

THE GIFT OF STRAWBERRIES

I once heard Evon Peter—a Gwich'in man, a father, a husband, an environmental activist, and Chief of Arctic Village, a small village in northeastern Alaska—introduce himself simply as “a boy who was raised by a river.” A description as smooth and slippery as a river rock. Did he mean only that he grew up near its banks? Or was the river responsible for rearing him, for teaching him the things he needed to live? Did it feed him, body and soul? Raised by a river: I suppose both meanings are true—you can hardly have one without the other.

In a way, I was raised by strawberries, fields of them. Not to exclude the maples, hemlocks, white pines, goldenrod, asters, violets, and mosses of upstate New York, but it was the wild strawberries, beneath dewy leaves on an almost-summer morning, who gave me my sense of the world, my place in it. Behind our house were miles of old hay fields divided by stone walls, long abandoned from farming but not yet grown up to forest. After the school bus chugged up our hill, I'd throw down my red plaid book bag, change my clothes before my mother could think of a chore, and jump across the crick to go wandering in the goldenrod. Our mental maps had all the landmarks we kids needed: the fort under the sumacs, the rock pile, the river, the big pine with branches so evenly spaced you could climb to the top as if it were a ladder—and the strawberry patches.

White petals with a yellow center—like a little wild rose—they dotted the acres of curl grass in May during the Flower Moon, *waabigwani-giizis*. We kept good track of them, peeking under the trifoliate leaves

to check their progress as we ran through on our way to catch frogs. After the flower finally dropped its petals, a tiny green nub appeared in its place, and as the days got longer and warmer it swelled to a small white berry. These were sour but we ate them anyway, impatient for the real thing.

You could smell ripe strawberries before you saw them, the fragrance mingling with the smell of sun on damp ground. It was the smell of June, the last day of school, when we were set free, and the Strawberry Moon, *ode'mini-giizis*. I'd lie on my stomach in my favorite patches, watching the berries grow sweeter and bigger under the leaves. Each tiny wild berry was scarcely bigger than a rain-drop, dimpled with seeds under the cap of leaves. From that vantage point I could pick only the reddest of the red, leaving the pink ones for tomorrow.

Even now, after more than fifty Strawberry Moons, finding a patch of wild strawberries still touches me with a sensation of surprise, a feeling of unworthiness and gratitude for the generosity and kindness that comes with an unexpected gift all wrapped in red and green. "Really? For me? Oh, you shouldn't have." After fifty years they still raise the question of how to respond to their generosity. Sometimes it feels like a silly question with a very simple answer: eat them.

But I know that someone else has wondered these same things. In our Creation stories the origin of strawberries is important. Skywoman's beautiful daughter, whom she carried in her womb from Skyworld, grew on the good green earth, loving and loved by all the other beings. But tragedy befell her when she died giving birth to her twins, Flint and Sapling. Heartbroken, Skywoman buried her beloved daughter in the earth. Her final gifts, our most revered plants, grew from her body. The strawberry arose from her heart. In Potawatomi, the strawberry is *ode min*, the heart berry. We recognize them as the leaders of the berries, the first to bear fruit.

Strawberries first shaped my view of a world full of gifts simply scattered at your feet. A gift comes to you through no action of your own, free, having moved toward you without your beckoning. It is not

a reward; you cannot earn it, or call it to you, or even deserve it. And yet it appears. Your only role is to be open-eyed and present. Gifts exist in a realm of humility and mystery—as with random acts of kindness, we do not know their source.

Those fields of my childhood showered us with strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, hickory nuts in the fall, bouquets of wildflowers brought to my mom, and family walks on Sunday afternoon. They were our playground, retreat, wildlife sanctuary, ecology classroom, and the place where we learned to shoot tin cans off the stone wall. All for free. Or so I thought.

I experienced the world in that time as a gift economy, “goods and services” not purchased but received as gifts from the earth. Of course I was blissfully unaware of how my parents must have struggled to make ends meet in the wage economy raging far from this field.

In our family, the presents we gave one another were almost always homemade. I thought that was the definition of a gift: something you made for someone else. We made all our Christmas gifts: piggy banks from old Clorox bottles, hot pads from broken clothespins, and puppets from retired socks. My mother says it was because we had no money for store-bought presents. It didn’t seem like a hardship to me; it was something special.

