

## Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

December 2021

### A Gift

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For us, this time of year includes many celebratory events —Thanksgiving, Dan’s birthday, Christmas, our wedding anniversary —that signal the importance of significant relationships in our lives and worlds. They mark in time relationships that we continue to enjoy, trust in, and grow. Our customary ways of noting these events of relational significance include sharing gifts. These gifts go from individual to individual—in our case, from Dan to Sally and from Sally to Dan. Individualizing the giving of gifts to each other is however, another way our individualizing culture/world we live in molds our interactions—*relationships* get celebrated by giving *individual* gifts. This got us to wondering: what does giving individual gifts have to do with celebrating relationships? We thought about how and why this practice has become so prominent and expected, and more interestingly, how it could be otherwise. We readily admit that we enjoy getting presents like everyone, but our curiosity led us to consider a couple of ways that the idea of celebrating relationships with gifts could be reimaged.



Our first idea was to consider ways that a gift could be given *to a relationship* rather than to individual members of relationships. Imagining this led us to consider the inherent materiality and temporality of the idea of a gift when we use it as a noun. A quick scan of synonyms for “gift” produces words that sound uncomfortably corporate or business-like: donation, contribution, endowment, alms, gratuity, tip, allowance, subsidy, bequest, inheritance. They all sound transactional, from one person or group to another. This, to us, does not embrace our idea of relationship. Rather, this tends to reinscribe the primacy of the individuals within relationships. We recognize that our world has collectively travelled a long way down this road of valorizing individualism and our point emphasizing the “spaces between people” may seem rather discordant with much of the world’s dominant discourses of individual achievement, autonomy, independence, and voice.

What if we were to shift our attention from thinking about gifts as things toward valuing the *act of giving* a gift as the noteworthy aspect? This could free us from just saving up for that one celebratory moment each year. “Giving to the relationship” could be a key component of the relationship itself, enacted in all we do all the time. We believe that a steady flow of relational “oxygen” keeps relationships alive and well. And as we continued our conversation, we put forward another idea: “what if we thought of our relationships as *gift*?” What might be the implications of this? We liked the spirit and feel of beginning to talk about this idea, but found that this will need more thought, reflection, and conversation. We will leave this one as sketchy as it is for now, for you to ponder.

The beauty of alternative conceptualizations rests in the possibilities brought forth, the paths illuminated. Modern day trumpets that are sounding the call to maximize our individual wants and needs can be quieted by those voices that speak to harmonizing our lives with others. We invite you to take a moment to shift your gaze from our individual lives to think about relational gift-giving and what that could mean for us in our worlds. We wondered, “What could make our relationships smile?”