

# Receiving Gifts

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## **Empaths and the importance of receiving**

Recently I was captivated by an idea that I came across in Anita Moorjani's book *Sensitive is the New Strong*.<sup>1</sup> In this book she writes that empaths – empathic persons, a category of people to which she also includes herself – are often too much pre-occupied with one-sided giving to others. Due to this one-sided giving, they eventually become exhausted, and it is therefore not surprising that get a burn-out. That's why she says it's very important to first learn *to receive* – and start by receiving everything that life itself is offering us and being grateful for it. This of course concerns the gift of your own body, but also all the life around you in which you are embedded, nature and also the cultural wealth that has been handed down through the generations. This means that you should not take everything for granted as the 'givens' that are just there, but actually become aware that at some point these have really been given to you, and that this giving is also an ongoing process that has never stopped. From the deep sense of gratitude that has come from consciously receiving all gifts, you are then driven to give to others – materially in the form of things, food and money; but more important is the immaterial side of giving: giving attention, compassion, help, etc., without immediately expecting anything in return. Your attitude to life in which giving is central therefore always starts with a response. By consciously receiving gifts, the natural principle of reciprocity is awakened in you.

But, as Moorjani argues, being open to receive also hides a danger for empaths: after all, they are already more open than other people to the world around them. In order to survive in this 'harsh world', it is therefore also important for them that they can close themselves off in time when too many or 'undesirable' impressions come in – that they can honestly say 'no' to something without feeling guilty about it. In addition, they must also learn to consciously regulate their openness to receiving, attuned to the circumstances in which they find themselves. This does not alter the fact

that Moorjani's emphasis on the importance of being able to receive as a basis for gift-giving has a very important meaning for Western society as a whole: we all do well to develop the art of receiving, and make the healing power inherent in this phenomenon our own. As she also points out, it's never too late to start doing that.

### **The gift and reciprocity**

When life is said to be a matter of give and take, I think we have pretty much lost sight of the importance of the first part of it, giving. A few years ago I discovered how important the principle of gift-giving or gift-exchange really is in social relationships and in holding a society together as a whole. This was actually a rediscovery, because research by the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss – and by others who followed in his footsteps – has shown that in past societies ‘gift-exchange’ or ‘gift-giving’ usually had been central to their ‘gift economy’.<sup>2</sup> In the rise to our modern form of society, it seems we had increasingly forgotten that reciprocity is an inseparable part of people living together – that if you give something to someone else, even without expecting anything in return, that gift will nevertheless always be returned to you at a given moment. More and more we seemed to have lost the mutual trust associated with this, giving way to a distrustful attitude to life – and created a multitude of state institutions and organizations to ensure that this mutual mistrust was kept within acceptable limits.<sup>3</sup>

Although at the same time I had become deeply convinced that the principle of gift-giving actually manifests itself everywhere and always, in both immaterial and material form, and that our own body and individual life can in fact be regarded as the most primary gift, I had not been sufficiently aware of the fact that gifts are not only to be given, but that the process begins with receiving what is given to us. Moorjani made me realize that we only know what a gift means when we have received it in full. And the great thing is that we can start receiving this right away, in our own lives, no matter how old we are. Even if we have lived in a body for decades, have move around in an incredibly rich environment, it is quite possible that we have not realized all this time what kind of wonderful things we have been given. And only when we have been able to receive them, do we know what it is to be grateful. I don't think I've ever realized

that enough myself. In this regard, life is an ongoing learning process, from beginning to end.

### **Being open, receptive and grateful**

It is clear that you cannot receive anything if you do not *open up* first. Receptivity presupposes openness. That openness is already there, because it forms the basis of who we are. We are all born as open beings. The American cell biologist Bruce Lipton has shown that openness is the default position of the membrane of any cell, allowing the growth process, and that closing this cell membrane immediately stops growth and all energy is devoted to the fight-or-flight response. The shutdown and the associated fight-or-flight response also makes sense, of course, because not all environmental influences are beneficial. But this option to close off is really meant for exceptional situations. In principle, the cell membrane is always open, unless danger threatens.