My father loves wild strawberries, so for Father’s Day my mother would almost always make him strawberry shortcake. She baked the crusty shortcakes and whipped the heavy cream, but we kids were responsible for the berries. We each got an old jar or two and spent the Saturday before the celebration out in the fields, taking forever to fill them as more and more berries ended up in our mouths. Finally, we returned home and poured them out on the kitchen table to sort out the bugs. I’m sure we missed some, but Dad never mentioned the extra protein.

In fact, he thought wild strawberry shortcake was the best possible present, or so he had us convinced. It was a gift that could never be bought. As children raised by strawberries, we were probably unaware that the gift of berries was from the fields themselves, not from

us. Our gift was time and attention and care and red-stained fingers. Heart berries, indeed.

Gifts from the earth or from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. The field gave to us, we gave to my dad, and we tried to give back to the strawberries. When the berry season was done, the plants would send out slender red runners to make new plants. Because I was fascinated by the way they would travel over the ground looking for good places to take root, I would weed out little patches of bare ground where the runners touched down. Sure enough, tiny little roots would emerge from the runner and by the end of the season there were even more plants, ready to bloom under the next Strawberry Moon. No person taught us this—the strawberries showed us. Because they had given us a gift, an ongoing relationship opened between us.

Farmers around us grew a lot of strawberries and frequently hired kids to pick for them. My siblings and I would ride our bikes a long way to Crandall's farm to pick berries to earn spending money. A dime for every quart we picked. But Mrs. Crandall was a persnickety overseer. She stood at the edge of the field in her bib apron and instructed us how to pick and warned us not to crush any berries. She had other rules, too. "These berries belong to me," she said, "not to you. I don't want to see you kids eating my berries." I knew the difference: In the fields behind my house, the berries belonged to themselves. At this lady's roadside stand, she sold them for sixty cents a quart.

It was quite a lesson in economics. We'd have to spend most of our wages if we wanted to ride home with berries in our bike baskets. Of course those berries were ten times bigger than our wild ones, but not nearly so good. I don't believe we ever put those farm berries in Dad's shortcake. It wouldn't have felt right.

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It's funny how the nature of an object—let's say a strawberry or a pair of socks—is so changed by the way it has come into your hands, as a gift or as a commodity. The pair of wool socks that I buy at the store, red and gray striped, are warm and cozy. I might feel grateful for the sheep that made the wool and the worker who ran the knitting machine. I hope so. But I have no *inherent* obligation to those socks as a commodity, as private property. There is no bond beyond the politely exchanged “thank yous” with the clerk. I have paid for them and our reciprocity ended the minute I handed her the money. The exchange ends once parity has been established, an equal exchange. They become my property. I don't write a thank-you note to JCPenney.

But what if those very same socks, red and gray striped, were knitted by my grandmother and given to me as a gift? That changes everything. A gift creates ongoing relationship. I will write a thank-you note. I will take good care of them and if I am a very gracious grandchild I'll wear them when she visits even if I don't like them. When it's her birthday, I will surely make her a gift in return. As the scholar and writer Lewis Hyde notes, “It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people.”

Wild strawberries fit the definition of gift, but grocery store berries do not. It's the relationship between producer and consumer that changes everything. As a gift-thinker, I would be deeply offended if I saw wild strawberries in the grocery store. I would want to kidnap them all. They were not meant to be sold, only to be given. Hyde reminds us that in a gift economy, one's freely given gifts cannot be made into someone else's capital. I can see the headline now: “Woman Arrested for Shoplifting Produce. Strawberry Liberation Front Claims Responsibility.”

This is the same reason we do not sell sweetgrass. Because it is given to us, it should only be given to others. My dear friend Wally “Bear” Meshigaud is a ceremonial firekeeper for our people and uses a lot of sweetgrass on our behalf. There are folks who pick for him in a good way, to keep him supplied, but even so, at a big gathering sometimes he runs out. At powwows and fairs you can see our own people

selling sweetgrass for ten bucks a braid. When Wally really needs *wiingashk* for a ceremony, he may visit one of those booths among the stalls selling frybread or hanks of beads. He introduces himself to the seller, explains his need, just as he would in a meadow, asking permission of the sweetgrass. He *cannot* pay for it, not because he doesn't have the money, but because it cannot be bought or sold and still retain its essence for ceremony. He expects sellers to graciously give him what he needs, but sometimes they don't. The guy at the booth thinks he's being shaken down by an elder. "Hey, you can't get something for nothin'," he says. But that is exactly the point. A gift *is* something for nothing, except that certain obligations are attached. For the plant to be sacred, it cannot be sold. Reluctant entrepreneurs will get a teaching from Wally, but they'll never get his money.

