

Reflections on Giftware and Giftcare: Whither Consumer Research?

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Myself unto myself will give
This name, Katharsis - Purgative.
—James Joyce, “The Holy Office”

While I have played the role of augur in real time as a discussant at many conferences, and have enjoyed the rush of synthesizing and predicting that the hearing of research tales for the first time conspires to produce when chance favors the prepared mind, I find myself reluctant only to prescribe regimes in print, despite the lively springboard the contributors to this volume have provided. Our authors have delivered us to the frontier regions of gift-giving research—interpersonal and intrapsychic parameters, formal and informal organizational dynamics, cross-cultural dimensions both domestic and international, exemplary domains from the literary to the everyday, consumption rituals of sacred and secular cast—from whence we may advance into the deeper woods of commercial, emotional, generational, ethnic, national, and corporate giftways. At the editors’ invitation, I employ my reading of the authors’ works as a critical incident, in conjunction with a number of other revelatory incidents, to produce an intensely personal and entirely idiosyncratic account of the direction consumer researchers might take in pursuit of a richer interpretation of gift giving. This essay, then, is a handsel, an inaugural gift betokening a wish for good luck for consumer researchers eager to take our contributors’ understandings further forward. I adopt a particular voice and tense, and trust they will accept the ethnographic present.

Readers familiar with my scholarly style will presently recognize that I have abandoned my customary strategy of citation overkill in favor of a *silva rerum* format that I use with my MBA students. I adopt the vehicle of a commonplace book in this essay, and provide the reader with excerpts from a larger long-term meditation on consumer culture.

What follows is a collage of observation, interpellation and pontification. The essay is completely introspective, shamelessly self indulgent, and almost exclusively emergent. If there is an identifiable theme in the essay, it resides in the fascinatingly complex interplay between giftware and giftcare in consumer culture: meaning is invested in, and divested from, the material and ethereal in pursuit of a metaphysic.

Epiphanies

What follows is an atemporal chronicle of synchronicities, of what Rick Pollay (1987, 138) has happily described as "Acme deliveries." The vignettes are accounts of unexpected or unanticipated visitations of insight. They are descriptions of epiphanies, occasioned by the straying of incidents across the fieldworker's cognitive peripheral vision (Zaltman 1995), during times he supposed the fields to be dormant. Committing these epiphanies to print is a response to our authors' stimulating analyses; their collective effort has proven a powerful synergist. It may interest the reader to learn that this essay was written during the official opening days of the 1994 Christmas shopping season, whether as a result of synchronicity or of poor time management.

Myth

My youngest son and I have nestled into my favorite easy chair in the warm comfort of our goodroom, and have opened this night a volume of creation myths (Hamilton 1988) to enact our own ritual of bedtime reading. We riffle through the pages until he comes upon the portrait of a young woman, framed by a window, into which our gaze is drawn. She regards us with a sidelong glance, at once seductive and shy. Responding to some primordial urge, my son decides, "This one!" and we're through the window in a trice, there to engage the First Woman.

To my tired ear, Pandora is a cosmological commonplace, so I am mildly amazed in listening to my voice convey the teller's words to recover meanings I hadn't thought to seek in other tellings. Subtly at first, then to my son's increased amusement as the tale unfolds—he knows his father to be more disposed to narcolepsy than epiphany—I find my anthropological imagination drifting from the story to the moral. Energized in the telling, I bundle Brendan off to bed, reclaim my chair, and let the myth rethink itself through me at the fireside.

Pandora ("the gift of all"), gifted by all the gods, and Zeus's gift to man, herself is given an unknowably terrible gift to bear into the world. Cursed/blessed with an irrepressible curiosity, she struggles in vain with gods' warnings not to open Zeus's gift box. Epimetheus ("afterthought") receives the gift of Pandora and her present, despite his own intuitions

and his brother's concerned advice. Men know Zeus's gifts to be divisive: they are tinged with ambivalence. To protect his new wife, Epimetheus conceals Pandora's present, but in vain. The mystery of the boxed gift exerts an irresistible allure for the First Woman, just as she does for Epimetheus. Through her curiosity, Pandora inadvertently unleashes all manner of awful things into the world, but also releases "hope" in their wake. Pandora must live with the dread consequences of her curiosity, and Epimetheus must live with Pandora, whose presence he has failed to unpack.