Now the threat of danger, imagined or not, and the corresponding fight-or-flight response has unfortunately come to the fore in today's Western world. For many people on a mental level, the uneducated ego, responsible for a sense of separation, has become central to their experience of identity. This has had an impact down to the cellular level, where growth is blocked for longer periods. Lipton has argued that the functioning of the cell has meaning for our entire organism, because it is essentially a community in which trillions of cells work together. He has emphasized in this regard that when we open up as human beings, we invite and enable growth within ourselves – not only biologically, but also psychologically and spiritually. On the other hand, when we close ourselves off from outside influences, all our energy goes into fight-or-flight mode, and our growth in all its forms comes to a complete standstill. Then we are completely focused on defense against unwanted influences; on competition and struggle with others.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, we must not forget that, as with the cell, the closure and defense against unwanted influences via the fight-or-flight responses always remains an option. Knowing that this option exists, and learning how to consciously turn it on and off, is especially important for the extra sensitive, empathetic individuals, whose ego development has apparently been less vigorous and whose innate openness to receive life has remained on the foreground. Although they benefit from some individual ego reinforcement

to channel the overwhelming impressions from the outside world, they must be careful that this does not turn into a total shutdown from the environmental influences and the accompanying blockage of their inner growth. For them too, the closing off must remain an exception – not least because our current Western society is anxiously waiting for the input of their sensitive, empathetic attitude to life, to soften the widespread harshness, and to awaken the original openness in others.

As I mentioned above, our feeling of gratitude is closely related to our capacity to receive gifts. Simply put, we can only be grateful for something if we first realize that we have been given something very important. And yes, of course the question arises: from whom did we actually receive these gifts? The feeling of gratitude ensures that we maintain a healthy humility towards the immeasurable and mysterious life in which we are all embedded and experience a deep connection with.

### **Wonder**

From the position of innate openness and receptivity, we can approach the world with wonder – perceiving life around us and within ourselves as one great mysterious wonder. A small child does not need to be told that life is miraculous and sees its many manifestations all around him. Every detail that the child perceives can fascinate him or her. As adults, we may think we know what life is by now, but by analyzing it as objectively as possible, we first had to place ourselves outside it, to perceive it from a certain distance. We probably didn't realize that with this act we also closed off our minds to the miraculous; that with this we have – perhaps unintentionally – positioned ourselves over against the world, activating the fight-or-flight mode in us. All it takes to reconnect our minds with the wondrousness of life is to fully open it up again. But that is of course easier said than done.

Think for a moment how amazing it is that the person you currently experience as yourself once started out tiny, because of a fusion of a sperm cell and an egg in your mother's womb. What do we actually know about the growth process generated from the moment of conception and about the later process by which the fully-grown body currently maintains itself by constantly renewing itself? How wonderful is it, that although our bodies are nourished by what we eat and drink, they are in no way similar to what we eat and drink? A transformation process is taking place that was devised

by nature itself and that we do not – consciously at least – steer in the right direction. From where is the growth and renewal process directed? And what shapes our body? If the cells of the body are replaced every seven years, why do certain pimples not disappear on their own, but are these cells also renewed every time? Why are even tattoos applied artificially to the skin constantly renewed by the body? And why don't destructive cancer cells disappear in the renewal process? Are they also replaced after seven years or are they an exception? Who decides that certain hair cells are no longer renewed at a certain age and that we become as bald as a baby again?

Science itself can help us to become even more aware of the miraculous. We now know that an atom is mostly made up of space—the space between the electrons, neutrons, and protons. Therefore, according to the American naturalist Gary Ferguson, 99.99999 percent of our bodies are made up of empty space, and if you were to remove all this space, there would be so little actual mass or substance of our body that we could no longer see it.<sup>5</sup> In other words, not only when the sperm and the egg fused at conception did we begin as tiny beings – the experience of the great material body that gradually grew out of it and that we have now come to identify with, turns out to be based on an illusion. And actually, we all know very well that we mainly consist of space: our consciousness experiences itself primarily as spatial. Consciousness thus takes place in the space between the electrons, neutrons and protons. And the better we feel 'in our own skin', the more we experience balance and peace within ourselves, the more we also experience that space within ourselves. I think everyone recognizes this. In this way, the reality of quantum physics is intimately revealed to us daily.

The mystery of life reveals itself not only in our own bodies but also all around us. The parakeets in our living room stay alive and renew their cells by eating only seeds and some greens, and by drinking some water every day: somehow this little varied food, mixed with water, is transformed into the body of the parakeet with its colorful plumage. The plants in our garden are all rooted in the same dark soil, they all get the same sunlight, the same rain, the same seasonal changes, and yet this leads to completely different results. Something in every plant knows how to convert the available soil, along with the rain and sunlight, into the specific branches, leaves, flowers and fruits of the plant. The wonderful variety in plants arises from the same

natural basic elements, and is constantly renewed from that basis too. It also shows that the principle of Diversity & Inclusion is a natural principle.