Sweetgrass belongs to Mother Earth. Sweetgrass pickers collect properly and respectfully, for their own use and the needs of their community. They return a gift to the earth and tend to the well-being of the *wiingashk*. The braids are given as gifts, to honor, to say thank you, to heal and to strengthen. The sweetgrass is kept in motion. When Wally gives sweetgrass to the fire, it is a gift that has passed from hand to hand, growing richer as it is honored in every exchange.

That is the fundamental nature of gifts: they move, and their value increases with their passage. The fields made a gift of berries to us and we made a gift of them to our father. The more something is shared, the greater its value becomes. This is hard to grasp for societies steeped in notions of private property, where others are, by definition, excluded from sharing. Practices such as posting land against trespass, for example, are expected and accepted in a property economy but are unacceptable in an economy where land is seen as a gift to all.

Lewis Hyde wonderfully illustrates this dissonance in his exploration of the "Indian giver." This expression, used negatively today as a pejorative for someone who gives something and then wants to have it back, actually derives from a fascinating cross-cultural misinterpretation between an indigenous culture operating in a gift economy and a colonial culture predicated on the concept of private property. When

gifts were given to the settlers by the Native inhabitants, the recipients understood that they were valuable and were intended to be retained. Giving them away would have been an affront. But the indigenous people understood the value of the gift to be based in reciprocity and would be affronted if the gifts did not circulate back to them. Many of our ancient teachings counsel that whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again.

From the viewpoint of a private property economy, the “gift” is deemed to be “free” because we obtain it free of charge, at no cost. But in the gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity. In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a “bundle of rights,” whereas in a gift economy property has a “bundle of responsibilities” attached.

I was once lucky enough to spend time doing ecological research in the Andes. My favorite part was market day in the local village, when the square filled with vendors. There were tables loaded with *platanos*, carts of fresh papaya, stalls in bright colors with pyramids of tomatoes, and buckets of hairy yucca roots. Other vendors spread blankets on the ground, with everything you could need, from flip-flops to woven palm hats. Squatting behind her red blanket, a woman in a striped shawl and navy blue bowler spread out medicinal roots as beautifully wrinkled as she was. The colors, the smells of corn roasting on a wood fire and sharp limes, and the sounds of all the voices mingle wonderfully in my memory. I had a favorite stall where the owner, Edita, looked for me each day. She’d kindly explain how to cook unfamiliar items and pull out the sweetest pineapple she’d been saving under the table. Once she even had strawberries. I know that I paid the *gringa* prices but the experience of abundance and goodwill were worth every peso.

I dreamed not long ago of that market with all its vivid textures. I walked through the stalls with a basket over my arm as always and went right to Edita for a bunch of fresh cilantro. We chatted and laughed

and when I held out my coins she waved them off, patting my arm and sending me away. A gift, she said. *Muchas gracias, señora*, I replied. There was my favorite *panadera*, with clean cloths laid over the round loaves. I chose a few rolls, opened my purse, and this vendor too gestured away my money as if I were impolite to suggest paying. I looked around in bewilderment; this was my familiar market and yet everything had changed. It wasn't just for me—no shopper was paying. I floated through the market with a sense of euphoria. Gratitude was the only currency accepted here. It was all a gift. It was like picking strawberries in my field: the merchants were just intermediaries passing on gifts from the earth.

I looked in my basket: two zucchinis, an onion, tomatoes, bread, and a bunch of cilantro. It was still half empty, but it felt full. I had everything I needed. I glanced over at the cheese stall, thinking to get some, but knowing it would be given, not sold, I decided I could do without. It's funny: Had all the things in the market merely been a very low price, I probably would have scooped up as much as I could. But when everything became a gift, I felt self-restraint. I didn't want to take too much. And I began thinking of what small presents I might bring to the vendors tomorrow.

The dream faded, of course, but the feelings first of euphoria and then of self-restraint remain. I've thought of it often and recognize now that I was witness there to the conversion of a market economy to a gift economy, from private goods to common wealth. And in that transformation the relationships became as nourishing as the food I was getting. Across the market stalls and blankets, warmth and compassion were changing hands. There was a shared celebration of abundance for all we'd been given. And since every market basket contained a meal, there was justice.

