

The Mindful Life

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MINDing theMIND

Who Gets a Holiday Gift?

As we enter the holiday season, it's time to construct our annual gift lists. How many people are on your list simply out of obligation? They may be family or acquaintances with whom you are familiar enough to feel obligated to exchange gifts, even though perhaps you'd prefer not to. Others may have made it on the "obligation" list simply because at some point they gave you gifts, starting a "tradition" of gift exchange that now feels obligatory. How did that happen?

Most of us tend to follow the reciprocity norm, or the unspoken rule that if I do something nice for you, you should do something nice in return. So, once we receive a holiday gift, automatically we feel obliged to return the favor. Adding to the problem is the sense that these obligatory gifts are often the most difficult to select. For one, we may resent feeling pressured to do so. Also, these are the people in our social circles about whom we tend to know the least. The result is that we often end up giving generic gifts, such as gift certificates or gift cards, or trying a slight variation on a gift that seemed to elicit a positive response in the past.

What else can we do? The obvious choice is to simply grit our teeth and continue the tradition. A more radical idea is to bite the bullet and graciously receive the unnecessary gifts without giving gifts in return. Ideally we would receive the unexpected gifts appreciatively, without explanation as to why a gift is not being given in return. Each of the gift givers then has a decision to make; to either continue giving us gifts even though we don't return the favor, or quit giving us gifts. If they choose the former, they must actually feel good giving gifts, so who are we to deprive them of this pleasure? If they choose not to give us gifts any longer, problem solved. The difficulty is in coping with the social discomfort involved in bucking social norms. If you decide to give it a try, perhaps starting with the person on your obligatory section of the gift list about whom you care the least. If all goes well, you might find yourself branching out until eventually your list includes only those for whom you genuinely want to give gifts.

MIND Morsels

Charm is the ability to be truly interested in other people.

— Richard Avedon

It's relatively rare to encounter someone who is genuinely interested in what we think, feel, or have experienced. Perhaps it's obvious why people seem to focus more easily on themselves than on others. Sometimes this is most apparent when we overhear conversations, because then we can observe without being distracted by having to participate in them. Then it may really stand out that many people use conversations to turn the attention toward themselves. For example, one person says, "You won't believe what happened to me today," and then follows with a description of some particular misfortune. The "listener" responds with, "You think that's bad; let me tell you what happened to me." So, when someone is genuinely interested in us, it can feel like a breath of fresh air. The person who provides that genuine interest may seem quite charming indeed. Notice what happens when you truly focus on the other person.

Even monkeys fall out of trees.

— Japanese Proverb

When we consciously think about it, we know that everything and everyone is imperfect. Still, when we aren't consciously thinking about it, we may sometimes assume that there are exceptions to the imperfection norm. That unanalyzed assumption, lurking quietly in the background, can lead us to be more critical of others, and of ourselves, than is justified. Even those people who seem to do certain things really well "naturally" don't do so every time. Perhaps it would be useful to remember: even monkeys fall out of trees.

*As long as we have some definite idea about or some hope in the future,
we cannot really be serious with the moment that exists right now.*

— Suzuki Roshi

At the heart of mindfulness as practiced in some eastern cultures is the idea of living in the present moment. That's especially difficult in western cultures in which we're frequently encouraged to focus on the future. To do so, however, implies that the future is more important than the present. If we foresee a positive future, the present is something to wait through on our way to a better place. If the future looks bleak, the present is spent preparing, worrying, or dreading. Of course the future never really does "arrive" because by that time there is another future to think about. When does it stop?