### **Embedded and connected**

The innate openness goes hand in hand with being embedded in and feeling connected to the environment in which we live – a context that extends through the landscape to the whole earth and beyond. In principle, we all experience the world subjectively, from within, but at the same time inextricably linked with the environment, to which we are completely open. As soon as we have taught ourselves to observe, objectify, study and describe the world from the outside, we have placed ourselves as perceiving subject or ego against the world: the subject against the object, which already suggests a conflicting field of tension. Objective observation of the world around us doesn't come naturally: it is an artificial position, the result of a learning process, which the polish philosopher Henryk Skolimowski has called *the Yoga of Objectivity*. According to him, we are born to participate fully in life, and we naturally have *a Participatory Mind*.<sup>6</sup> But everything comes with a price: by putting ourselves in the objective position, we have surrendered our natural openness, and with it our receptivity.

The ego is an essential part of our dual nature, but it is our second nature. By identifying with it, our first nature, the nature with which we are born and in which we feel deeply connected to the surrounding world, is pushed into second place. To realize this, it must be suppressed or even completely denied by the ego. In any case, the roles are reversed. From the ego pushed to the fore, we find it normal that beyond our necessary food supply to survive, we are engaged in constant competition and struggle – first with the universe, and on the terrestrial level with the surrounding landscape, with the whole 'more-than-human world' (a term I borrowed from David Abram<sup>7</sup>), and consequentially with our fellow human beings. Even if we manage to penetrate further and further into the micro-world of the atom, or to look further and further into the macro-world of the vast cosmos, we do this primarily by first objectively distancing ourselves from it. In this way, we have brought ourselves in the artificial position to study these worlds from without and will remain studying them from without – no matter how lyrical the (materialistic) scientists involved become with their

latest insights. From the subjective, open conception of life, which is deeply present in everyone and never really disappears, we know – deep down in ourselves – that the objective, materialistic conception of life implies a certain closedness of mind: new scientific insights are only welcomed if they fit in with already accepted knowledge, and all too innovative insights are, as a rule, fiercely opposed.

### **‘Awe’ experiences**

The innate sense of being embedded in the more-than-human world has never completely left us. For the surprise that we are quite unexpectedly confronted with, the English language has come up with a nice word: *awe*. This awe refers to experiences with which we are confronted with unexpectedly, and that overwhelm us and leave us speechless. Usually this happens ‘on a large scale’, for example when a magnificent view in the landscape suddenly reveals itself to us; but it can also manifest itself ‘on a small scale’, when, for example, our eye suddenly falls on a minuscule life form – an insect, a plant – that we have never seen before. Or, it can happen when we observe a light phenomenon in the night that we cannot immediately identify. The term *awe* beautifully expresses the speechless reaction of *oohh*. It shows that the small child in us, who has not yet learned to speak and can only emit sounds of deep wonder, is still alive. Suddenly we know again that we are always included in and part of a greater whole that we cannot fully comprehend.

Interestingly, research (for instance by the American psychologist Dacher Keltner) has shown that these kinds of awe experiences, in which people get the feeling of being part of a connection with a larger natural world that surrounds them, also lead to positive changes generated in the social field in human society. People seem to become more empathetic and cooperative as a result, and their competitive spirit and fighting spirit are pushed into the background. It confirms the fact that empathy and cooperation are deeply rooted in our being, much deeper than competition and struggle.<sup>8</sup>

### **A communion of subjects**

An awe experience in a landscape is a gift from the natural world whose power we apparently could not resist: being overwhelmed and being left

speechless are signs that we have fully received the gift. This transformative experience could trigger the natural reciprocity principle in us to give something in return, to give our full attention and care to the land – to the larger context of life in which our smaller human life is embedded and on which it is also utterly dependent. An ongoing exchange and cooperation could start, like the one that must have happened when we started practicing of horticulture and agriculture thousands of years ago. This wonderful gift exchange between humans and the land is still experienced today. As Cliff Seruntine, a psychotherapist who lives with his family on a homestead in Nova Scotia, has expressed it with regard to his experience with self-supporting gardening: ‘What is ultimately important is a simple lesson: respect Earth and she will care for you. However you look at it, she is aware. Ultimately, Earth responds to how we live with her.’(...) ‘We gave to the land and its spirits, and they gave back to us.’<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Berry has called this kind of gift-exchange ‘a communion of subjects’ – in his view, our original way of relating with the world around us, before we degenerated to the egocentric state in which we started to treat the world as ‘a collection of objects’.<sup>10</sup> I think that the principle of receiving and giving gifts is inextricably connected to experiencing the surrounding world as a communion of subjects. Since we have changed to treating the world as a collection of objects, we have felt free to *take* one-sidedly from Mother Earth by exploitation, pollution and maltreatment of Her other species, convincing ourselves that it would have no serious consequences. But as the Native Americans had warned us already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: what we do to the web of life of Mother Earth we do to ourselves – as we are all part of it. Her response with intensifying hurricanes, rising sea levels and extremer forms of drought due to climate change, and perhaps even with viruses like COVID 19, are reminding us painfully of that wisdom. Because of their enormous negative impact on our lives, it might not be immediately obvious to us that actually they are gifts – challenges and invitations to reconnect our human world to the larger natural world.