Pandora's story suggests a number of inquiries appropriate for consumer research. Perhaps most enticing is the engendered and embodied nature of the gift. We need to understand more precisely the femaleness of the gift, and to determine whether it has a countervailing or complementary maleness as well. The role of mystery and compulsion in giving also requires deeper exploration. What is it that makes a gift so inexorably, compellingly desirable? A mature cultural erotics—not to mention agapics, ludics, storgics, manics, and pragmatics (Lee 1988)—of gift giving is a worthy aspiration. The tension between eagerness to accept and ambivalence in reception is still only dimly understood. That gift giving is tinged with negativity has become apparent; giftedness may be as much a burden as boon.

Phylogeny

In conducting a recent series of unrelated proprietary field studies for several clients, and immersing myself in the literature of developmental psychology, I grow increasingly interested in the relationship of basic biocultural behavior to our notions of gift giving. Caregiving rituals in particular—feeding, grooming, playing, and otherwise nurturing, for example—are in Geertz's (1966) sense both models *of* and models *for* gift giving behavior; such rituals shape and reflect our fundamental understanding of gift giving. They do, that is, only if we pause long enough to ponder their significance. The drama of mimesis and alterity is enacted in the mirroring exchange between care giver and receiver. Sustenance is exchanged for grace, love for information, as each partner helps the other one emerge from a current chrysalis.

That gift giving may be an epigenetic causal mechanism does not seem to have penetrated consumer research. Our various life projects are intertwined with those of others. These projects frequently involve behaviors which are both archetypal and metaphoric wrappings and unwrappings. Concealed, embellished, embedded, or tangential offerings accompany nurturing behavior exchanges. Discovery, revelation, epiphany, and insight are attendant upon acceptance of nurturing. It is

conceivable that a dependent—in the sense of any life form beholden to the self for succor—is the ultimate gift, and represents the opportunity of ultimate giving. It is only through such giving that the self and the other are realized. Further, and just as intriguing to consumer research, the ethos of sacrifice and the ambivalence of reception are available for inspection when we view giving epigenetically (Shabad 1993).

Search

I prowl the aisles of one of my favorite CD outlets, looking for exactly the right combination of classical, country, and new age discs to suit the denomination of the gift certificate I have received as a Christmas present from my wife. The part of my monitoring consciousness I am able to disengage from search alerts me to the difference in effort I am currently exerting from the more casual, surgical strike routine I normally follow. By the time I reach the counter with my presents, the clerk exclaims triumphantly, "*I knew it!* I knew it was a gift certificate. People *always* take longer to look when they have a gift certificate." Converting reluctantly to research mode, intermittently suppressing an introspective urge and a sheepishness borne of being typecast so waggishly, I probe the clerk rather diffidently about his observation. He has no ready interpretation, just the firm conviction and lack of curiosity of a brute empiricist. "I don't know *why* they do," he maintained, "but it never fails. The harder they look, the surer I am they're shopping with a gift certificate."

Such search throws the relationship of dyadic to monadic giving into high relief; understanding the conversion of one to the other is a consumer research imperative. On the surface, this relationship is one of convenience. It allows for self-provisioning under the aegis of gift giving. At a deeper level, it may represent an admission of estrangement and a breach of intimacy. Giving-by-certificate may drive the "recipient" to heroic lengths to singularize and resacralize the "gift." The drive to get it exactly right may be a burden imposed upon the recipient, whose heroic labor becomes a sacrifice in the service of saving face for the donor, reestablishing ties of intimacy, and healing a wounded self. Consumer researchers have just recently begun exploring the autodon, or monadic gift (Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1995). Understanding the interplay between dyadic and monadic giving is a necessary next step.

