

Some Foundations

Welcome back to “Living in the Gift.” This is the second session in which we’ll go over some foundational ideas.

Every culture, as far as I know, has something that I call a “Story of the World.” That story is a weave of myths, meanings, narratives, words, symbols, rituals and agreements that together define the world. It’s a story that tells us who we are, how to be a man or a woman, what is important and valuable, what is real, what is sacred and collectively what humanity’s role and purpose is on earth.

The world’s dominant culture, the one called modern, has a story of the world also. I call it the “Story of Separation.” I won’t go too deep into that, it’s in my books “More Beautiful World” and other things I’ve written. Besides, I think you already know intuitively what I’m talking about when I say the “Story of Separation.” It’s the story that holds us as separate individuals and holds humanity as separate from nature.

In the “Story of Separation,” giving or generosity does not come naturally. In fact, the “Story of Separation” says our default nature is selfishness all the way down to the genetic level. We are basically programmed to maximise our reproductive self interest, that our basic nature is self interest. That makes sense because if I’m separate from you, then why should I give when I don’t have to? More for you is less for me; more for me is less for you, that’s baked into the cake of the separate individual in a world of other.

Not only giving, but in the “Story of Separation” trust does not come naturally either. The world is our adversary, full of other competing separate individuals, human and otherwise, whom we must overcome to have a good life. These can be weeds, germs, the Russians, whatever, something to overcome, something to dominate. Beyond that, beyond our competitors there are also the arbitrary forces of nature. They’re our adversaries too because they’re not purposeful, they’re utterly random, they’re not our friend. In fact the whole universe tends toward entropy. Things fall apart. There is no intelligence or purpose outside of ourselves, we’re not part of anything bigger and we’re not part of a movement TOWARDS something. Therefore, to establish a comfortable human habitation in the world, in the cosmos, we have to dominate and control these arbitrary forces of nature. We have to insulate ourselves from them; we have to harness them to our purposes. That’s what our story says.

Where in that story is there room for gratitude? Where is there room for gift? In the “Story of Separation” you basically have to rise above human nature, rise above the way of the world, if you want to be selfless, generous or altruistic. Becoming a good person requires kind of a conquest, a self conquest. It’s the same domination, but turned inwards.

Now I have to say, this story of separation is quickly becoming obsolete. Even its scientific dimension in genetics, physics and biology is crumbling. In ecology we understand that the wellbeing of one is inseparable from the wellbeing of all. So let me talk about gift, generosity, and gratitude from the perspective of another story, a new and it’s also an ancient story I like to call *Interbeing*, a word I’m told was coined by Thich Nat Hanh. I think a deep part of you

will find a ring of truth in these words. This is what this entire course is based on, this new and ancient story, it's based on this foundation.

Life is a gift. The world and everything in it is a gift. We did not earn this world. We did not earn our lives. We did not earn the sun; it is not thanks to our hard efforts that the sun shines. We did not earn the ability of plants to grow. We did not earn water. We did not earn our conception; we did not earn our birth. Our hearts beat and our livers metabolize all on their own. Life is a gift and that's just fundamental. In fact, even the things that did come to you through hard effort, those are a gift too. Maybe you worked hard for your money or for your status, your healthy body? OK, but from where did that ability to work hard come from? Did you earn that or did that come as a gift too? Where does that come from, your creativity, your strength, your intelligence? Did you earn these?

When we apprehend these basic truths gratitude comes naturally. Gratitude is the knowledge of having received and the consequent desire to give in turn. Gratitude is primal. All beings including human beings have an unquenchable desire to pour forth their gifts. That is because some version of gratitude is woven through all of life and it's woven through you as well. That's why when you are in a situation where your gifts are not valued, not received, not expressed or not useful, then you will want to get out of that situation. It could be a job, could be a relationship where your gifts are not received. Its not that you're not receiving enough yourself necessarily, you could be getting paid a million dollars a year, you could be the object of adulation in your relationship, but if you're not giving, if your gifts are not met with receptivity, then you're going to want to get out of there. You're going to feel like this isn't what I'm put on earth to do. You're going to have an unstoppable... well, I won't say it's unstoppable; it can be suppressed for a while until the life force explodes out somehow, maybe in some sideways destructive way. But let me call it in that sense unstoppable, an unstoppable desire to develop and express your capacity to give to the world in service of something that you care about. No matter how much you are being paid, no matter how scared you are to leave the relationship, you're going to want to bust out and develop and express your capacity to give to the world in service of something you care about.

