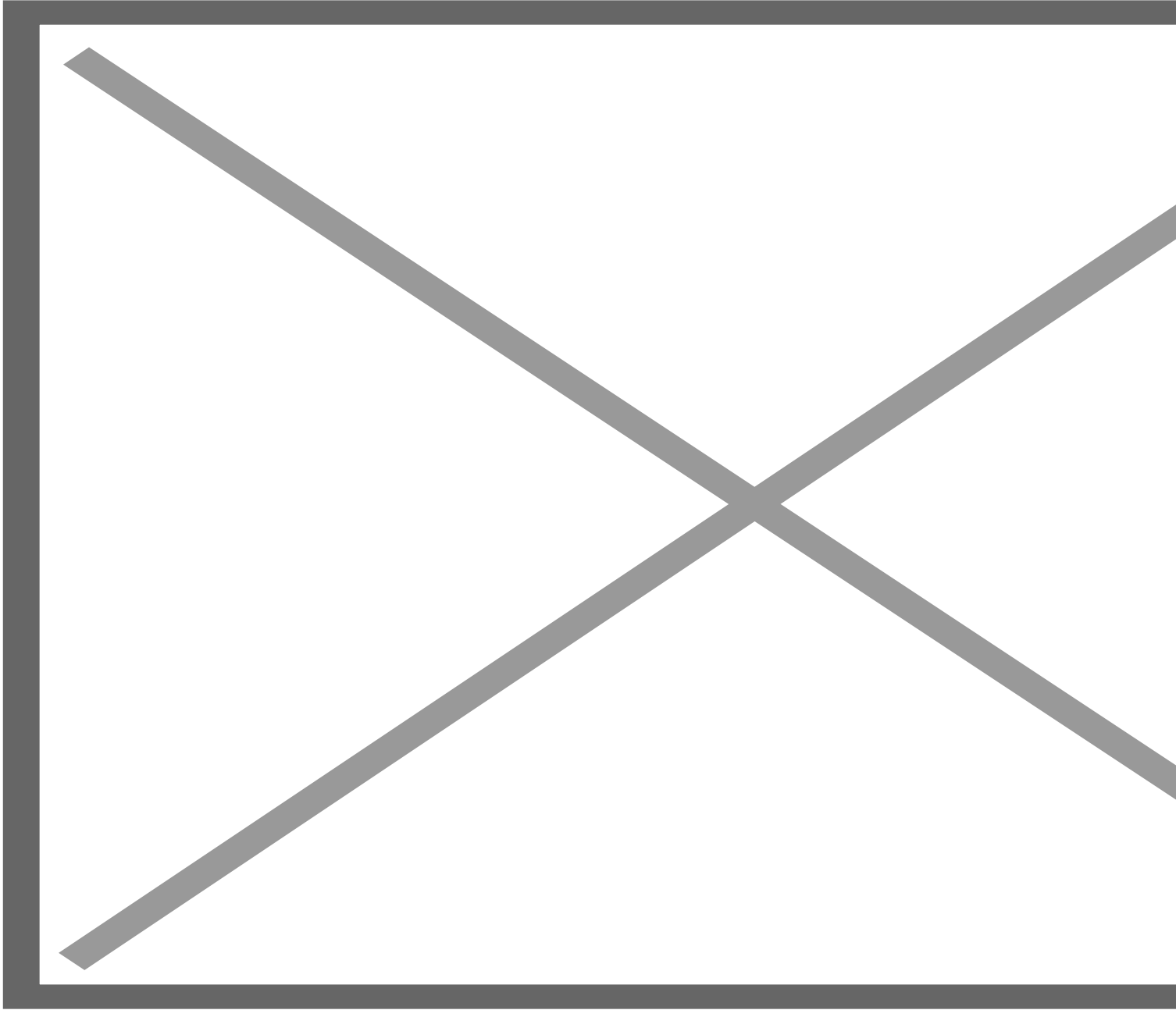


From shame to gift

Humans have a special talent for screwing things up. I think acknowledging this offers liberation.

by [Rachel Mann](#)
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The Trojan horse in Christopher Nolan's adaptation of *The Odyssey* (Photo © Melissa Sue Gordon / Universal Pictures)

Near the end of Christopher Nolan's stunning, if imperfect, movie adaptation of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus makes a speech that completely unpicked me. He tells Penelope about how, after ten years of siege, the Greeks turned a gift to the Trojans—the famous horse—into a means of terror and destruction. He says, “We left them a gift, an offering of peace, that they took into their home. We violated all that is ever sacred between people.” The gift, a signal of friendship, mutual recognition, and hospitality, is used as a means of violence and betrayal. From this violation Odysseus sees a poison spreading across the Greek world, which will ultimately destroy well-established notions of home and relationship.

