

## The Gift

"Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

-- Wordsworth

I

A few days ago I gave my son an extravagant gift. It ended badly -- for reasons I might have foreseen if I'd taken the time to think it through. But I didn't. I was in a hurry, operating under the influence of an impulsive (though not uncharacteristic) generosity that seemed to brook no delay. But I think it was more than generosity. The item in question had wormed its way into my brain, where it would not be dislodged by more practical considerations. Though practical considerations have never held much sway over me - especially when I get a brain worm of the kind we are talking about here.

And just what kind of brain worm are we talking about? It was a toy - an elegant, ridiculously expensive, shiny metal desk toy. Toys, actually - 16 of them. 16 spinning tops, plus docks and base, with a keychain thrown in for good measure. The tops were streamlined and precision-milled, and came in a range of different metals: stainless steel, Damascus steel, cast iron, aluminum, copper, brass,

bronze, black zirconium, titanium, magnesium, nickel. Not to mention silver and gold (both yellow and rose). Tungsten, too. Let us not forget the tungsten - heaviest, by far, of all the featured metals. And the heftiest. Heft was a major factor in the purchase. By "heft" I mean not only weight, but also compactness, density and general feel in the hand (or what I imagined, from the tops' sleek online photographs, would be their feel in the hand). All of these properties combined to form a package that was irresistible to me, causing the sumptuary worm to burrow deep inside my brain, not to be dislodged. Heft is a hard thing to ignore - impossible, apparently, for me - let alone fight against; though I cannot pretend to have put up much of a fight. The heft of a "complete" set of these spinning tops, each one of a different metal, was just too much for me, and after a few mesmerized click-throughs, I succumbed. The deed was done - to the tune of almost a grand.

What a patsy! What a tool! What a mark!

The advertised "completeness" of the set was a major factor in their purchase. As soon as I saw the photos - five tops to a dock, three docks in all, plus one "extra" top - the tungsten - I knew that anything less than the full complement would be unacceptable. This is an

interesting phenomenon, actually, and worthy of further attention.

What is it about a "complete set" that is so appealing - nay, irresistible - to the imagination? One feels compelled to be in possession of a totality. And if that totality is composed of separate parts that are individually "nifty" -- that is to say, if they are intricate, well-made, well-ordered, compact - then so much the better. For me, books are a particularly good example of the appeal of sets. I am a total sucker for a multi-volume scholarly series - be it an extended literary biography, a "collected works of...", a history (such as the five-volume Folio Society history of the Middle Ages, in alternating cloth covers of red and green, that my son gave me a few years ago, for Christmas or my birthday, I forget which), or even just a "collected letters of...". The contemplation of a complete set of books - with all the pertinent scholarly apparatus, including footnotes, bibliography, and index - has an almost unbearable heft for me. The idea of the completeness, or at least the definitiveness, of a set of books gives me a flutter of uncontainable excitement in the region of the solar plexus. And if I happen to see such a set that seriously interests me, this flutter can only be assuaged by buying it.

But the desire for the possession of a complete set is not limited to books. (Though books are perhaps its most defensible manifestation, because the possession of knowledge - which I realize is a contradiction in terms, since knowledge is something that can only be shared, not possessed - is after all something edifying, and therefore totally unobjectionable, as opposed say to the possession of money, or other material things, or power). As a child, I was strongly allured by complete sets of crayons (back in the day, Crayola's 72-pack was irresistible; I particular craved the silver, copper and gold; surprise!), pastels and watercolors. Never mind that I had - and continue to have - absolutely no artistic talent, as far as drawing or painting is concerned; the point was always just the possession of the thing, and the contemplation of the thing, and the contemplation of the possession of the thing, and the looking forward to coming home and finding the thing waiting there for me, ready to be contemplated all over again. (The desire to possess the thing was itself bad enough; but the desire to contemplate the possession of the thing - even when I already possessed it! - was really what got me going. In this way, the best was not to actually have the thing yet, but to be looking forward to getting it. Second best was not so much to have

it as to know I had it, to bask in that knowledge, and to look forward to coming home from school to contemplate having it. Actually having it in my possession and playing with it was a distant third. The reality of actual possession could never compete with the anticipation of possession.)

