

Giving in a Culture of Getting

Whether or not we believe in the abstract that it's more blessed to give than to receive, in our everyday lives most of us are practitioners (more or less successful) of getting. Getting is not only a totally legitimate activity in our culture, it's highly valued. People who are good at getting (the go-getters) are admired and rewarded. Those who aren't often become objects of pity or blame; they don't "get it," they're losers, unhip, failures.

We are trained from early childhood to play the getting game. The object of the game is to get as much as you can while giving as little as you can. Although you can't expect to get something for nothing, the rules of the game say that you give only in order to get. Giving more than you get, or giving anything away if you can get something for it, is a sign of poor judgment — or worse.

Now many of us make a distinction between those areas of life in which the getting game seems to be perfectly appropriate and reasonable, and those in which it is considered something between impolite and morally wrong. Economic life, for example, is explicitly organized on the basis of the getting principle; making a profit is what our economy is about. Working for a

receive dividends, are the recognized terms of the American social/economic contract.

Personal life, however, is — at least in principle — quite different. Here, wheeling and dealing — not to mention buying and selling — are often regarded as crude or immoral (and sometimes illegal, too). The teenage boy who expects a girl to “put out” on their first date in return for being “taken out,” and the woman who sells sex on the street corner, are both acting from the same profit motive (the getting principle) that inspires everyone from the grocer down the block to the chairman of the board, as well as everyone who’s ever bought a lottery ticket, punched a time clock or claimed a tax deduction for making a charitable contribution. But date rape and prostitution are considered wrong in our culture; personal life is expected to be organized not around the getting principle but on the basis of feelings. This is true not only of sexual relationships, but of friendships and the relationships between parents and children.

Yet the division between economic life and personal life is sometimes not all that clear. Ordinary activities — including those we do with the people we care the most about — are deeply imbued with the philosophy of getting. They’re unofficially contractual. (“I’ll do this for you if you do this for me.”) They’re gratuitously competitive. (“I’m a better parent — or friend, or lover, or woman, or mourner — than you are.” “I try harder — or feel things more deeply, or pay more attention, or put up with much worse — than you do.”) They’re acquisitive. (“I have to have you!” “You owe me that much.”)

The getting principle is so much a part of our culture and, therefore, “in us” that most of the time we aren’t even aware that it organizes our relationships with other human beings; it’s not possible just to leave it behind at the office or the shop. It’s even in our language. How we speak to one another — not just what we say, but the way we say it — is one of the most powerful ways in which the competitive, contractual, acquisitive mode that characterizes the culture of getting is expressed and reinforced.

The societally acceptable form of good conversation in our culture is typically an exchange, a trade: you tell me your ideas, your feelings, your experiences, and then it’s my turn to tell you mine. We listen to each other just long enough and attentively enough to make the connection — “Oh! That makes me think of...my childhood, the last time I was sick, my favorite

movie star...” — so that we can have our turn at getting (attention, admiration, respect).

Now it turns out that the culture of getting sometimes fails people, even by their own standards. Competitiveness and acquisitiveness may serve Mr. (or Ms.) Money well in the boardroom, but it’s not so clear that they make for success in the bedroom — or any of the other places where we live our lives. Ironically, people who, like Mr. and Ms. Money, organize their lives on the basis of the getting principle — which means many or most of us — often are more or less deprived, emotionally disadvantaged, and underdeveloped. (I am making a distinction here between being undeveloped, as children are when they haven’t yet grown to their full height, and being underdeveloped, as people are when their growth has been stunted as the result of malnourishment, disease or injury.) Of course, this doesn’t look exactly the same for everyone: men and women, people from various ethnic backgrounds and social classes, all do different versions of getting — and how they do it has a big impact on their emotional lives. But the culture of getting is something we all participate in. It’s part of our shared culture.

The point I’m making is not that getting is immoral. It’s simply that, like cholesterol, in many life situations getting isn’t very good for our (emotional) health. We may not die from it. But it puts us at constant risk.

One of the most important principles of the social therapeutic approach is that although we live in a culture of getting, people are helped much more — emotionally and developmentally — by giving than they are by getting. What I mean by giving is the active sharing of all our emotional “possessions” — including, in the appropriate environments, our pathology, our pain and our humiliation.

Learning to be accepting — letting other people be giving to you — is a very important corollary of the giving principle. Letting people give to you isn’t the same as getting; in fact it’s actually a kind of giving.

The social therapeutic approach helps people to break out of the getting mode, to put aside the getting principle (where appropriate) in favor of a more sophisticated and gratifying method for living. The people who are most helped by the social therapeutic approach are those who allow themselves to

learn how to make giving the organizing principle of their emotional lives. They usually do so with conflicts, of course — which is perfectly fine.

For one thing, as I've said, being unusually giving violates a fundamental principle of our culture. So people tend to worry, not surprisingly, that they'll be ripped off. In our culture of getting, people are getting ripped off, emotionally speaking and otherwise, much of the time. If you give more than usual, there's the concern that you'll be the victim — ripped off — more than usual. Paradoxically, it's only when you're unconditionally giving emotionally that you can't get ripped off at all. (Someone named Jesus said that!) What's more, the more you give, the less time you have to spend and the less mental energy you have to exert worrying that you'll be ripped off or resenting that you have been. What a relief!