Moral Economy

I am beleaguered by free standing inserts (FSIs) and premature renewal notices from *The Economist*. Amused by the dismal science's ineffectual attempts to apply actuarial logic to disenchant the spirit of the

gift, I am captivated by the editors' exhortations to accept "an adversarial gift idea." "Don't Give Them What They Expect," commands an FSI. "Delight Yourself" with "An Indulgent Gift Idea," suggests another. My favorite is a red bordered FSI headline that declaims "WHAT A GIFTLESS BASTARD!" using Tchaikovsky's opinion of Brahms to help boost circulation. That the FSI—a quasi gift certificate packaged in the magazine, an obligatory gift presented to me by anonymous editors, designed to spill to the floor with its myriad unwanted mates, destined for lateral cycling as a bookmark or consignment to the garbage—should invoke the moral economy of gift giving is at once ironic and outrageous.

This invocation reverberates across my coffee table, whose surface is strewn with a host of recent mail-order catalogs. An FSI from a Signals catalog redundantly invites me to "Choose a Free Gift With Any Order of \$40 or More." Perhaps the notion of a free gift is less redundant than oxymoronic, I wonder, as I make eye contact with the model on a cover of the catalog onto which this FSI has fallen. It is the Victoria's Secret holiday edition, whose body copy promises "One Hundred Great Gift Ideas" across a pictorial which encourages mutually reinforcing fantasies of bondage and unwrapping.

The FSI is a coldly efficient, impersonal descendant of the high-touch handbill, and reminds consumer researchers of the need to understand gift giving as a compliance technique. The commodification of the gift economy, and the cooptation of altruism, is perhaps more lamented than it is actually investigated. The sanctioning and enshrining of monadic giving as a rational economic motivation requires exploration. So also does our ambivalence toward, and suspicion of, gifts. The manipulation of the boundary between monadic giving and provisioning is intriguing; we require more precise understanding of self-interested giving. The surprise and mystery attending successful dyadic giving, missing entirely from monadic giving, is transmuted when the former form is converted to the latter. In conversion, the gift becomes agonistic, a blatant (if subtly exercised) attempt to remake the recipient. The mail order catalog example I describe above is agonistic in this sense. Victoria's Secret enables a wife to give directly to herself and indirectly to her husband. It permits a husband to give directly to his wife and indirectly to himself. The directionality of all these prestations can just as easily be reversed; the underlying ideology may be blissfully undetected, or either playfully or hurtfully acknowledged. Finally, this example invokes fantasy in ways that remind researchers of the need to study issues such as sensuality, voluptuousness, guilt, outlawry, and marginality as they relate to gift exchange.

Takraw

While I question the wisdom of the particular pattern of token giving I am now pursuing, I know it to be the ethnographer's obligation. For weeks, I watch young Thai athletes watch me, an aging professor with a fairly consistent fifteen-foot jumpshot, work up a sweat on a battered basketball court in an uncomfortably hot, old Bangkok gymnasium. During rest breaks, I wander over to the *takraw* court, to watch these same athletes compete in a contest I experience as a hybrid of soccer and volleyball. Displaying incredible agility, they put into play a simulated rattan ball woven of impossibly unforgiving plastic strands. The ball, about the size of a twelve-inch softball, is kept in play with the aid of head, feet, elbows, and other unsuitable appendages, propelled back and forth over the net through heroic contortions, airborne somersaults, and many inevitably brutal collisions with a hardwood floor. Resuming my workout, I invite several of the *takraw* players to join, rather than merely to observe, my shoot-around, forgetting to fix firmly in place my ethnographic persona. I am then treated to a reciprocal *takraw* tutorial, which I cannot in good faith decline. I soon raise welts and bruises on the body parts no basketball has ever encountered, to the delight and concern of my "teammates." The lesson concluded, I leave the gym a wiser, older man, and enroute to my apartment, as I pass the spirit houses and shrines that are laden with gifts of garlands, fruit, food, and other ritual prestations, I remind myself to leave an offertory gift to the *genius loci* of the ball court, as a hedge against injury and foolish pride.

