

Session 10.2: Positive Motivations

Living in the Gift

charleseisenstein.org/gift

Hello valuable, beautiful, and willing people.

Welcome to the second part of the Gift Economy segment of the course.

Now I would like to solidify the foundations by touching on some of the motivations that generate a positive experience of gift economy.

I remember my first step into gift economy that came when I self published *The Ascent of Humanity* in 2007. I had the almost-final draft online on a website I designed myself. That was before WordPress and I had put a lot of toil into learning HTML, CSS, and PHP. And finally the book was published and for sale and I thought, "I guess it's time to take down the digital version," but when I went to do that I found I could not. I loved my creation too much and I had put so much energy into it and I didn't want to withhold it from anyone. It was a precious thing and I felt like I'd be degrading and insulting this precious thing by enclosing it and charging admission.

That's how I discovered an essential motivation of Gift Economy. What I had created, or actually what had been created through me, was sacred to me. What is the appropriate price for something sacred? Any amount is too little to put a price tag on the sacred, to reduce the infinite to a finite number. At the same time any amount is too much because it's not here to enrich me, it is here as a gift to the world. I have no right to slow it down or withhold it, it is not mine to withhold. Therefore I thought if any amount is both too much and too little, I'd better not set a price at all. I'll let the reader decide whether and how much to pay. That is when I started putting gift links on my page. People could still choose to purchase the physical book, but they wouldn't have to.

I'm sure many other people have some sense that what they offer to the world is sacred. Musicians, artists, and healers especially share this dilemma. What they offer does not map naturally onto a linear price scale. These gifts are incommensurable; priceless to one person and worthless to another. That is why gift economics is particularly relevant to healers, artists, and musicians. And guess what? The destiny and desire of all of us is to be a healer, and an artist through our work, whatever that may be. We want our work to benefit more than ourselves and we want to express and expand ourselves through it and to do it as beautifully as possible.

Do you feel that to be true? That you want to do your work beautifully as possible, If only you had the freedom to do that?

This truth leads to another key motivation which is the desire to be free to do work better than necessary. Better than necessary for any practical reason. This in fact is what distinguishes an artist. An artist does not seek to produce something that is merely good enough, good enough for the boss, for the market, for the critic. The true artist is a servant of the art.

In a normal economy we are usually under pressure to cut corners, to hurry the job, and basically do things "good enough." Economics teaches us that self-interest, i.e., financial gain, is what motivates work. So why would you need to do the work any better than what is required to get paid?

Back in my twenties when I was a translator I ran into this all the time. If I'd spent a lot more time on it, I could have made it beautiful. I could have made a beautiful, masterly translation

of what I was translating, say the program for a museum collection. But no one would have known the difference, especially not the client. I'd get paid the same regardless and I had other jobs waiting for me and bills to pay, so economic incentives conspired to prevent me from ever really stretching my wings.

So one of the motivations to walk out of the normal world of commerce is to exit that cage where you never quite get to do your best work. Now sometimes even in a normal economy you do get to stretch and your best work is rewarded and encouraged. That was the case when I was a beginner at translation, but eventually I couldn't contain the feeling, "I was put here on earth for more than this." I wanted to break free of the confines of mediocrity. I think we all have that impulse deep down, the impulse to be magnificent in the expression of our gifts.

Now sometimes, as I said, you can do this and thrive in the normal economy, but eventually a contradiction will arise. That is because fundamentally the master that the normal economy serves is the production of more money. Sooner or later you will face a choice in which the most financially secure option is not the best expression of your gifts. If you choose to express those gifts towards their highest purpose, with no guarantee of reward (or at least as much of a reward), then you my friend have stepped into the Gift.

So it may not even be profit, it may be something like job security and you making your choice whether to do your work in the most beautiful way toward its highest purpose when there's a bit of a risk involved. You're sacrificing a kind of a return, whether it's financial or some other kind of return and it's that letting go, that release of a secure return that defines you as being more in the Gift. It doesn't necessarily matter whether you are charging money for something or making more or less money for something. It's all in this feeling of release, of letting go in service of a higher purpose or in service of beauty or in service of doing it well.

Living in the gift means a lot more than whether you charge a set price. I began this series last session talking about not charging a set price and stuff but it's way, way more than that. Ultimately it's about what you serve with your own gifts. Living in the Gift comes from understanding that life is a gift. Therefore it is the expression of your desire to give in turn. Sometimes exiting conventional business models liberates us to give more fully, but that may not be the natural next step for you.

Another reason to step into gift is that no other way works. It could be that. Perhaps what you do does not produce sellable goods and services that the present economy recognizes. Or perhaps the people who need what you offer are not the people with money. That's one reason that I use the gift model, because many of the people who come to my events or maybe who have signed up for this course are people who have stepped out of the matrix and they can't afford normal prices for retreats and things. But others are still in the matrix, or they have inherited wealth from their ancestors or from their former selves. I use a gift model so that financially wealthy people can fund those without money. It's part of the spirit of, again, we are all in this together.

Let's take a more obvious example. If your work is repairing ecosystems, or blighted urban neighborhoods, or you work with ex-prisoners or the homeless, then you probably aren't going to make a lot of money off those people. The money has to come from somewhere else. Ultimately it must come from someone who gives the money without expecting a profit from it. It could be a donor, it could be a foundation, it could even be the government. You could be receiving a regular salary for doing this. But if the reason for that salary is *not* that you'll make the boss even richer, that you'll make him even more money than he pays you, then you are still living by gift even if you are getting a salary.

I hope that wasn't too complicated but let me just cut to the chase. The central motivation for living in the gift is: Love. When we love someone we want to give to them. We just want to. We just want to give. We don't care about ourselves so much. The floodgates of gift open and we don't want to limit it. The desire for gift based business models comes from that. It is, "I just want to give this to you. I just want to give this to one and all. I want others to feel the way that I feel."

That motivation does not come from guilt. It does not come from being ashamed about your privilege. It does not come from wanting to prove yourself to be a good person. It does not come from any of those motivations that I went over last time.

A primal form of love is gratitude. That might be how we learn love - as babies in abject helplessness, when we are given what we need with no thought of return. Gratitude is the intake of love and generosity is its expression. Gratitude cannot be forced. It cannot be "shoulded." I think that by making children say thank you all the time we actually cut them off from gratitude by converting thankfulness into an empty social gesture. Gratitude is already in there somewhere. It is aboriginal to our humanness. It cannot be forced but it can be awakened and nourished.

So before we move on to some more of the practices and pitfalls of gift economy, in the next session we will go more deeply into gratitude, the primal wellhead of love.

The love of what we create and the love of whom we serve, these are the central motivations for living in the gift. They are not a substitute for the skills and practices I'll talk to you about, but they are a prerequisite for making these work.

What do I love? If the bounds of love reach no further than yourself and your family, then the normal economy will work just fine for you. As those bounds expand, the normal economy may no longer meet the needs of your service to The Beloved.

The seed question for this session then is, "what do I love?" Ask again and again, whenever it occurs to you. The object of your love may shift moment to moment so ask it often. Don't take notes; don't write it down. It will be recorded automatically on your inner notebook.

What do I love?

What do I love right now?

What do I love?