No doubt this freight of childhood associations was in operation with the tops as well - and my succumbing made all the easier by the fact that the purchase was a gift. To my son, yet - my only child -- who'd passed the California Bar Exam and then gotten a job at a medium-sized firm in L.A. I was so uncontainably proud of him, and for him, and it seemed the perfect gift for a young lawyer at his first job: a tabletop "executive toy" of bright, shiny metal tops, smooth, streamlined and precision-milled (those selling points, skillfully exploited by the manufacturers, were a key recurring theme of the burrowing worm), that could be set spinning on a low-friction, matte-black base. Ah, the irresistible heft of it all! Playthings built to beckon, and to please. To tantalize and burrow deep. To dominate the susceptible imagination until the whole thing issued in a veritable orgasm of disbursement. How could I ever restrain myself? For the extravagant indulgence, after all, was not for myself - it was for my son. My only

son, in whom I was well pleased. That made all the difference. A lavish gift to someone you love is, after all, a work of generosity; and a work of generosity can never be a mistake, can it?

Well, in matters of generosity, I have come to learn -- and partly through the very debacle I am recounting here -- that it all depends on which end you're on. The giving end is fine (though it has its own perils, as we will see); but to be on the receiving end of someone else's lavishness can be a problem. I found this out on the night of the day Zack received the package.

I'd sent it to his work address, for a couple of reasons. First, the security at his home building wasn't so great -- some residents' packages had recently been stolen, so he told me to send any important mail to his office. Though I would have done that anyway, since (second) I could so clearly picture him, in my mind's eye, having this classic "executive toy" on his desk at work. But for Zack himself, the set of tops turned out to be a source of embarrassment, shame and dismay - something to be hidden away, not displayed. Never displayed. God forbid. How could I have gotten it so wrong?

Some family background is in order here. I seem to have inherited my penchant for excessive giving from my

father, a champion of over-the-top shopping and presenting. My father grew up rich in Manhattan, and for many years was a successful screenwriter, so in his life he'd had ample means to indulge his extreme sumptuary proclivities. He was never one to deny himself, or others. He favored double-legged panty hose stockings at Christmas, and a fulsome panoply of presents under the tree. Never mind that he was a Jew; Christmas presented a much greater occasion for gift-giving than Hanukkah, an inherently more modest (i.e., Jewish) holiday, even with its eight nights; and he milked Christmas for all it was worth. Which is not exactly to say he ignored Hanukkah, either; it was just that the Hanukkah presents tended to be more in the way of novelties. Early stocking presents, if you will; they provided a warm-up to the main event.

After Zack arrived on the scene, my father experienced a revival of his gift-giving genius. (I am using the word here in its Classical sense of a resident local deity or spirit, as in genius loci - the "spirit of the place".) His presents to his only grandchild included, one year, a puppet theater, complete with a rainbow-painted old steamer trunk stuffed with hand puppets - many of them of the two-in-one, reversible variety (frog turns inside-out into prince, complete with crown; caterpillar turns into

butterfly; Old Mother Hubbard turns into shoe); and, some years later, a full-size conga drum, which Zack had admired on a visit to Sam Ash Music, but which, once Gramps had presented it to him, he hardly touched again.

Can you spell "spoiled child"? When I was growing up (also as an only child), this label was the monkey on my back - especially at Christmas- and birthday-time. I was well aware that I received too many presents, and this awareness weighed on me. And when friends, and sometimes grownups, applied the epithet, the burden of it - which is to say, the shame and guilt - became even heavier. When I went to my mother for relief - and it was always to my mother that I went in these matters, never my father (that would have been like asking Maecenas to just cut it out!) - she would always reassure me that to be "spoiled" was a question of attitude, not possessions; and since I didn't have a "spoiled attitude", I could never be a "spoiled child". But much as I wanted to believe her, I was never fully convinced by this reasoning. The fact that some people saw me as a spoiled child was damning enough. It would be going too far to say that I came to dread Christmas and my birthday; but all the gifts on those occasions - and sometimes, no occasions -- became slightly tainted with the poison of the "Spoiled Child Syndrome".



In my plenty there co-existed a kind of dearth - a dearth of the proper spirit of gift-getting, if you will. The pleasure of receiving presents was tinged with a little bit of pain as well, or at least a palpable discomfort: the discomfort of knowing I had too much. It was the mild nausea of surfeit.

