

Gifts of the Spirit

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Once upon a time, in a faraway country,
there was a people who lived as herders, ranchers of cattle.
Their whole world revolved around caring for the cattle,
raising the young calves,
milking the milk-cows,
pasturing the herds in the lush green grass.
The cattle gave them food, wealth, status, everything.
They told stories of their god coming down
from his home above the mountains
to promise them the right to farm the cattle for always and forever.
This was their way of life, their destiny,
their past and their future...
until the drought came.
The rain that had fallen so freely began to disappear,
not for a year or two but for an entire generation.
The grass dried up.
And the cattle began to die.

Alas, this is not a make-believe story.
This is the story of a real people with whom we share this earth,
the Maasai people of eastern Africa.
For many generations the Maasai have built their whole world—
their identity, their livelihood, their entire culture—
around the cattle they raise.
Twenty years ago this was still a good life.
But then the rains began to dry up.
Climate change and deforestation throughout east Africa
have teamed up in the worst way to produce a drought
that has gone on for years.

For the Maasai people, that means the grasslands where they have lived and worked for centuries is becoming a desert.

In some areas, the cattle are dying for lack of water. And the people are left with no food, no money, no jobs, no way to survive.

One of the Maasai communities is in Tanzania. For them, too, the center of their entire world was falling apart like that.

The symbol of their entire society, dying before their very eyes. The work they had done their entire life, no longer possible. Everyone they knew, their families, all their friends, caught in the same bind.

They tried to figure out what on earth they were going to do. Like all human beings, they were extremely resourceful, but like all of us, their knowledge had limits.

All of us have faced times when we just don't know what to do. And sometimes a new idea from someone outside the situation is just what's needed—

a fresh perspective, a helping hand.

And so it was

that one day, someone offered to that community in crisis a gift that would change everything.

This is the season when I know many of us are pondering, what makes a good gift?

What do we have to give that will delight the people we care about, maybe even transform their lives?

And what are we yearning to receive?

In today's reading, Clarke Wells tells us about

the gifts he's treasured most:¹
those gifts that gave him confidence in himself
when he was feeling unsure,
helped him feel understood,
comforted him when he was hurting,
gave him a spark of joy to hold on to.
When we offer someone a gift,
isn't this really what we're trying to give them—
acceptance, joy, appreciation?
We hope and trust that the stuff, the material things we pick out
are going to carry a message for us that says,
I love you, I care about you,
I see who you are and what you need.
I want you to be safe and well and happy.
I give you this thing as a token of my care.

One of the loveliest gifts I ever got
was a gift of this kind of understanding.
I was one of those kids who was kind of an overachiever.
I tried really hard to do a lot of things really well,
especially things that adults and teachers liked,
like writing cursive
and spelling words right
and doing long division.
But I also liked to do stuff just for fun.
My friends and I liked to run around in the woods
and ride our bikes really fast down the hill in our neighborhood.
And one thing I really, *really* liked was playing Barbies.
We built Barbie houses out of books and Kleenex boxes
and made up all sorts of cool adventures for the Barbies to have.
One Christmas, I think I was nine,
I had my heart set on a special Barbie doll for Christmas.
She was called French Barbie,
and she was dressed up like a French can-can dancer

¹ Clarke Dewey Wells, "The Nicest Gifts I Ever Got."

with a hot-pink dress and red hair. And she was beautiful!
I hinted to my mom and dad that I would really, really like it
if they got me French Barbie for Christmas.

Finally Christmas arrived,
and there was a present waiting for me under the tree.
I really wanted it to be French Barbie,
but the box seemed kind of big.
And when I opened it up on Christmas morning, I found...a globe.
It was a very nice globe.
And I really did like learning about other places around the world
and imagining what it would be like to live somewhere else.
But it wasn't French Barbie.
I felt sad when I saw that beautiful globe.
And I felt guilty that I felt sad, because I knew Mom and Dad
had wanted to give me something I would really like!
It was complicated.

I thought about what I should do,
and the next day I asked my mom and dad if I could talk to them.
And I said to them, "Mom, Dad, I really like my globe.
But it kind of makes me feel like
you just want me to be perfect and nice
and good in school all the time.
But I don't want to be only that!
I really wanted French Barbie too!"

And I still remember what they said to me then.
They listened to me, really listened,
and they thought, and then they said,
"You know what? We made a mistake!
We are so proud of you and how much you like school
that we forgot that sometimes you just want to be a kid and have fun,
and we forgot to listen to what *you* wanted.
And we love *you*."

That was a long time ago.
But I still remember how good it felt to be understood.
It was wonderful to feel that they could accept me
as I really was, not just as they wanted me to be.
The next day my mom took me to the store
and she bought me that French Barbie doll,
and I tell you what, I *cherished* that doll for years.
She was a wonderful crystallization of this lovely fantasy I had
about the kind of person I was and who I could be.
I didn't have to be just the brainy, nerdy kid—
I could be a fabulous, glamorous artiste,
dancer, wearer of hot pink dresses as well!
And it meant so much to me that my parents
were able to honor that little wild and crazy,
non-goody-two-shoes streak in me.

