

Rev. Paula T. Webb

WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF A GIFT?

We hear so much this time of year about giving, and Gifts ~ and most of the stories or events are about giving to those we love, or those who have less than we do. Or possibly those who have suffered a traumatic event, or may have lost loved ones (human or animal companion) ~ and how, at least for a few moments, those we have given to may be able to feel some degree of happiness, joy, or even release in knowing that others (even if strangers) may care about them or their situation.

But after all the holiday merry-making is done, and the last of the Christmas lights have been taken down, and the ornaments tucked away in their boxes ~ what is left?

What "Gift" can we take away from the Holiday Season to sustain us throughout the coming year?

If we take a look at ancient peoples ~ and really nowadays they don't seem so ancient after all with modern science ~ just taking a look at one "Gift" tradition ~ we can see how our own Gift-giving and Gift-receiving can sustain us.

In Europe centuries ago, the nomadic and non-nomadic tribes practiced what modern philosophers call a "Pagan" type of religion. The Pagan religion is oft described as heathenistic by modern peoples, meaning, according to modern ideas, Pagans had no belief in God, specifically one main God. However, this is not exactly true.

In its truest form, Pagan beliefs include the idea that every living thing is created, and ensouled, by God ~ and therefore by definition, every living thing must "be" God, since God created it. Going back to ancient Greece, we can find the Goddess Venus described as worshipping an apple, (as seen in several statues still in existence today), lending her name to some of the earliest shall we say, Pagan followers. A belief that an apple was worthy of respect and honor...just like every other living thing.

How simple!

Yes, how simple ~ to believe that everything that lives ~ is created by God ~ and therefore deserves the same level of respect and honor that we place on say a crucifix, or a statue of Buddha, or a saint, or the sun, or Mother Earth, or any other deity, and so forth. And taking this a step further as most of you familiar with my work know I like to do ~ the practice of adorning a "Christmas" tree heralds from those very Pagan beliefs and times ~ not Christianity. (There were no evergreen trees in Bethlehem! The term "Christmas" tree simply denotes the time of year, not a tree for Christ per se.) Centuries ago, those subscribing to the Pagan beliefs that all living things are ensouled ~ took time to bring Gifts to living things during the winter months ~ when the earth lay dormant, when the farm animals no longer gave birth or had little milk to share ~ to show their respect for those living creatures and the sustenance they provided for them so that they may live

and thrive as well. Hence the tradition of adorning the trees in the forests, the farm animals, the inside of their homes with handmade trinkets ~ which was an easy way for God to be shown He was believed in, respected and honored ~ by giving Gifts to Him and His very creations. Our ancestors knew ~ *believed* ~ that with God, everything is possible, and honored that by “Gifting” to His living things.

Now this message is not about whether or not you decorate a Christmas tree, or a Hanukkah bush, or light Kwanzaa candles, or enter into Ramadan, or practice any other faith-based practice ~ rather it is to remind us that any Gift ~ whether given to another, or given to you ~ whether you like it or not, can be viewed with the same simplistic ideals of our long-ago ancestors. That a Gift is a symbol of respect and honor ~ no matter how small, how inexpensive ~ no matter who from or when given ~ a Gift ~ is a message from God, reminding us we are His, we are a part of Him, and we are loved.

What are the most generally accepted ideas of Gifts by society?

- ◆ *Jewelry*
- ◆ *Clothing*
- ◆ *Home-cooked food*
- ◆ *Artwork*
- ◆ *Books*
- ◆ *Handmade goods*
- ◆ *And so on.*

Of course, none of our ancestors had any of that ~ more than likely the “Gifts” they brought to the trees, the animals, and their homes, were possibly feathers that had dropped on the ground, or maybe a smooth stone, a dried flower ~ maybe just a whispered wish floating up to the Heavens; I think you get the idea.

So how about creating a new definition for Gifts?

- *A smile to anyone you see*
- *A wave of the hand as you pass others by*
- *A friendly “hello” to the clerk or grocery bagger*
- *Fresh cold water to landscapers, or the garbage-truck drivers, or the mailman*
- *Hot lunch for the cleaning service people (office or home)*
- *A “thank you” to everyone who provides services for you*
- *A “thank you” to others who have done nothing for you personally, but may serve others*
- *A blessing to someone, possibly a stranger ~ even silently*
- *And so on.*

Quite possibly you already subscribe to this ideal of “gift” giving! And if you haven’t yet thought

about this idea ~ why not think about it as we wind down 2014. Let's take a look at this wonderful example of what I am talking about, below.

In 2006, you may recall that a man named Roberts went on a shooting spree in an Amish town in Pennsylvania; killing a number of schoolchildren before killing himself. The outrage by those outside the Amish community was understandable; and Mr. Robert's parents had little to say to anyone, especially the media, about what their son had done.

However, shortly after hearing of the death of one of his own grandchildren, a senior member of that Amish community was heard to say to younger members of their community:

"We must not think evil of this man."

Another Amish father noted,

"He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he's standing before a just God."

Jack Meyer, a member of the Brethren community living near the Amish community in that county in Pennsylvania explained:

"I don't think there's anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts."

And, mere hours after the shootings occurred, members of that Amish community approached the family of the shooter, offering comfort to them in *their* grief, and extending forgiveness toward the acts of their son. One member of the Amish community held the father of the shooter in his arms while the elder Roberts sobbed over what his son had done. This same Amish community set up a charitable fund for the children of the shooter; some 30 Amish attended the funeral of Roberts; and the widow of Roberts was invited to attend the funerals of some of the Amish victims.

Would these most gracious actions on the part of the Amish community, be considered a Gift?

Even though they were of a different faith than the shooter?

And, should those Gifts have been accepted by the Roberts family?

The point of this message here today is again, to remind us to not merely look at a Gift as a commercial enterprise. Or see it has an insult, or any type of disrespect ~ depending on what it is, or who it may have come from. Meaning, it doesn't matter what the "intent" behind any Gift is that we may receive ~ we can choose, as those in the Amish community did, to accept what "Gift" came to them with grace, with respect, and honor the process of being spiritual people ~ knowing they, and we, are truly a part of God, just as He intended us to see within ourselves.

Even if you choose to re-use a particular Gift to another ~ the person it is given to, can now choose to accept it with their own beliefs ~ and quite possibly you may have made someone's day, week or even year.

You yourself can choose to create your own definition of what a Gift is ~ and what giving or receiving a Gift means to you ~ each and every day. This definition can be as unique, as individual, as special as the stars in the sky ~ just as each one of us are.

***The Amish community chose to see the experience as the Gift of "being" ~
being children of God, being children in God.***

And so can we.

So, maybe we can revisit our Gift-giving ideals, and increase their defining potential to do the highest good ~ not only for ourselves, but for all those whom we come in contact with. This isn't about a major shift in your consciousness, or a change in your mindset, or experiencing a huge event such as the one described above ~ it is simply an idea, a suggestion shall we say, to remind us to keep our ancestral spirits flowing ~ and respect and honor every living thing, as God intended.

All Good Blessings!

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