



# The messy mysteries of learning to receive

Alison Phipps challenges the taken for granted practices of 'giving' and 'receiving' in order to equalise relationships and bring about wellbeing for all



I was brought up to value generosity and to give of my time and my money, and to do so in ways which would be costly. As a young adult I joined the Iona Community, an intentional faith-based community whose members commit themselves to a five-fold rule of life, which includes accountability for both time and resource, including money. I have found the pattern of life and of giving has deepened through the years. I have gradually come to positions where I do not just give the traditional 10 per cent of my money but where I have learned, through the campaigns of organisations like Church Action on Poverty and also Christian Aid, to align myself *experientially* with the poorest in the world. Taking part in living wage campaigns or surviving on a

dollar a day through Christian Aid week has enabled me to have a glimpse into what it is like to have to think constantly about the basics of surviving and to plan my life around these without the fix that a salary can give.

I was also brought up in a family of volunteers and community makers: Guides, Scouts, youth groups, walking clubs, young adults' discussion groups, a church at the heart and making the heart of a community, fetes, festivals, well dressings and garden parties, all aiming to raise funds or give time to help someone other than myself. I was told: 'Clean your plate – people are starving in Africa.' Time was to be spent well and thoughtfully in making community and fostering connections between people; not just spending time

with friends, but visiting the sick or elderly, looking out for one another. As an adult, within the structure of the Iona Community's rule of life, the habits of action and service have continued and my life has been full of voluntary activities and communities in the local, regional, national and latterly also international arenas. Holidays have been spent with young people and adults, leading weeks of reflection and refreshment, being part of creative groups of people from all over the world who have given of their creativity, ideas, time and energy to make something they believe to be good, useful, hopeful and beautiful.

Over the last five years, as my income levels rose considerably and my career 'took off' I came to realise that the gap between rich



and poor and the campaigns for equality were important and urgent in enabling a sense of worth and dignity. The work of epidemiologists Pickett and Wilkinson<sup>1</sup>, popularised in *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, was particularly compelling in this regard. They identify inequality and income disparity as being the single most obvious indicator of wellbeing; the bigger the gap, the greater the indicators of suffering. Whilst part of my work is involved in campaigning for a wholly different economic model to be adopted by our elected representatives, it struck me that one of the biggest blocks to those on salaries like my own being able to make decisions which would be in the direction of a radical redistribution of wealth, was fear and lack of experience of what life would be like if a choice was made to live on less, voluntarily. So I decided, with my family, to choose to live on the average wage. Not a radical choice for poverty but a choice to live on the average, and to give away the rest.

'It is more blessed to give than to receive', is a phrase from my tradition, which underpins this attitude to life and these freely chosen commitments to give of time and of money and to do so in ever deepening ways. Added to this, however, was the general understanding that giving in these ways would also mean I needed 'me-time'; 'space'; a 'holiday'; 'R and R' – the terms used to describe the 'time out' or 'down time' that it is assumed is needed to sustain any kind of compassionate activity. 'Recharge the batteries', 'rest', 'make sure you don't forget yourself', are examples of the received wisdom of friends, and professionals who watch over the work of compassion, service, and giving. With this comes the belief in 'burnout', 'limit', and the flipside wisdom that somehow our reserves are limited and to expend them all will lead to an emptying unless we go to the places where we can be filled again.

I'm really not so sure about this 'in-out' transactional model of giving and receiving. I'm not sure it is quite this simple. I am not sure that my soul empties and fills in this way. Under modern conditions, giving and receiving have become like other forms of our labour – alienated from the ground of their production and taken out of the relationships which forged them. Yes, as Kant famously put it, three things help us to cope with the arduousness of life

– sleep, hope and laughter<sup>1</sup> – but more recently, I've been learning that it is not so much about receiving, or being refreshed at a distance from those I might seek to serve, but that receiving from those people with whom I am actually in these relationships, is what is important, in non-alienated forms of relation.

I am aware that there is a danger of dependency here, or co-dependency, and that in the work of compassion this is something to be wary of... and yet, yet... refreshment comes to me in its most profound forms at the nerve endings of my body and soul, where I am porous, open to air and light and the lives of others, and where the exchanges are messy and mysterious.

Perhaps an example will serve to elaborate here. A few years ago I took a further step and began to volunteer with my family to share my home with destitute asylum seekers. This has meant living on a daily basis with the trauma and the devastating experiences of being alongside those who have lost everything and who are suffering the sustained assaults of what I consider to be a toxic British media and immigration system. This means I am choosing to live daily with despair and helplessness, and not to have 'space away'. It means, genuinely, in the words of Leonardo Boff, being converted to the way of the poorest, who cannot choose to have space away either<sup>3</sup>.