Why did that speech compel me? Well, partly because I'm a sucker for a big oration, an epic metaphysical take, that seems to reach out from the screen and speak into the present moment. I, like many, feel that something has gone terribly wrong with our world and we've screwed up pretty badly. Odysseus's speech invites me to ask, What is the cause of our malaise? Though perhaps, really, the speech grabbed my attention simply because the idea of gift has been so crucial both for my faith and for my intellectual formation.

Gifts, as Odysseus reminds us, are typically something exchanged between people or peoples; they are tokens of good will, friendship, and love, designed to build up rather than tear down. The best gifts are freely given, with no strings attached. That is the theory, though the philosopher Jacques Derrida argued that there is no such thing as a “clean” gift exchange: It always generates a debt, not least because both parties are aware that what is shared is indeed meant to be a gift. For Derrida, if the exchange is truly to be a gift, the giver would have to be unaware that she is giving it, and the receiver would need to be unaware of the giver's identity. Anonymity at every point would be required (which rather removes the pleasure of gift-giving). Of course, what makes the Trojan horse especially horrifying is that it masquerades as gift when it is pure trickery.

The meaning of gift is not limited to an exchange of goods. It has a wider meaning that relates to character and ability, whether these be innate or developed. We say an individual is *gifted*. Odysseus, for example, has a gift for trickery. But where I think this talk of gifts becomes especially interesting is when we talk about how we—as a species—are gifted. Human beings clearly are distinctive. We are high-caliber problem solvers and next-level tool users. We have a talent for lying and trickery. Odysseus is surely the archetype.

However, Christian faith makes, for me, the best pitch for our defining gift: messing things up. It is our genius. Some have characterized this gift as original sin. I prefer to see it as a talent for screwing up.

What happens if we lean into the idea that the specific human gift is to screw up? I think it offers liberation. It certainly lets me embrace something I know, at a bone-deep level, to be true: that I am a person of unclean hands and lips. Sure, I want to live and act for the good, but I do not hold within me the resources to achieve it. I have not committed the grossest crimes, and I trust that I'm never likely to. In simple terms, I might claim that I am a good person. However, I am compromised and limited. I may be made in the image of God, but to grow into the likeness of Christ often seems impossible to me. I am definitely not good, and change seems a lifetime's work. I take one step forward and two back.

And this personal gift for messing up is merely a token of our species' gift for getting it wrong. Only a fool could fail to recognize that the whole of creation is compromised and on a knife's edge. Our species' place within it more often has the character of an ecology of exploitation, greed, and failure rather than an ecology of grace. In the face of our serial failures to act for the good, we offer up our hope, our anxiety, our prayers.

It is tempting to read our capacity for failure, foolishness, and damage through the scope of shame, to have a massive downer on ourselves. Yet I don't believe this is necessary or inevitable. It is possible to place our gift for screwing up in the ecology of God's grace. As I consider honestly who and what we are in a precarious world, I think we might yet appreciate our own creatureliness. It offers an invitation to meet God's abundance

with our joy and delight and with the promise of real liberation.

This shift from shame to gift might seem of minimal significance, but I think not. If we accept—as I think we should—that the God-Who-Saves comes to us as abundant gift, not holding back but emptying herself into the fragility of human existence in Jesus Christ, then the way in which we dare to greet her is significant.

I'm not suggesting that the work of redemption is conditioned on our attitude or disposition. God's work is God's work. Salvation is gift, regardless of our reception of it. Christ redeems.

However, the shape, form, and content of the gift is ultimately an invitation into full and joyous relationship with the living God. And this is a living, embodied, and dynamic matter, not an intellectual schema. It requires the whole of our embodiment, in all its particularity. How we—individually and communally—greet God's invitation represents a potent way to model the gift of holiness in a precarious world. When we, unlike Nolan's Odysseus, are able to do this, I don't think the poison will win.