I cannot speak for Zack here, but I can pretty well gauge his feelings, judging from his text to me after I'd messaged him to find out if he'd gotten a package at work. He replied, "It was a lovely gift about which I have a lot of feelings." My antennae immediately went up; I sensed he was being tactful. Upon further discussion, it transpired that the gift of the 16 tops was painful to him, for some of the same reasons that my father's extravagant gifts had been painful to me (and, I later learned, to Zack as well, when he mentioned the conga drum).

In money matters, my son is both more practical and more frugal than I am. He enjoys saving money. He gets more pleasure out of a good deal than I do. And he is much more cognizant than I of the practical purposes to which money saved can be put. This latter point was in evidence in our exchanges - both text and phone - the day after. Because the company that makes the tops is based in Canada, and the package was shipped from there, it had to contain a

customs declaration, which stated the value (purchase price) of the merchandise. That was how Zack found out his present cost nearly a thousand dollars.

"My pockets have holes in them," he told me. "I could have used the money you spent to buy new pants."

My parental guilt - guilt of a different sort now - kicked in when I heard this. "Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Because that's not the point," he replied. "The point is, if I'd known you were going to spend that much on tops, I would have asked you for money for pants instead. Or even a few more plants." (His plants are his only office decoration, and he loves taking care of them.)

"But you're making good money as a lawyer, aren't you? Can't you afford to buy new pants - or plants, for that matter?"

"Yeah, but I have student loans to pay. Remember? But I'm not asking you for money. I'm just asking you not to waste it."

We talked a little bit more about the plants, and then he had to get back to work. He texted me later: "I am sorry to scold you, I just know you also wouldn't want me to not say something."

I wrote back, curtly, "That is true." But I was hurt, and said nothing more for a while. I found out after that he'd already called the company to see if they could refund the money if he returned the merchandise, but they couldn't, or wouldn't. The damage was done. A gift intended to bring pleasure had brought pain instead. Nothing irreparable - but it hadn't worked out as I'd hoped. Given both of our histories, I should have known better. And the thing is, I did know better - I just failed to act on that knowledge. I actually acted against it. Why?

I came to see that it was a case of the sins of the father being visited upon the son - and I was the middle man in this pickle, receiver and giver both. Zack was right about it being a waste, too. Not so much a waste of money - I cannot help not caring so much about the money (in this way I am much more my father's son than my son's father) - as a waste, or at least a misdirection, of good will. And all based on an unworthy object. A thing. An obscenely expensive, practically useless material thing. A rich person's toy. And neither of us was rich.

They say you should give the gift you yourself would like to receive - that's the proper spirit of gift-giving. And it's even possible that's what I did - though in a more

selfish (and even sort of perverted) sense. For I failed to take into account what the recipient himself would have liked to receive, and gave instead the thing that had burrowed its way into my own brain. What Zack would have liked to get was what he needed: new pants, or the money for new pants. (Or more plants.) I didn't know that, because he hadn't told me beforehand - but I could have asked him what he wanted, or what he needed. Of course, that would have ruined the surprise; but the surprise turned out to be a Trojan Horse. It would have been better if it had been ruined before it was sprung. Not that my intentions weren't good; but the good intentions were countervailed by the wrong values - the attraction to bright, shiny things.

But that's really not so bad, in and of itself. We're all attracted to bright, shiny things. It's the need to possess those things that's wrong -- that's an instance of the wrong values. And the belief that my son also needed to possess them - it's that belief, that need, and my acting on them, that are fucked up.

Because the possession of material things can never satisfy. We think it can, and we also act on that belief - we hunger, we buy, we consume - and are inevitably left wanting more. And feeling empty, too. (The two feelings

are basically the same.) Which makes us feel even worse than before. Ah yes: the emptiness of the consumer society -- and of the consumer. Sociologists and psychologists and Buddhist teachers (Chogyam Trungpa, Pema Chödrön) have accounted for this phenomenon much better than I. I can only register it on my pulses - "Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart", as Wordsworth says (in a very different context). It's the insatiability of the materialistic mindset - Wordsworth's "getting and spending" - that is most bedevilling. It's a kind of consumer's bulimia -- binge and purge. Hunger, and gorge, and then vomit it up. The vomiting, in this case, comes in the form of the dissatisfaction and unease, the feeling of emptiness, that follows a significant buy. The more extravagant the purchase, the stronger the metaphorical nausea and vomiting, and the more pronounced the very real feeling of emptiness.