It's not just you, all beings are like this and that is why we should be living in a world of incredible abundance. All these givers who desire to express their magnificence; the fact that modern society has constructed conditions of such pervasive scarcity is an impressive achievement. All that suppression, how did we do that? So much talent, such a rich world, how is it that so many lives are spent in insecurity, anxiety and deprivation? It's not just the economically poor who suffer a kind of a deprivation, it's the wealthy too. I'll go more into that later. Some of this might sound like a privileged person talking about how the world is a gift when for so many it's hard struggle and there are times of struggle naturally as part of the course of life. The scarcity and the struggle are very much artificial and systemic. They have a systemic dimension and an internal dimension creating additional struggle that's not even built into the system and not built into the course of a normal life.

One way to illustrate this is just to look at nature. Is nature fundamentally a struggle? Yeah, there are moments of struggle. I'm remembering a boat trip I took with a couple friends. We were sailing in the San Francisco Bay and there were these seals hanging out on an

abandoned pier or something like that. Four hours later we came back and there were the same seals still sunning themselves on that pier. Then I thought, yep, there it is the struggle to survive. And I thought, how often do I have that kind of ease and leisure? How often do you have it, where you feel totally at ease to spend four hours doing nothing, enjoying the sun, enjoying the sound of waves? Is that part of the fabric of your life or is it confined to vacations? They themselves are just interruptions in a normalized reality of scarcity

Nature is fundamentally abundant, even profligate. I am recording this at my brother's farm. The birds here sing all day, pouring forth their song as a gift to the world. Yeah I know about attracting a mate and marking territory, there are reasons that say oh, it's all selfish after all to explain why birds sing, but come on. Do they have to sing that much just to mark their territory and attract a mate? It is as if they are bursting with the desire to give their song, just like you are. You were born for it, whatever your song is; you were born to sing it. Do the wild black raspberries here have to taste that good to attract animals to eat them and poop out their seeds or is this a part of the gift, the abundance, the magnificence, the profligacy of life? So many, so good, those black raspberries are better than they have to be and don't you have that urge too, to do it better than necessary for the grade, better than necessary for the boss, better than necessary for the market, better than necessary for any reason because you have a yearning to make art of your work and to make your work your art. Don't you have the urge within you to make art of your work and work of your art? Don't you have the urge within you to create something beautiful, to expand your capacities in doing that to their full potential and to express them in service to something magnificent? That is you. If you are not doing that maybe you'll feel, "this isn't quite my life."

If you have this deep seated feeling in you you're not alone. This is universal. Imagine what the world would be if each person were liberated in that desire. Imagine what the world would be if we could sweep away the conditions that conspire to stunt and suppress our gifts. These conditions are political, they are economic, they are ideological, they are relational, they are psychological and they are spiritual. This course focuses on the relational, the psychological, and the spiritual and I will visit these other realms as well. Maybe for some of you this beautiful expression of your gifts that I'm talking about, this fusion of your work and your art, will be to fashion beautiful creations in the social realms or the political realms or the business realms, the organisational realms.

OK, so the ground of this entire course is the understanding that life is a gift, that the world is a gift and that the cosmos operates on the principles of gift. Now I haven't even said what a gift is. Maybe later we'll investigate what a gift is and what it isn't. Right now, please bathe in your intuitive resonance with this truth that says: Why does the sun shine? A random result of coalescing gases igniting nuclear fusion, or is it in order to give its light and warmth to Life? There is a part of you that looks at the sun and knows that there is a relationship here of giving and receiving. It's a child like, deep, primal knowing. Did you know that the existence of stable stars like the sun depends on an exquisite balance of the fundamental forces of nature? If the nuclear strong force were a tiny bit weaker or a tiny bit stronger relative to the electromagnetic force, stars would either blow up in a swift runaway reaction like a bomb, or they would never ignite in the first place. Even the basic set up of our universe is a kind of a gift. Why does it have to be this way? It's a gift, take that in. That connects you to your native state. Your native state is gratitude.

The knowledge that it is a gift, the knowledge of having received, the knowledge that you didn't earn your breath, you didn't earn your heartbeat, you didn't earn your blood, you didn't earn your conception, you didn't earn your mother taking care of you, nursing you or at least someone looking out for you enough with no possibility of compensation. To do that hard work, this is one of the most primal and important gifts that there is and unacknowledged, the gifts that mothers and parents generally, but especially mothers give through childbirth and through nursing and through looking after these little ones and they don't present you with a bill when you grow up. Your life is a gift. So, gratitude is your native state.

That will be the seed concept to take a way from this session

Remember, just carry it. You might enjoy working it with your mind and trying to understand it, qualifying it, or debating it or whatever, and you can do that but you don't have to do that. All you really have to do is to bring attention to it once in a while, to feel into it.

Gratitude is my native state.

Not an aspiration, not an accomplishment, but just a product of the truth.

Gratitude is my native state.