This has meant also discovering the limits of 'middle class advocacy' and of the limits to giving in terms of time and money, together with similar discoveries of the limits of what is achieved by time out from those relationships. Because my giving cannot do much at all against the wickedness which has blighted the lives of those who live with me, it has meant that I see how important is the play of relationships and of non-alienated forms of giving and receiving in flow.

A woman rings the bell at my door. I open the door and recognise her, ask her to come in, and offer to make her a cup of tea. She is Somali. She knows my house and is a regular visitor. She laughs and says 'No, it's OK; if I need one, I will help myself', and she does, help herself. And here it is – so simple – a mutuality, a knowing that what is mine is shared and is hers too, an approach to life which I am learning to understand as a deeper wisdom than transactions in giving and receiving.

My instinct is to offer hospitality and to make a cup of tea; my instinct, deeply ingrained now, is to give. But whilst this remains a constant in my experiences of hospitality – visiting and being visited – I have also seen how this attitude of trust in sharing as solidarity, stops me in my tracks and equalises the relationship. It is where I see that we are indeed in relationship and deeply dependent one on another: for money, for food and shelter, for love and compassion, for prayer and laughter and tears. We leak when we live from our edges and it is here we discover something far

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more interesting and sustaining about human solidarity than from the carefully bounded place of my professional wisdom, where the balance of power is maintained.

It is all too easy to give, and for this to maintain the imbalances in power. In the debates about trade not aid, or development not charity, about co-dependency and burnout, we see this dynamic challenged, and rightly so, but what I have discovered is perhaps more challenging still. It asks me also to be served by those I seek to help, to be porous, to be unsafe if I am to know solidarity and strength. It is a paradox, a mystery. It asks me to allow those who are the most vulnerable to give of themselves and to be vulnerable alongside.

We have just had some very expensive legal fees to pay to help our foster daughter's claim for asylum. During the years of campaigning for her protection we have not asked for money as we know we earn enough not to do so, but as the campaigning continues, cheques arrive, given spontaneously by people who believe that this is what they can do.

On several occasions now, cheques match those of our legal fees, in serendipitous ways, which the givers could not have known about. Again, my impulse, my upbringing to be independent, autonomous, to value my own agency, kicks in and I want to say, 'No, please, give to someone needier than I am. I can afford this.' And then I think of all I have learned by giving; how I have learned that it is simply good to give unconditionally; and then I think of all I am learning as others join in relationships of solidarity and togetherness, in the ways they have worked out for themselves that they can give. I realise that for giving to be learned there need to be receivers, and for this not to mimic unequal patterns of care and



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alienated relationships, there needs to be a porosity and flow in these relationships – not a matching, one for one, but a collective sense of what can be made together. For dignity to be achieved for all, those of us who want to empty ourselves for others, to be kenotic, have also to allow others into our space, into relationship with us, in ways which are intimate and disconcerting and which equalise.

So, I am learning to receive. I am learning that my giving and my receiving brings joy to others, it dignifies others, it takes my powerful acts of giving – and levels them, creating something more of the conditions of equal relationships which might bring about wellbeing for all. It puts me into communion, a place, for me, of sacred relationship, as what is precious in my life is given, broken, shared and remade.

Another story in my tradition tells of a woman, thought to have been a prostitute, who turns up at a meal where the man who saved her life, was feasting. She takes her most expensive jar of perfume, breaks it open and pours it over his feet, wiping them with her hair. The gesture horrifies onlookers, not least because it puts this woman on a level with the man who has saved her life. It equalises the relationship and does it through intimacy, and through a degree of porosity. These are not new insights. Religious traditions are full of such stories of people learning generosity and receptivity, of people being changed and levelled in the process. It is also the wisdom in the Greek figure, Chiron – the wounded healer; one also present in Jungian models of analysis. But these forms of relational, messy and mysterious equality are still horrifying, troubling power and prestige and 'the way things are done', the taboos of hospitality. They trouble the foundations of many of our most hard-won professional

insights and a whole industry of alienated labour of care.

The guest in my house brings a cup of tea into the lounge, wearing my apron and holding my tea towel. The guest is the host. She has just done the washing up, unbidden, and without my knowledge. I pick up the cup and her gift enters my soul, warming and healing a place I did not, until now, know, was raw. I smile as I realise that nothing will be quite where I think it belongs, next time I go back to the kitchen to make tea myself, that my orderings don't match hers. But this is receiving: messy, with loose endings; active and irresolvable in its endless mysteriously ordinary forms.

### Biography

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### References

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