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Gift Giving Within the Quilt Making Tradition - Lynne Heller

Preamble

A recent article in the *New Yorker* about the composer, Paul Simon, reflects a little expressed but strongly held attitude amongst artists. The writer, Alec Wilkinson, quotes Simon talking about work he felt compelled to compose that was not marketable.

The voice reprimanding him had the tone of an Old Testament figure. "This is Judgment Day, and there's no defense," it announced. 'I'm going to tell you a deep truth, and you're are going to listen. You made this thing that you received partly as a gift, and you took it immediately to the marketplace without sufficiently appreciating it. And when you intuited that the marketplace wasn't going to accept it you knew right away that you had no business taking such a thing there. The gift was the point.'" (Wilkinson, p.64)

So it was a real 'aha' moment for me when I was reading Clive Dilnot's article, *The Gift*. He speaks of the gift as a crucial economic factor, psychological implication and historical tenet. He looks at design and creation through the lens of the gift. Here were very real reasons why so many artists feel conflict around valuing art within the constraints of market economy definitions. Continuing on and reading classics in gift giving literature, Mauss' *The Gift, Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* and Hyde's *The Gift, Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, the complexity and depth of the issue was driven home

I had originally understood some of what I read within the context of the quilt making traditions I was familiar with. Often quilters have said to me that they won't sell their work but would rather give it away. There is also a very strong tradition of creating community quilts for raffle or donation to various causes. A project I started along with two other artists, Mary Corcoran and Judith Dingle, called 'The Quilt Project' was an ongoing commitment to make quilts for comfort and decoration for various agencies, for example, a women's shelter, an aids hospice and a breast cancer research facility. Any suggestion of direct benefit, financial or notoriety, from being involved in 'The Quilt Project' was uncomfortable and diminished the activity for me, and I believe for the others as well.

Naturally, feminist critique comes to mind immediately when talking about quilting, gift giving and women. Issues of socialization and demeaning of women's labour comes into play when talking about the thorny issue of giving instead of being paid. Volunteerism and socialized response have long been problematic for women. For some deeper understanding of these issues I turned to Rozsika Parker and her writings in *The Subversive Stitch* and an essay by Susan E. Bernick, *A Quilt Is an Art Object when It Stand Up like a Man*. I also interviewed quilters to listen with a more informed perspective to what they had to say about gift giving.

Introduction

The study of gift giving is historically dense, psychologically nuanced and seemingly contradictory—in short a loaded issue. Gift giving within the quilting community is a longstanding tradition. While not an obvious source of friction within the traditional quilt community, it certainly raises questions—in particular questions referencing feminist thought and

theory. To name a few; issues concerning giving work and not receiving payment; the bonds created through giving; the gift as promissory note; creating emotional ties/obligations through giving; and giving as charity.

An investigation of gift giving within the quilt making community necessitates a look at gift giving in a wider societal context. How does what they do reprise age old cultural practices? How do quilters adjust to or defy our contemporary cultural norms? Is their response particular to gender and/or marginalization? Do their responses tell us something of history and/or future developments in our economic culture? How does a culture steeped in capitalism respond to different attitudes to production and distribution of goods? Notions of professionalism and amateurism, bonding and obligation, individualism and community come to the fore when practices of gift giving are examined.

The gift in society has played and continues to play many roles—bond, obligation, kinship delineation, ecological insurance, economic pressure valve, cultural legacy, transformative power and instrument of transcendence. It is a slippery concept, mostly viewed, at the very least, as benign but often heralded as 'good'. Discounted in this reading of gift is the power of giving and as with all power comes control. Over time a multitude of cultures have found ways to codify the power of giving and have corralled it for many purposes.

Gift Economy / Market Economy

"It is characteristic of market exchange that commodities move between two independent spheres. We might best picture the difference between gifts and commodities in this regard by imagining two territories separated by a boundary. A gift, when it moves across the boundary, either stops being a gift or else abolishes the boundary. A commodity can cross the line without any change in its nature; moreover, its exchange will often establish a boundary where none previously existed (as, for example, in the sale of a necessity to a friend). *Logos*-trade draws the boundary, *eros*-trade erases it." (Hyde, p. 61)

Our market driven economy is so prevalent globally that it is difficult to see past it. One finds it hard to imagine that a parallel economy, unheralded for the most part and certainly not much a part of our everyday consciousness is alive and well and living in our universe—that is the economy of gift giving. It is an ancient code of moderating our interactions with each other, our needs for material and spiritual exchange and it has its own logic, strengths and weaknesses. Gift giving economies have been as varied as any other part of culture and they have changed considerably since they were the dominant form of exchange in the world. Often gift giving was highly codified, strategically complex part of societies.