Consumer researchers have neglected some fundamental dimensions of gift giving that cry out for exploration. Token giving sustains relationships, yet we have no natural histories of this mundane infrastructure. Receiving is often difficult and problematic, yet we have no poetics of reception. Sacrifice, so integral to the inscape of the gift, is finally receiving renewed attention. So also is the notion of agonistic giving being revisited by researchers. Prestation and exchange tied just partially to objects themselves, or involving objects as a mere portion of overall dynamics, also require reconsideration. Gifts of grace, merit, or protection such as those I describe above provide significant windows onto consumer behavior. The immediacy of the giving experience, and the corporeality of the truly sacrificial gift (food in a monk's alms bowl vs. money in a collection basket) are potential avenues of inquiry that might produce rewards of insight.

Registry

I just finish reading an essay flagged for me by my colleague Marla Felcher. In his hilarious sendup of matrimonial gift giving, Henry Alford (1993) recounts his experiences with gift registry programs in the upscale department stores of New York. Bloomingdale's in particular boasts a self-registry program for singles who are not getting married, and other stores are willing to bend their bridal registry rules to accommodate singles. Believing that his "own grim existence" as a single person would "benefit from an influx of bright and shiny objects," and armed with the simple rationale that he liked "to receive and unwrap presents," Alford registers for unconventional gifts at a number of these stores. He views this action as an emancipatory one, lifting the sanction against nonobligatory giving and receiving.

The registry phenomenon permits consumer researchers to perform a metasocial commentary of unparalleled significance. The creation of such a market, the institutionalization of monadic giving, points to the transmogrification of culture that gave rise to the original form. This ultimate commodification of the gift economy betokens fundamental culture change, which consumer researchers are in an advantageous position to explore. In a similarly evolutionary vein, the consumer's observations I recount above suggest that we need to return to earlier notions of commodity fetishism, and rework them in light of developments occurring during this current phase of late capitalism. These comments also serve to highlight how little we really know about the ethos of reception.

Exchange

In scanning my morning *Tribune*, I learn that Triangle Electronics, a Chicago area retail chain, is running a promotion it calls "Dad's Day Gift Exchange." The vendor's premise is intriguing:

Bring in your unwanted "Special" Gift and trade it for a FREE AT&T PORTABLE CELLULAR PHONE. OFFER GOOD FOR MOMS TOO. Or just tell us how you enjoyed your gifts and the offer is still good. All traded gifts will be donated to the Salvation Army.

The body copy is accompanied by a photo of the archetypal father, bedecked with archetypal gaudy neckties, who is disassembling archetypically, "Honey, I love it . . . !!! Really."

This advertisement powerfully evokes our American ambivalence toward unwanted gifts and obligatory giving. Such evocation is ripe for study. The use of gifts as weapons, and the transformation of anger and

hurt to guilt and back again, is little understood. Again, the need to understand the conversion process, when dyadic giving transmutes to monadic giving, is pressing. The promotional technique of the ad employs two powerful archaic devices. First is the use of lateral cycling as a persuasive motif. Through this usage, the spirit of the gift is honored and the gift object itself is kept moving. Second is the consumer's default option, which encourages gift exchange to take place at the telling of a story. Gifting a storyteller is a hallowed tradition (Appelbaum 1993), here harnessed in the service of sales. The overarching premise of the promotion—that receiving is difficult—stands in need of thorough investigation by consumer researchers.

Wrapping

In the midst of our comparative analysis of gift-giving practices across two language groups in Belgium, my research assistant, Jennifer Chang, describes an episode of the Warner Brothers' cartoon program *Animaniacs* that she has managed to catch on the Fox network during an off hour of televiewing. She retells the story of Goldie, a sheet of gold wrapping paper preferred above all others. It seems Goldie has been used to wrap a gift for a baby. The baby eagerly unwraps the present, tossing Goldie aside. A cleaning lady promptly deposits Goldie into a trash bin, where the wrapping paper's odyssey accelerates. Along its windborne journey, Goldie is struck by cars, falls into a river, gets carried along by the current until snagged by a fisherman, and is generally tossed and blown about. Goldie is eventually found, lying crumpled and battered, in an alley by a homeless man. He uses Goldie to wrap an old discarded windup toy, which he gives to his son as a birthday present. The boy opens the gift and plays with it under the watchful eyes of his parents. Carefully, he folds the gold wrapping paper and places it safely in his pocket as the story ends. During Jennifer's retelling, I find my imagination flickering from her story to a remembered winter parkway in Belgium, where I recall closely observing Santa Claus, and his punitive partner, Black Pete, roll by me in a ramshackle carriage, on their way to delighting (and frightening) the neighborhood children.