## II

I write today from inside that feeling. I have just bought a brand new car, and am caught up once again in the spirit of sumptuary frenzy. It's a Toyota Prius Three Touring car (fourth generation), with all the bells and whistles: faux-leather seats (so I don't have to feel guilty, whatever

else I fell guilty about, about the killing of any animals), two-tone interior (black and white; very nifty), totally digital instrumentation, "Sea Glass Pearl" exterior -- the whole package an epitome of niftiness. You might say it's my gift to myself. Having just given a lavish gift to my son, I have immediately turned around and gifted myself much more lavishly - about 30 times more lavishly, to tell you the truth. I feel excited, expectant, eager to possess my new car (and yet I know this eagerness to possess the thing will prove more pleasurable than the possession itself, once I actually have it); also guilty, hollow, and slightly nauseous. All those things, at the same time. I feel, on the negative end, sort of like I do when I continue to eat when I'm not hungry. The Buddhists have a term, "the hungry ghost," that describes pretty well how I feel. I'm reminded of a story Zack once told me about his cat up at school, who chased a lizard, caught it, ate it, and then immediately vomited it up. That story horrified me. The utterly pointless, gratuitous death of the lizard horrified me. The actions of the cat horrified me. And I feel sort of like the cat.

But just sort of. Because the analogy, in at least one sense, really doesn't track at all. In my buying of the tops for my son, and the new car for myself, nobody was

killed. Nobody was even hurt. The salesman of the car I ended up not buying (a Kia Optima hybrid) was disappointed, but he handled it well - with dignity, grace and generosity of spirit -- and we ended up having a really good phone conversation, in which I told him I felt bad about disappointing him, and he assured me I shouldn't feel bad, because he didn't. He told me he was glad I'd gotten the car I really wanted. I know he was being sincere, and I hung up feeling good about the way we'd both handled ourselves. So why do I still feel like the cat that vomited up the lizard?

I think it's because I feel slightly sick - sick with buying - with continuing to buy -- the bright and shiny things that can never satisfy, and that are indigestible to the stomach of my soul. And Zack too, I know, feels slightly sick in receiving these things - the things he never wanted or needed or asked for, that were just a conceit (in the sense of a foolish or misbegotten idea) of the cat in me - the hunter-consumer, pursuing his prey. But with the cat, it was just his animal instinct that drove him to hunt, kill and eat. (Albeit an instinct unsupported by the realities of his digestive tract.) With me, it was learned behavior - learned young, at my father's

knee, so to speak, and practiced over a lifetime, including on my own son.

But there is another sense in which the analogy doesn't track either, because in the second case - the case of the car -- I wasn't playing the game I thought I was playing. I wasn't really after the lizard at all. That is to say, it wasn't the bright and shiny thing - the car - that I wanted at all. It was something else. Or rather, I wanted the car - the Prius - and I got it. But it wasn't the car in the end that satisfied (as it never could have been). It was the interaction with the Kia salesman, Antonio -- whose car (an Optima sedan) I ended up not buying -- that made me feel good, like I'd done the right thing. It had nothing to do with the car I bought or didn't buy, and everything to do with the person I didn't buy it from.

After test-driving both cars - the Prius and the Optima - a couple of times each, I told the salesman I'd sleep on it, and make the final decision in the morning. Both cars possessed the requisite heft and niftiness - though the Kia was literally heavier, a sedan with a larger engine, more power, and a much better warranty. But it was the Prius, with its totally digital display in the center of the dashboard, its panoply of cockpit-like controls, its



two-tone, faux-leather interior, and its Sea Glass Pearl exterior, that was the brighter and shinier object. The more complete package, you could say. So it was the Prius I chose the next day.

But before I went back to the Toyota showroom to actually buy the Prius, Antonio, the Kia salesman, called to ask if I'd made a decision. I told him I was going to buy the Prius. He accepted this gracefully, didn't ask any more questions, and wished me pleasure in my purchase.