It is easy to think that the current dominant exchange mechanism is somehow 'scientific' with all the layers of complexity that implies. Our practices, for example, in investing in a stock market in order to increase our capital can be a dangerous and arcane game to play. The 'rules' are ridiculously complicated, to the point where it is impossible for the average person to participate in any kind of 'fair' way. But gift giving systems of exchange were no simpler. The rules were often complex and time consuming, with 'experts' like shaman or tribal chiefs playing the role that your

average stock broker takes on nowadays. Practices like extreme potlatch are puzzling to us and complex taboos and stipulations seem unknowable.

Ironically, the market of the gift, giving away of your possessions is a culture of affluence. The market economy on the contrary, hoards in order to increase possessions and is therefore an economy of scarcity. Hyde quotes Marshall Sahlins on this. "Modern capitalist societies, however richly endowed, dedicate themselves to the proposition of scarcity." Gift giving on the other hand implies that goods are always in circulation as people are giving them away constantly. Consumables follow a similar logic in that even though the actual consumable, for the most part food, can not be given away again. Within a gift giving structure production of consumables is dedicated to the replacement of that consumed and the ability of the producer to give in return for what they previously received. There is never a worry of one person within the community going hungry because all the food will be given not saved for more favourable market conditions.

Even though at first brush it would seem that gift giving is no longer dominant in our culture it is certainly a part of our history which refuses to curl up and disappear. It would seem that we humans are hard wired for giving. It is still critical to our very survival. Giving continues to direct our actions and interactions without much acknowledgement or awareness on our part.

Gift as Bond

"It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection." (Hyde, p. 56)

Central to the idea of gift is what the process of giving does to our sense of self. As we mature we gradually come to see ourselves in the wider context of the rest of the world. As we learn more of this world, we come to understand we are small part of a larger whole. At the same time we feel our separation from first our parents/family then others. We yearn to feel connected outside of our immediate body—we need to reach out to others and escape the loneliness which is so haunting to human beings. Gift giving is an integral expression of this need. By understanding the needs of others and concretizing that understanding by giving to others what they desire or have want of, we are moving beyond ourselves. We are creating a 'feeling-bond'.

The process of giving is multi-faceted. A giver must understand what she is giving to whom. There is often a right time and place and the issue of what is given is paramount. The reason so much thought goes into this process is the implication of getting it 'right'. If the giver gives what they know to be the perfect gift they are often as elated as the recipient. It is this feeling of 'knowing' someone else intimately which makes the gift so powerful. The recipient who feels she has been 'understood' feels less alone. The giver feels they can see beyond themselves and connect, once again dissolving the boundaries and reaching out to others. Marcel Mauss in his writing on gift puts in succinctly. "the

objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them; the communion and alliance they establish are well-nigh indissoluble." (Mauss, p. 31)

Many conventions accompany the giving of gifts so that the right degree of bond or feeling is created. We all are often acutely aware of appropriate gifts and gift giving practices. Transgression of the appropriate is uncomfortable because of the bond it creates. In many older cultures, where gift giving was an important part of exchange practices and market economies were not as overwhelming as contemporary global practices, gift giving was highly codified. For example, the potlatch ceremonies of the first nations peoples of British Columbia, Canada evolved to a highly structured activity. Certain items were given at certain times and transgressions of these codes were seriously considered. Members of the tribe who did not 'follow the rules' were ostracized and ridiculed.

In talking with quilters they quite often touched on the appropriateness of a gift of a quilt. Because the gift of time—hand-made work—was so valued it was not appropriate for all gifts. Quite often the quilters would comment that they would only make hand-made quilts for family. The powerful feeling of bond that an important gift creates would only be appropriate for family and close friends. Size, technique and particularly materials were all considerations when deciding what a quilter wanted to give to whom. Most felt that only 'good' or emotionally imbued fabric should go into important gifts. Interestingly an idea of what constituted 'good' was often much more than the fibre content of the textile. A lot of the women I spoke with valued found fabric which could be revalued by being used again. Often the physical strength of a fabric was an issue. They wanted to give gifts that were functional and would last being well used by the recipients. They wanted their quilts to continue feeding the 'feeling-bond' in a very physical way—by giving physical warmth and comfort on an ongoing basis, a highly charged bond.