This story and interwoven fantasy suggest additional kinds of probing that consumer researchers might initiate. Gift wrapping encodes mystery, effort, and nobility into the gift; it is recognized as a mechanism of resingularization and sacralization. Unwrapping is a species of foreplay that may be brutally abrupt or exquisitely prolonged. In fact, the product might be better named (and certainly better positioned as) "unwrapping paper." This paper is a literal cloak of

mystery. It is the veil that must be pierced, lifted, or rent. Its essence is transferred to the wrapped object. Jennifer's retelling captures an archetypal motif. The true gift must circulate to remain a gift, and we experience the lateral cycling of the spirit of the gift in her rendition. The wrapping paper is a mnemonic and a metonym that allows donor and recipient to savor mystery, love, anticipation, surprise, and ambivalence. A folk phenomenology of unwrapping would be well worth eliciting. My Belgian reverie emphasizes a need to intensify our investigation of the dark side of the gift. The aggressively bipolar depiction of the spirit of Christmas in Belgium contrasts sharply with our attenuated American "belief" in an avenging Santa. Here is powerful recognition of the punitive power of withholding gifts to ensure conformity, propriety, and general accession to the will of the donor. The gift embodies pain as well as pleasure. Our understanding of agonistic gift exchange is in its infancy.

Interpretive Summary

Let me harness some of the notions in my *silva rerum* in the service of programmatic consumer research. I would like to send inquirers into even more diverse organizations and cultures than our contributing authors have made apparent and which bear exploring. I would set these inquirers in pursuit of topics I find murky yet compelling. We need to understand more formally how gifts are literally engendered and embodied; the reciprocal impact of artifacts on genders and bodies must also be assessed. The dynamics of reception await compassionate analysis. Consumer researchers have probed two of Mauss's tripartite elements of the total social fact—giving and reciprocating—with enthusiasm, but the ethos of reception remains to be plumbed. Meaning transfer is another analytic opportunity. The investing and divesting practices of givers and receivers are ripe for exploration. The interplay between the tangible and intangible dimensions of the gift is a contiguous fertile field. In particular, an investigation of incorporeal gifts (from information to grace) would be well worth undertaking. Of all the central elements of gift giving identified by our intellectual ancestors, sacrifice is perhaps the most vital yet least understood. Our attention might be productively riveted on sacrifice for years to come. A focus on monadic giving as diagnostic of imminent cultural transformation is also warranted. Finally, as an overarching project, consumer researchers need to elaborate a cultural poetics of desire. We have begun with a cultural erotics/agapics of the gift, but this enterprise must be generalized to consumption at large if the discipline is to avoid stagnation.

Conclusion

Let me end this introspectively prospective essay on a methodological note. The contributors to this volume have employed a variety of methods to enlighten their readers about a range of gift-giving issues. We need to bring as many methods and perspectives to bear upon the illumination of gift giving as there are inquirers motivated to undertake the study. We also need more multimethod investigations to take us more deeply into areas that only synergy will reach. Clearly pluralism is the ethic of the day, but I will close by stumping for my two currently preferred synergists.

I envision a program of research into gift giving that combines the contextual sensitivity of ethnography with the intrapsychic depth potential of existential phenomenology. A cultural psychology of the gift broadly construed is the hopeful outcome of this vision, and presages the sensible measurement of gift-giving phenomena. As social scientists, we need to recall McCloskey's (1985, 160) inspired analysis of our own rhetorical enterprise. *Data* are quite literally a gift, given to us by our consultants only if we manage our relationship with them humanely. We rarely work with data in consumer research. Rather, we manipulate *capta*, data that we have dislodged prematurely and decontextualized beyond belief. Researchers must learn to elicit the gift of data before they attempt to elicit data on the gift. Such learning requires much patience, for which I now thank the reader who has followed this meandering essay to its close.

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