The poet Mary Oliver urges us to let ourselves love what we love
and stop judging ourselves for it—
just let ourselves love what we love.
So many of us spend so much time
judging our most secret yearnings and wishes and longings.
“Oh, I could never do *that*,” we say,
“I could never *be* that.”
Wouldn't it be lovely if we could free ourselves
from all those judgments
and just let ourselves shine out in our full beauty?
But so often we're afraid of what others are going to think of us.
We hide our beauty and uniqueness and yearning
for the sake of fitting in.
So sometimes what we need
is for someone else to see that spark of wildness and truth inside us,
to honor it and respond to it with acceptance and affirmation.
This is the kind of gift I wish for every one of you,
as often as you should ever need it.

Of course, sometimes the gifts we receive
are not exactly what we want in our heart of hearts.
But they may be what we need.

As a child I was blessed to get that Barbie doll
that I truly, truly wanted.

Since then I've had to learn, like all of you,
that life does not always give us our heart's desire—
at least, not in a silver package with our name on it
to make it obvious.

And what is required of us then
is to keep up our courage, remember who we are,
accept with gratitude the blessings that come our way,
and trust that our life unfolding will still be joyful
perhaps even beyond our imaginings.

I don't know about you, but I felt so tender
for the boy in today's story, *Silver Packages*.²

He longed so much for a doctor kit,
the gift that he felt would have validated
his dream of becoming a doctor.

Years went by and he never did receive that doctor kit.
But he got what he needed to stay alive and safe
so that one day he was able to fulfill his dream.

You remember I told you a little about the people of the Maasai
in Tanzania. They too knew exactly what they wanted—
they wanted to keep being cattle ranchers—
but this possibility is very rapidly shutting down
as the climate changes and the land dries out.

What happened to them was this:
the Heifer Project approached them—you probably know
this organization that donates farm animals
to communities in need around the world—

² Cynthia Rylant, *Silver Packages: An Appalachian Christmas Story* (New York: Orchard Books, 1987).

and said, look, have you ever thought about herding *camels*?

Think about it: the grass plains aren't coming back.

The land is turning to desert,

and this people is struggling to find some way
to hold on to their culture as herders and ranchers.

Could they imagine—

could it be possible to conceive of a new identity
as herders of camels?

In a lot of ways it makes sense.

Camels can go for days without eating.

They're happy to eat the leaves of the acacia trees that grow there.

They can survive quite nicely drinking water
just once every two weeks.

You can milk camels just as you do cows,
so the people could keep on drinking milk,
which has always been a huge part of their diet,
and selling the leftovers to make money
to buy what they can't make or grow for themselves.

So immediately this made sense from an economic perspective.

It was much harder for people to accept from a cultural standpoint.

The camels looked funny.

They were tall and cranky and kind of intimidating.

They were not cows and they weren't going to *be* cows.

But the people decided to give them a chance.

And what they found was, the camels were actually pretty OK.

Better than OK, in fact.

Traditionally the men's job is to take the animals to graze
and protect them from predators.

Their job is actually easier now,

because the camels can eat more kinds of food.

And a lot of the women have become big fans.

Traditionally their job is to gather firewood,
haul water back to their homes,

both for their families and for the animals,
milk the cows (and, now, camels),
take care of the house—
including building new houses when the old ones wear out—
take care of the kids, do all the cooking...
is this starting to sound familiar?

Anyway, the women are really appreciating the camels because,
guess what, they can carry stuff!
They can help the ladies lug the water and firewood
back to their homes.
Interestingly enough, now that the camels are available
to do the heavy lifting,
the men have decided they don't mind going to get the water
and the firewood. What a deal!
So in the end, it seems the camels are fitting right in.³

Camels are not a perfect solution for the Maasai people.
It's not what they had,
it's maybe not what they would have chosen for themselves.
Nobody knows exactly how the camels
are going to change the ecology of the place.⁴
But no solution was going to be perfect, because life is that way,
and in a moment when change was inevitable
and an entire culture was perched on the brink of collapse,
this one gift—the animals themselves
and the whole new way of thinking that came with them—
is helping this people hold on to who they are
and live with pride and dignity on this earth.
A welcome gift indeed.

So may we all become givers and receivers of gifts
that inspire us with new and creative possibilities,

³ Donna Stokes, "Maasai Adapt to Survive," *World Ark* holiday 2010, pp. 10–19.

⁴ For a Unitarian Universalist critique of the Heifer Project, see Gray Kowalski, "What's Wrong with the Heifer Project?" online at <http://www25.uua.org/ufeta/heiferproject.htm>.

delight us with beauty and playfulness,
strengthen us when life is difficult,
and sustain us in the deepest center of our heart.

May it be so, this holiday season and forevermore.
Amen.