I'm a plant scientist and I want to be clear, but I am also a poet and the world speaks to me in metaphor. When I speak of the gift of berries, I do not mean that *Fragaria virginiana* has been up all night making a present just for me, strategizing to find exactly what I'd like on a summer morning. So far as we know, that does not happen, but

as a scientist I am well aware of how little we do know. The plant has in fact been up all night assembling little packets of sugar and seeds and fragrance and color, because when it does so its evolutionary fitness is increased. When it is successful in enticing an animal such as me to disperse its fruit, its genes for making yumminess are passed on to ensuing generations with a higher frequency than those of the plant whose berries were inferior. The berries made by the plant shape the behaviors of the dispersers and have adaptive consequences.

What I mean of course is that our human relationship with strawberries is transformed by our choice of perspective. It is human perception that makes the world a gift. When we view the world this way, strawberries and humans alike are transformed. The relationship of gratitude and reciprocity thus developed can increase the evolutionary fitness of both plant and animal. A species and a culture that treat the natural world with respect and reciprocity will surely pass on genes to ensuing generations with a higher frequency than the people who destroy it. The stories we choose to shape our behaviors have adaptive consequences.

Lewis Hyde has made extensive studies of gift economies. He finds that “objects . . . will remain plentiful *because* they are treated as gifts.” A gift relationship with nature is a “formal give-and-take that acknowledges our participation in, and dependence upon, natural increase. We tend to respond to nature as a part of ourselves, not a stranger or alien available for exploitation. Gift exchange is the commerce of choice, for it is commerce that harmonizes with, or participates in, the process of [nature’s] increase.”

In the old times, when people’s lives were so directly tied to the land, it was easy to know the world as gift. When fall came, the skies would darken with flocks of geese, honking “Here we are.” It reminds the people of the Creation story, when the geese came to save Skywoman. The people are hungry, winter is coming, and the geese fill the marshes with food. It is a gift and the people receive it with thanksgiving, love, and respect.

But when the food does not come from a flock in the sky, when

you don't feel the warm feathers cool in your hand and know that a life has been given for yours, when there is no gratitude in return—that food may not satisfy. It may leave the spirit hungry while the belly is full. Something is broken when the food comes on a Styrofoam tray wrapped in slippery plastic, a carcass of a being whose only chance at life was a cramped cage. That is not a gift of life; it is a theft.

How, in our modern world, can we find our way to understand the earth as a gift again, to make our relations with the world sacred again? I know we cannot all become hunter-gatherers—the living world could not bear our weight—but even in a market economy, can we behave “as if” the living world were a gift?

We could start by listening to Wally. There are those who will try to sell the gifts, but, as Wally says of sweetgrass for sale, “Don't buy it.” Refusal to participate is a moral choice. Water is a gift for all, not meant to be bought and sold. Don't buy it. When food has been wrenched from the earth, depleting the soil and poisoning our relatives in the name of higher yields, don't buy it.

In material fact, Strawberries belong only to themselves. The exchange relationships we choose determine whether we share them as a common gift or sell them as a private commodity. A great deal rests on that choice. For the greater part of human history, and in places in the world today, common resources were the rule. But some invented a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it is just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one.

One of these stories sustains the living systems on which we depend. One of these stories opens the way to living in gratitude and amazement at the richness and generosity of the world. One of these stories asks us to bestow our own gifts in kind, to celebrate our kinship with the world. We can choose. If all the world is a commodity, how poor we grow. When all the world is a gift in motion, how wealthy we become.

In those childhood fields, waiting for strawberries to ripen, I used

to eat the sour white ones, sometimes out of hunger but mostly from impatience. I knew the long-term results of my short-term greed, but I took them anyway. Fortunately, our capacity for self-restraint grows and develops like the berries beneath the leaves, so I learned to wait. A little. I remember lying on my back in the fields watching the clouds go by and rolling over to check the berries every few minutes. When I was young, I thought the change might happen that fast. Now I am old and I know that transformation is slow. The commodity economy has been here on Turtle Island for four hundred years, eating up the white strawberries and everything else. But people have grown weary of the sour taste in their mouths. A great longing is upon us, to live again in a world made of gifts. I can scent it coming, like the fragrance of ripening strawberries rising on the breeze.