

More blessed to give

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [June 20, 2001](#) issue

Some time ago a family paid us a visit. Robert, as I will call a little boy who came along, was about our son's age, and neither of them had yet mastered the art of sharing. But Robert was now on Nathanael's territory. Nathanael's toys were scattered all around, and it was his responsibility to share. He did well for a while, but when he saw Robert reaching for his lawn mower, his virtuousness came to an abrupt end. He screamed and charged toward Robert to take the precious object from his hands. After intervening to end the pulling and tugging, I was just about to deliver another mini-lesson about sharing when Robert's mother beat me to it. "Nathanael," she said, "Robert was just trying to mow your lawn for you, so you don't have to do the work yourself!"

A clever and seemingly innocent remark—but I did not like it at all. Generally, I don't mind other people helping raise my child. No, I did not dislike the fact that she said something. But I objected to what she said. I wanted to shout, "Don't listen to her, my son. Tell her not to manipulate you. Tell her, 'Don't package your son's interest as my good! And don't transmute my generosity into selfishness!'" But of course I didn't say these things.

For some time now I've been troubled by the way we in contemporary societies—especially in America—motivate each other to virtuous behavior. We allow the market to shape a good deal of our everyday encounters. The market operates on the principle of exchange between self-interested parties. A company wants to sell us a product. To do so, it does not tell us, "If you get this cell phone, you'll do us a favor—we won't go out of business and our profits will increase."

Instead, a company will tell us something like this (though in different words): "This cool Nokia phone is exactly what you need. It is small, user-friendly, and has all the features you want. You'll benefit from having it." We object when companies misrepresent the benefits of their products; we may also object when they seek to create new wants by persuading us with the subtlety of a good seduction that we really cannot live without what a company wants to sell us. But on the whole, we think that it is appropriate for companies to appeal to our self-interest as they

pursue their own self-interest. After all, when I give out my own money I ought to get something I am interested in getting. Similarly, if I am parting with the good I have produced, I ought to get something in return.

So it is in commercial transactions, which operate on the principle of exchange. I may, of course, choose simply to give my money away. Or a company may choose to donate its products. But when this happens, we have exited the domain of economic exchange and have entered the domain of gift giving. If I see things rightly, in contemporary societies the domain of economic exchanges is increasingly encroaching upon the domain of gift giving. Not that gift giving was ever easy. Some would even argue—not completely persuasively, I think—that it is impossible. Jesus had to instruct his disciples not to transmute what is to be a gift into an exchange of commodities. In relation to the gift of hospitality he said:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12-14).

At its best, hospitality belongs not to the domain of exchange but to the domain of gift giving. We ought not expect to get as much (or more) out of the invitation as we put in. Every time exchange threatens to subvert what ought to be a gift, we should offer resistance. That is where learning to share a toy with a guest comes in.

Notice how deeply at odds the words of Robert's mother were with what she was trying to do—to help Nathanael learn how to share. First she construed what was clearly and exclusively in Robert's interest as *the good Robert was doing to Nathanael*. This was a manifest misrepresentation. A pattern of such misrepresentations would have the effect of making Nathanael wonder whether people actually do good to one another rather than pursuing their own self-interests under the guise of gift giving.

Second, she construed the good she wanted Nathanael to do for Robert as *the good Nathanael was doing for himself*. In effect, she was robbing Nathanael of the opportunity to give Robert a gift and therefore truly to share. Tomorrow he might think to himself, "Why should I do for others what is clearly not in my own interest if my magnanimity will be interpreted as selfishness?"

It may be hard to teach our children and motivate ourselves to give to others without appealing to our self-interest. But something of our human and Christian dignity depends on whether we succeed or not. It is still more blessed to give than to receive.