Ironically, many people feel degraded by being related to as having something to give emotionally when they "know," or believe "deep down," that they have nothing to give. A culture of getting tends to undermine our sense of self-worth. After all, when you're spending almost every waking moment frenetically trying to get all you can, your "subconscious" might well be thinking that you must not have very much — that you're missing something.

At the same time, the assumption that people do have something to give often makes them angry because it challenges their life strategy of trying to get all the time. It challenges their societal identity as a high-powered getter.

Then there are those people who have a kind of "martyr complex" — they seem to get off on not getting. Most of us have at least one person in our lives who's like this. Some of their favorite phrases are: "Oh, don't worry about me..." "No, thank you..." "I don't want anything..." "It doesn't matter..." "I'll be fine..." "Go ahead without me..." and "Whatever you say..." It's very, very difficult to be giving to them. They're often rejecting; they seem to take pride in not needing or wanting anything or anyone. And they typically adopt an attitude of moral superiority, as if they were better than the rest of us because they prefer to do without. In fact they're into getting too; they're into getting nothing.

How do people who have been socialized in the culture of getting come to see themselves as having something to give? By giving. They give, and in doing so they discover that they have something to give — not the other way

around. We don't know how to do it, nor that we can do it, in advance — how could we?

The social therapeutic approach teaches people to create environments where emotional giving is practiced — environments in which people are supported and encouraged to practice a way of living ("living as giving") that is different from what we are used to in our getting culture. Our culture of getting is economically very sophisticated but emotionally simplistic and crude. We live in a world where many, many people (across all ethnic, racial and gender lines) are emotionally undeveloped, underdeveloped and "uncultured."

What this means is that many adults don't know how to do much emotionally, or to do things differently from what they did when they were children first learning to adapt to society and didn't get their way, or didn't get what they wanted, or didn't get as much as someone else got. Most of us have the emotions that got "handed out" to everyone at the beginning. Along the way we may have refined those emotions slightly, but typically we have created any new ones. Most of us don't even know that this is something people can do. But, to paraphrase William Shakespeare, there are more emotions in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our getting culture — or traditional psychology.

As a social therapist, I will say to someone, up front (and you could say something like this too): "Look, the reason that you're responding in that way isn't because you're a bad person, but because you're emotionally ignorant. You're emotionally very limited. All you know how to do is slug people (verbally or physically) who offend you, or insult them, or make fun of them. Do you want to learn how to do something different?" It's not simply a moral issue. It's a developmental issue.

In creating a social therapeutic environment, people participate in an emotionally more "advanced" and creative culture of giving. The social therapeutic approach adds tools to people's emotional repertoire; it gives them more emotional options, including the significant option of creating brand new emotions. It's like mixing paints. There are some basic colors. But the possibilities for new colors are endless.

Again, it's not merely a matter of morality — although I do take that moral position that people should have as many emotional options, as ma

emotional alternatives, as possible. Social therapy teaches people to create environments inside and outside the therapy office where a different emotional culture (creating new emotions) is practiced.

Take a situation (all too common in our culture) in which a man is getting ready to hit his wife. He's storming around the house, the children are terrified, the wife is crying. Social therapy teaches him that (and how) he could hold her hand instead! He could alter his rigid societal posture, which has become second nature to him but is in fact what he has learned in the getting culture about how to be a man, how to be angry, how to get (his revenge, his satisfaction, his pride back).

"Hey, man! I know you don't want to! But you could. You can do better than saying, 'I couldn't help myself.' By changing your cultural posture, by challenging your cultural role, by giving rather than getting — by mixing a new emotion — you could no longer be in a position to hurt her." Such a small (actually, not so small) change, such a cultural variation, such a shift in nuance, such a momentary breaking out of our societally overdetermined roles, could make all the difference in the world. It changes everything.

Or take touching. Many people (men and women alike) assume that if they don't feel like being touched at a particular moment then they also wouldn't want to touch the person they are with. But the giving of touching is a very different activity from getting touched. Now if you're only into getting, or giving to get, that's not really an option. (It's more like a waste of time, or a chore, or a "favor.") But if you're into giving, it isn't any of those things.

The social therapeutic approach reorganizes our culturally limited emotionality. Everyday sexism, homophobia, racism and the other "isms" are as much the products of the culture of getting as they are expressions of how the economy and politics are organized. In the absence of creating a new emotional culture, there doesn't seem to me to be much hope of doing a whole lot about them. *Change* the cultural/emotional environment, and the "isms" that thrive in the culture of getting will lack nourishment and, in my opinion, they'll begin to die.

Taking courses in art or music or a foreign language, or traveling, often gives us a greater aesthetic sensibility, broadens our perspective, enhances our abil-

ity to appreciate and to create beauty. Social therapy makes people more "cultured" and developed emotionally. It challenges our emotional underdevelopment. The social therapeutic approach teaches people that when someone screams at you there are other things to do besides screaming back — just as people who study painting learn that there is more to the visual arts than a coloring book and a box of Crayolas. This is what we mean by saying that social therapy is a culturally transforming experience. It teaches us a new, and developmental, way of seeing things and creating a new life. It's about the "re-mixing" of our lives.

EXERCISES:

Here's something you can try out which may give you a more focused look at what giving feels like: Be unexpectedly giving — for "no reason at all" — to someone who's unlikely to give you anything in return.

Here are a few ways to practice "mixing new emotions."

1. Add a little silliness to a situation you're not usually silly in.
2. Get a kick out of finding out that you made a mistake about something.
3. Fall in love anew with someone you already love.