

GIFTING - and the Consequences of its Absence

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Historical perspective

Our twentieth century culture is built on a belief structure which originated in Europe about 300 years ago, and which is at most only 150 years old in Aotearoa-New Zealand. This belief structure relies first on breaking down everything which is regarded as important into component parts which can be "understood". "Products" which are physical or social can be synthesised from parts which may be of metal or people.

Money is the socially-accepted and culturally-conditioned standard most commonly used for measurement of processes involved in the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services. The usual measure of efficiency of such processes is profit, the difference between the money values of the outputs and inputs.

Along with such concepts goes economic determinism - a belief that the social system encompassed by the measured, formal economy is in some real sense a machine, with complex but direct links between its component parts. When such a belief gains currency, it is but a short step to see an economy's structure and movements as being to a significant extent preordained, and only to a modest extent capable of control, let alone change, by the people who are its components.

With such simplistic models and ways of thinking, it is not surprising that many people overlook the complexity of life's interrelationships. For example, environmental impact reports have only relatively recently been made an integral part of the planning process for major projects. In the past, little account was taken of the fact that ecological balance cannot be disturbed without consequences far beyond those which are local in their effect.

As another example, the reality is that most of the world's economic activities occur outside the formal, money economy, and consist of informal use-value production, exchange systems and reciprocal arrangements for sharing goods and services. Despite this reality, they are generally considered to be of no "value" unless or until they can be measured (in money terms) and thereby brought within the formal economy.

As more and more of these activities - housework, childcare, looking after the sick and the old - become monetised and institutionalised, the values that allow people to provide services to one another free of charge become distorted. When such changes occur, social and cultural cohesion dissolves and a malaise is evident in society. Domination by the market economy also transforms attitudes to goods as well as services. For example, young people are now frowned upon when they pick pawpaw in some Pacific islands, for it is worth cash if taken to market.

The process of creating dependency, of people on mechanisms, is being accelerated by the fact that the entire concept of money (as perceived by most people) is becoming ever more detached from human realities, as it moves from physical tokens which one can handle, to electronic images on pieces of plastic.

Our society is now moving to a post-industrial stage, which is service-based and depends upon the manipulation of information. In a context such as this, it is critical to affirm that the enormous variety and complexity of what we call "knowledge" cannot be reduced to a commodity whose value can be measured in money terms, without destroying it in the process. The associated myth that information can be equated with knowledge must also be demolished, and replaced by the fostering of a basis for communication that recognises the full range of human experience. People should not be regarded as standardised interchangeable components of an information bank, but as unique individuals with the capacity for creativity.

This is particularly important since we are living in an age of economic determinism, where a small section of the population has the power and resources to make most of the critical decisions. Much social policy results from the responses of social workers, psychiatrists and politicians to pathological cases they meet. In practice, the result can be that the tail wags the dog.

The place of gifting

The reductionism which encourages humans to think of themselves as items of production, consumption and exchange (i.e. commodities) can perhaps be broken by an affirmation of gifting. Tauiwī (people who do not have Maori ancestry) need to act with humility in understanding Koha (gift) relationships among Tangata Whenua (Maori). This basis of relationships between groups of people in Aotearoa before the arrival of the colonists is also deeply ingrained in the cultures of most other societies, including that of the Pakeha (settlers of European origin), although often submerged beneath a veneer of other ideologies.

Gifting is distinct from informal exchange relationships; it has no immediate or direct expectation of monetary reward or equivalent quid pro quo. In many cultures, gifting has become limited to the family or small group. The imposition of emotional burdens as a price for social cohesion through these gift relationships has largely resulted from the domination of market exchange. While the market is believed to be efficient and relatively free of these burdens, the consequent loss of relationship should be recognised. In promoting the need for each individual to make a response, we must not at the same time assume that an individualistic approach to Gifting is valid. Gifting is an appropriate response for many people in many situations.

The autonomy of the gift giver is enhanced by his/her gifting. In collective gift relationships there we understand that there is some control on koha, as Mana (status in the eyes of others) is lost if fairness is not maintained in those relationships.

The experience of giving and receiving is fundamental to the building of community, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The encouragement of gifting draws out the autonomy of people. The gift response may well enable the reframing of those assumptions about individualistic behaviour which lie behind the industrial-training approach. No-one knows where such a reframing would lead, but it is clear that current assumptions do not reflect the full range of human experience.

The collective dimension of human experience

In our society, we are so used to thinking individualistically that we pay little attention to our collective perceptions. Gifting is only one of many collective experiences.

The question of definition of need has become the subject of a substantial literature, much of which acknowledges that the problem in attempting to describe needs in human beings is that

any definition assumes an ideological stance on the part of the definer. It is important to acknowledge that the concept of need includes more than the collection of information about the needs of individuals. Need has a collective dimension which is formed by a wide variety of social forces, including advertising.

So often, the definition of need derives from the concept of disadvantage, which seeks to remedy social problems through the imputed inadequacies of individuals. We respond to individuals and mistakenly believe that multiple individual responses can be equated with a collective understanding of need.

The individualistic, "self-directed" ideology needs to be analysed and investigated in terms of its significance in supporting some cultural styles and not others. Individualism breeds concepts of individual "achievement" and "success" on the one hand, but more seriously of "failure" on the other.

A profound transformation is well under way, not only in our institutions but among the population at large. The values and lifestyles being adopted by ever-increasing numbers of people deny their experience and concern for social justice, ecological balance, gifting, and spirituality. We need to legitimate these aspects of human reality.

The response

What is required is that we acknowledge the existence of imbalances in opportunity, access and power. We need to focus on Treaty-based ways of assessing what is being accomplished (the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) established the terms of a relationship between incoming British settlers and the indigenous people). For Tauīwi, policies of social equity could bring about some condition where people have more equal dignity, rank and privilege with others. Access, opportunity and outcomes are all key concepts in such policies.

Equal access and equal opportunity are not enough - equal access cannot respond to social inequality, while equal opportunity can only be understood as the opportunity to succeed. Similarly, when equity is expressed in relation to access it runs the risk of being reduced to an economic definition. People in the lower socio-economic groups see themselves as failures, lack confidence, give up easily and become virtual non-participants in society. Continual deprivation imprints emotional and psychological marks on their characters which can lead to loneliness, alienation and violence, with the result that many of the poor opt out of society and institutions.

The gap between rich and poor is growing. The collective dimension, summarised in the expression "Think globally - Act locally", brings a new means of looking at the gap. In this context it implies the importance of the individual looking beyond personal considerations to a response which acknowledges the complexity of interdependence between people, groups, communities and nations.

There are more basic problems of rationale in looking at the gap in the context of the collective dimension. These are implicit in such questions as "Who defines the problems and needs?", "Who sets the goals?", "Who benefits and who loses?", "Who controls?" and "Who makes the decisions?" If these questions are addressed, outcomes can be assessed in ways that acknowledge the collective rather than the individual dimension alone.

The post-industrial society is service based and depends upon the manipulation of information. It is a data-processing society, and the person who dominates in this kind of society is the professional. The relationship of the professional to society is therefore of critical importance.

The role of the professional must take into account this relationship. If such a professional is to take seriously his/her tasks of professing - of inducting amateurs (lovers of a subject) into his/her subject - theirs must be a gift relationship. The resource person must refuse to be mesmerised by the two idols of individualism on the one hand, and love of organisation on the other, or there will be little room left for a collective response.

Those involved in this professional, resource-gifting relationship have personal, not structural links with the communities they serve, and seek to develop rather than dominate or regulate them.

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