at home, for you can do nothing for yourself and for others unless it comes from within. It is you, you yourself, your own inward being, kindled by God's grace into rapport with outward things, that relates your own state of being to the true being of outward things. You waken them, they waken you; you find the reciprocity and the mutuality that alone brings life and joy. Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven — which the child may know by innocence, which the man may regain by experience if he knows humility and wonder and rebirth Such is the way to Charity.

In Charles Dickens' immortal classic, *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge, in the early part of the story, may be said to be entirely *just* to his employee Bob Cratchet. Cratchet gives of his labor under certain conditions, and Scrooge pays him an amount that, presumably, was mutually agreed upon. Scrooge, however, does not understand the concept of charity, and is consequently an unhappy man, miserly and ignoble. Later, after his adventures with the famed ghosts of Christmas, the realization dawns on him that his own life is barren and lonely. His subsequent discovery of the spirit of Christmas, which is the spirit of charity, renews him and brings him a life of fulfillment. This is not revolutionary thinking, in the leftist sense, since the spirit of charity cultivates only a "revolution" in the hearts of men, not of overthrowing a society. It is the only kind of revolution that really matters or lasts. Scrooge remains the master of his business and property, and Cratchet remains his employee. And so we see that the augmenting of letter-of-the-law justice with charity alters their inner relationship and creates a solidarity that is nearly family-like. Human divisions and human failings dissolve in warmth and kindness, thanks to this wonderful gift.

Therefore, the offering of a gift of charity to each and every individual whom we may encounter means not only offering material sustenance and a helping hand to those who need them, but to be charitable in the broader sense of extending to others our hospitality, graciousness, amiability, forbearance, forgiveness, and a recognition of the inborn dignity of each and every one — all of these things are embodied in the notion of charity and all assist in binding together man and man.

In the not-too-distant past, before the untoward growth of the government Leviathan, before the birth of the centralized welfare state, before petty bureaucrats pried into every corner of our lives, before federal mandates began unduly to regulate relationships between people, and before federal courts declared some human beings "more equal than others," and others still — little ones, too tiny to defend themselves — no longer human at all, before all of this came to pass American life was the envy of the world. Our streets and homes were safer, our lives more orderly and secure, our moral sensibilities keener by far. Life in America was more pleasant by virtually any criterion one cares to name.

A successful return to the ideals of our own past depends *not* on government, but on each individual American citizen. If this costs some small measure of sacrifice, insofar as self-complacency and convenience are concerned, then so be it. Not only is the goal worth the effort, but if we think about it



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we will see that we owe that much, and more, to our forebears. In that fashion, we repay the debt to them for the gifts they have given us. What is that debt, you may ask, and what are these gifts?

It is not easy for most people to conceptualize the gifts they have been given by people they never knew, gifts from ancestors long dead. While lip service may be paid these men whom we dimly recollect from our school lessons, the whole idea is somehow too abstract, too subtle for most. Fewer and fewer Americans today are aware of the gifts they enjoy, thanks to the bounty and goodness of God, and to the immense struggles of our ancestors. The fact remains that we Americans enjoy our way of life in a great nation as the result of Divine gifts and the gifts our ancestors gave us long ago. Apart from what has already been mentioned, God has given us the gift of life, the gift of loved ones, the gift of friends. He has given us a world filled with wonder, splendor, and beauty. God has given Americans the gift of a great country, founded, settled, and built by courageous men and women. Our forefathers recognized the goodness of God and responded to His goodness in the things they achieved and the way they led their lives. Mindful of their Creator and confident of His continuous presence, they attained a grandeur of which we moderns, perhaps too easygoing and comfortable, can only fantasize. Here are several examples.

First, there are those hearty English souls of 400 years ago who braved journeys of many months and thousands of miles, across violent, unforgiving seas, in alarmingly diminutive ships. Once here, they resolutely carved out the rudiments of a new nation amid a raw, lonely, hostile wilderness. For many decades they withstood the onslaughts of the harsh elements, the attacks of unfriendly Indians, and the cold embrace of a vast unknown. Among their gifts to us were their boldness and determination. Without these gifts, where would any of us be today?

Next, we have the gifts given us by the Founding Fathers. These men, visionaries in the finest sense of that word, with only scant hope of victory, stood up to Great Britain, the mightiest empire and naval power of that age, and demanded their God-given right to live as upstanding free men. They endured, many of them, the destruction of their personal property and fortunes, the disruption of their personal lives, and the severe dislocation of their families. Some did not survive the long struggle, giving their lives that the dream of a free, independent United States might be realized, never partaking themselves of the pleasure of that dream's fulfillment. By their sacrificial gifts to their posterity, we live as free men today.

Lastly, let us think for a moment of the legions of brave men who have fallen in battle in all of the many wars this country has fought. It does not matter the precise nature of these wars, whether they were just or unjust, whether they were rightly America's concern or not. Those responsibilities rest with our elected representatives and it is they whom history will ultimately judge in that regard. Such questions are not in the fighting man's domain. While others commit him to battle, his duty is to serve his country and his countrymen. The Gospel declares, "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." That is precisely the gift our fighting men have given to us. We are what we are today, and we have the freedom to choose certain possibilities today, because of this transcendent gift, this final sacrifice.

In the Romantic Age, poets called such a death "the beautiful soldiers' death." Death, of course, is not a beautiful thing, particularly amid the blood and terror and devastation of the battlefield. Yet, as one can imagine, what they meant was that, regardless of the actual circumstances of a soldier's death, the beauty comes from the fact that he gave his life that others might live.

Not to be discounted either are the gifts of those who did not actually die in battle, but whose lives were



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changed because of wounds suffered at the front, and those, as well, who risked their lives but who, by God's grace, returned to their homes without injury.

Our response to the living and to the dead, to our ancestors who settled the shores of New England at the dawn of the 17th century, to our Founding Fathers of 1776, and to all the others, is to strive ourselves to make certain that the things for which they struggled and fought and died continue to be a living legacy for the present generation, and especially for the generations yet to come. Our debt to our progenitors is to acknowledge the gifts that they have given us, to nourish them and keep them vigorous, and to give them, either unchanged or enhanced, as our gifts to our offspring. To allow these miraculous gifts to decay or die is to scorn them, to be ungrateful to our forebears, to forget them, and to forsake our progeny. That, in brief, is the nature of the debt we owe.

May we strive this Christmas, throughout this coming year, and throughout all of our lives, to give one another those nonmaterial gifts that will make our lives more joyful and that will help to build a better, stronger America. May we strive also to make the preservation of American freedom and independence our gift to that intrepid folk who represent our past, and to all of those who represent our future.

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