But this didn't quite sit well with me. I called Antonio back and left a rather long and rambling message, telling him how much I appreciated the work he'd done, all the effort he'd put in trying to sell me the Optima - which in some ways, I recognized, was the better car: bigger engine, more power, and a much better warranty - and confessing that although I knew I'd made the right decision in the end, I still felt bad he hadn't gotten the sale. He texted me back right away, thanking me for my call. I called him again, and then we had our friendly conversation, which went on for about ten minutes. In this conversation, it seemed necessary for me to explain to Antonio, as fully as I could, the rather complicated state of my mind and feelings on the matter. I was aware of the whole thing being slightly ridiculous, even as I

perseverated in my praise of him and his product, and my sincere regret that it wasn't him I'd finally given my business to. I mentioned my constitutional preference, ever since childhood, for the underdog. He took polite exception to this because -- of course -- as a Kia salesman he didn't think Kia was the underdog. But what pleased me most about our conversation was when he said that he especially appreciated my call because most people, in his experience, wouldn't have made the call at all. I basked in his observation. It allowed me to feel both sensitive and superior - sensitive to his feelings, and superior to all the other buyers who hadn't made the call. I hung up with Antonio feeling doubly vindicated: I'd done the right thing morally in caring about his feelings, and acting on my impulse to call him, but I'd also done the right thing sumptuarily in choosing the car I really wanted.

Of course it seems absurd even to suggest that I could have ended up, out of some perverse sense of moral obligation, buying the car I didn't really want - the Optima - but I really did briefly consider this option, if only half-seriously. My reasoning was something along the lines that it would have been a show of support - of real, cold-cash support - for the underdog, as well as a gesture of opposition to, and even rejection of, my susceptibility

to self-gratification through the possession of bright and shiny things (which the Prius was most definitely a niftier example of).

All of which is probably just an exhibition of my moral vanity - my wish for my actions and motivations to appear morally superior to others', especially since I am so conscious also of my consumerism and materialism - my patsydom, my tooldom, and my markdom. My conversation with Antonio was a way for me to have my cake and eat it too - to satisfy my sumptuary desires, while at the same time telling myself (and having someone else tell me, too) that I was a good guy: a sensitive, considerate, and ethically righteous person.

Vanity, vanity - all is vanity. Well no, not quite. Not all is vanity. For example, the plants in Zack's office. They are not vanity. As I mentioned before, he has several already, and wants - as he told me in our earlier conversation - to acquire more. Though perhaps "acquire" is not quite the right word. Or perhaps it is. Perhaps it is exactly the right word. Because acquiring plants is not the same thing as acquiring a complete set of spinning tops of different metals, or a Prius Three Touring car - or even acquiring a reputation as a good guy. For to acquire a plant is to take on responsibility for a living

thing. Responsibility to keep a living thing alive, and help it grow and flourish. And not just responsibility, but pleasure. And love. Zack takes pleasure in his plants, and he loves them. He cares for them, he takes pleasure in them, and he loves them. This came out clearly in the earlier conversation we had. He told me that on a walk he'd found an aloe flower - or what he thought was an aloe flower - and taken some seeds from the flower and planted them in a pot. They didn't sprout, but he didn't seem too upset about this. And that's not the point, anyway. What struck me then, and even more later, thinking about it, was just the way he talked about the plants. With affection, and pride. And love. They matter to him. He takes pleasure in them. He likes taking care of them. And, in a sense, he loves them. I'm touched to see that he is, in this regard, his grandmother's grandson, and not his grandfather's. My mother raised orchids, and spent some of her finest hours in the greenhouse and garden, taking care of her plants. Zack's budding green thumb would have pleased her, and made her happy, just as it now makes me happy. He can make things grow, and this pleases him - much more than the gift of horribly expensive metal tops (which hadn't actually pleased him at all; quite the opposite). The pleasures that cost nothing, and that we

love, are the best - the truest and deepest. Thinking back on our earlier conversation, I saw clearly what had been staring me in the face all along, and should have been obvious - and would have been, if (once again) I'd been paying attention. The present I should have given him was a plant - or, better yet, a cutting, taken from a friend's garden. That would have been the best. We ought only to give what cannot be bought. We ought only to give love. And the real gift, in all of this, is having a son who cares more about the plants in his office than a complete set of spinning tops.