

THE ECONOMICS OF GIVING

Tom Bender * From *The Heart of Place*, 1993

tbender@nehalem.tel.net

If we change our relationships with others from a basis of taking or *getting* to one of *giving*, amazing new potentials open. *Giving* may sound like a ridiculous basis for economics. But the majority of our expenditures are for *wants*, not needs - things that connect with our dreams and our self-esteem, not our physical survival.

The economics of giving creates unexpected dividends for the inner resources of both givers and receivers of gifts. The power of our inner resources is vital in overcoming the diseases of the spirit so endemic in our society, in creativity and progress in every field, and ultimately in our own sense of health and happiness.

When we *give* our time or possessions to someone, we do it because we feel better having done so. When we are given some thing or some help that we need, we feel grateful because it was something we couldn't take care of by ourselves. Everyone gains, and feels good towards each other.

When we give something to someone else, it usually is something we don't want and which the other person does. Occasionally a gift is something we value greatly, but where we value even more the other person enjoying it.

When we offer to give our time to someone else, we usually do it because we expect to have fun being with them. Our real skills are so familiar that we rarely understand their value to others. But to someone receiving them, they are a valued expertise which they are lacking.

In conventional buying and selling we often end up uncertain whether the other person is taking advantage of us or whether what we are buying is worth what we are paying for it. We frequently end up with the unhealthy feeling that we got a "raw deal", or the equally unhealthy feeling that we got a "steal".

Giving ends up with gain for everyone. And we don't even have to pay taxes on it! Such win-win situations have a far different economics of benefit than our conventional exchanges. An economics of giving does have constraints on scale, reciprocity, and sense of community - but that is true of almost anything which truly confers honor and respect to all parties involved.

Perhaps most important, an economics of giving involves a crucially different dynamic. In a consumer culture, we ask ourselves, "What do we want?" In a *giving* culture, we ask ourselves, "What can we *give*, what can a new situation *give*, what can our work *give*?"

As an architect, most clients came to me with big lists of "I wants". When I suggested that we also ask what we could create or give through their project, whole new possibilities

opened up.

For example, the program we were given on a YMCA project detailed the gymnasium, fitness center, locker rooms, offices and other facilities needed to house the Y's program activities. What was left unmentioned was the "people places". We said, "What can this project really *give* to kids?"

What those program spaces needed was "complex edges"- places to sit and watch older or more experienced players, or to watch and learn new activities, or to learn enough of the basics of an activity to get up the nerve to step out on the floor.

There needed to be places to hang out, to make friends, to relax between activities, eat a snack, rehash an exciting and well-played game, or just to get up the nerve to try something new or difficult. Meeting such needs cost little in space and dollars, but made a tremendous difference in helping kids grow physically, socially and emotionally. The new questions helped a mere program turn into a cherished part of lives and our memories.

In schools, we need to focus our programming on who the schools are supposed to serve - asking what we can give to help students reach out for the learning they need, instead of just institutional classroom program needs. Students need a "home base" - something more than just a locker; and then they need direct access to library, computer, labs, shops, work, play, friends - and help - not just a sequence of anemic pre-masticated classes.

We need to give what will help them attain relevance, self-esteem, expectation of meaningful employment based on their learning, and self-motivation - before any *real* learning can occur. School buildings, as we know them, may or may not be part of the solution, and pouring money into fancy facilities may not give the best answers.

We need to touch the living heart and inspiration that brought each of our institutions into being. We need to look freshly at our culture and our selves. We need to see what new and exciting opportunities they can generate with today's conditions, today's technology, and today's needs.

The intuition of our hearts and tummies is often far truer than the sophisticated theories and professional fads that come and go as regularly as the seasons. It is our hearts that give.

We have the wealth and resources to do virtually *anything* we really put our minds to. An economics of giving can generate a far more prosperous, happier, and more effective economic system than our present one. It has potential to achieve more in all fields because of its wiser use of resources and selection of goals. And it gives everyone a sense of being an integral part of, and being of value, to a greater and more wonderful whole than we have today.