Something similar can be said about the worldwide demonstrations and protests from movements like Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and Extinction Rebellion. Are we willing to listen to them and recognize the gift quality in them? As long as we are unable or unwilling to do so, we will not be able to *receive* these gifts fully in our hearts either. But when we do, they will

become wake-up calls that can change the course of Western civilization. In fact, we have no other options left – as Berry had already acknowledged – but to start listening to them, individually and collectively, and to revive our sense of experiencing the world as a communion of subjects.

**‘Sensitive is the new strong’**

Let me close this article by returning to the beginning: to the empathes. As said, they have never lost the innate natural sensitivity of being open, receptive to life. They have kept experiencing life as a communion of subjects. That is why daily life is an intense affair for them. To protect themselves, therefore, they would do well – as Moorjani has argued – to limit the number of these impressions from human society, especially from people driven by ego-dominance, and also to limit the sheer amount of information we are receiving through the many digital channels. But of course, they do not put the brakes on receiving the beneficial powers from the more-than-human world, from the surrounding landscape that still surrounds us all everywhere – they do not put the brakes on receiving the gifts from Mother Earth. In that regard, the whole of society, which has entered a deep spiritual crisis (of which the corona crisis is only a part), can learn something very important and deeply healing from them: namely that the sensitive nature of the human being – that is, of each individual – represents the ‘new strong’ we need to help us through this crisis. If we succeed in making the empathic attitude to life collectively common again – and indeed, in this regard we have lost something, namely the wisdom that we all take part in a communion of subjects –, more balance will automatically be generated between our human society and the natural world in which it is embedded.

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<sup>1</sup> Anita Moorjani, *Sensitive is the New Strong. The Power of Empaths in an Increasingly Harsh World*, Yellow Kite, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift – the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Routledge, 1990 (originally 1923/24); Lewis Hyde, *The Gift. Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Vintage, 1999 (originally 1983).

<sup>3</sup> In recent years I had already come to realize that in our rather egocentric society, in which self-interest has come to the fore, the emphasis has come to lie too much on taking from others and making sure that you always take advantage of everything, get things for yourself. Of course, this is the principle on which the market economy has always been based, but it is not so easy to suddenly switch outside working hours to genuinely putting the other person first. I had come to see that benefit-oriented market thinking has also left its mark on the criminal world: the diverse forms of crime we face in our society – be it theft, fraud, violence, or murder – are driven through this benefit-oriented market thinking, if possible without any compensation. In fact, they can all be characterized as manifestations of the one-sided and unsolicited taking of others: crime as an extreme expression of a generally accepted but unbalanced way of life. If in the market economy the effect of the reciprocity principle has already been considerably thinned, in crime all the emphasis is on one-sidedness and the reciprocity principle has completely disappeared into the background. In fact, the punishment imposed from the judiciary can be regarded as a partial restoration of reciprocity. See my Dutch article ‘Daderschap en wederkerigheid’: <http://www.wimbonis.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Daderschap-en-wederkerigheid-Wim-Bonis-definitief.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Lipton, *The Biology of Belief. Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter and Miracles*, Mountain of Love/Elite Books, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Ferguson, *Eight Master Lessons of Nature. What nature teaches us about living well in the world*, Doubleday 2019, p. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Henryk Skolimowski, *The Participatory Mind*, Arkana, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Vintage Books, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance: [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_do\\_we\\_feel\\_awe](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_do_we_feel_awe); <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/opinion/sunday/why-do-we-experience-awe.html>; Emma Stone, *The Emerging Science of Awe and Its Benefits. New research is exploring the vast potential awe holds for self and society*, Website Psychology Today, 2017: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> Cliff Seruntine, *Seasons of the Sacred Earth. Following the Old Ways on an Enchanted Homestead*, Llewellyn Publications, 2013, p. 235, 252.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Books Club, 1990; Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, Random House, 2000; See also: <https://www.ecozoicstudies.org/musings/2016/thomas-berrys-communion-subjects-awakening-heart-universe/>