Gift as Obligation

"How could there be anything negative about giving, especially a quilt." (Mary Valance, quilter)

Interestingly, most of the quilters I interviewed about their gift giving attitudes and stories, skirted the issue of obligation which often accompanies the exchange of gifts. In their efforts to give in extraordinary ways—putting in long hours, often hand stitching a quilt for someone—they were loathe to see their gifts as anything but 'good'—no strings attached. However, the history of gift giving, particularly in cultures where it was highly evolved, involves complex interweavings of giving and obligatory reciprocation. Obligation follows gift naturally as the inherent bonding of the gift works its magic. This idea of giving back is powerfully illustrated using the example of age old practices of giving back to nature so that nature will keep on giving. "Every gift calls for a return gift, and so, by placing the gift back in the forest, the priests treat the birds as a gift of nature. We now understand this to be ecological." (Hyde, p. 19)

In fact, Hyde argues extensively that this process of returning gifts actually is the life force of the gift. Passing on of your gifts to others is the only way to really make sure a gift stays a gift. In discussing the clash of cultures between the

original inhabitants of North America, first nations people and the Europeans who colonized the land he describes the European outrage against 'Indian Givers' and then goes onto explain that basic tenet of gift giving economies.

"The Indian Giver (or the original one, at any rate) understood a cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead, the way a billiard ball may stop when it sends another scurrying across the felt, its momentum transferred. You may keep your Christmas present, but it ceases to be a gift in the true sense unless you have given something else away. As it is passed along, the gift may be given back to the original donor, but this is not essential. In fact, it is better if the gift is not returned but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: *the gift must always move*. There are other forms of property that stand still, that mark a boundary or resist momentum, but the gift keeps going." (Hyde, p. 4)

Gift as Community Building

If the role of gifts between individuals is one of bonding and interdependence, this works tenfold at the level of community. Quite often the way a tribe, kin group or village defines itself is by what it will allow to be given to whom. One does not sell to family/kin but only to strangers. Within the 'family/community' all is exchanged through gift giving economy. Taking gifts out of community circulation and using them to increase personal wealth, a typical capitalistic behaviour, was often viewed in many cultures as anti-social.

Gift giving actually becomes an insurance policy particularly as it spreads into the community at large. Very few people would think of giving gifts as a direct insurance that they will in turn be rewarded. In fact people are often affronted by this notion. However, most people would agree that a community of people all giving is very much an assurance that your turn will come. And it is particularly in times of extreme need that the generosity of a gift giving culture is most appreciated. A community must foster a spirit of giving if it is to survive crisis of nature and adversity as a group.

Within quilt making communities the ties are almost literal. Quilts are given to help, influence, remind amongst other things. In my interviews with quilters several told stories of quilt gifts within communities. 'Burn-outs'—houses lost to fire—were a particular rallying time for rural communities. The community would come to the immediate aid of people affected by helping them extinguish the fire and they would bring quilts to provide warmth and comfort. Quilts were one of the first items that people who had just lost everything would need and the community responds appropriately.

Gift as Charity

As all giving is complicated by the spiritual baggage that comes along with it, giving as charity seems particularly fraught. Quilters have a very deep ingrained, long standing tradition of making quilts both to give directly to those in the community in need but also as raffle items to raise money which can then be used to some charitable end. The quilt raffle also has the added benefit of associating hard work and enterprise with the charitable organization. Everyone is

keenly aware of how much work goes into making a quilt, so it lends its aura and assurance of spiritual values to the cause.

In an interesting irony Ellen Fox, a quilter in Red Deer, Alberta told me about an interesting challenge the quilters who make for others face. In making specifically as gift they were confronted with the prospect of their work being commoditized by exactly the same people they intended to help.

"Just because it's a scrap quilt and going to charity, doesn't mean it has to be ugly...there's another church group and they make what they call ugly quilts...the reason they make ugly quilts is because they are donated to street people. If it is the least bit pretty they'll sell it for a dime, but if it's ugly nobody is going to buy it, so therefore they will use it." (Fox)

In order to directly help in the way that they felt appropriate and most useful, the quilters needed to do the antithesis of what we would usually typify as 'good' gift giving. They would have to 'design' quilts that could only function not please, thus circumvent the immediate response of the 'streetpeople' to procure money in whatever way possible.

Another revelation for me during these interviews is the change in attitude to raffle quilts in our contemporary money/value oriented culture. A lot of the quilters say they no longer will make raffle quilts because the quilts do not raise enough money for the work involved. They would rather give money to the cause/organization instead of their labour. Raffle quilts have for so long been predominant on the quilt making landscape that it is difficult to contemplate them going the way of the dodo. What does this mean to traditional modes of quilt giving? Is there anyway to reverse this trend and would anybody want to? Did raffle quilts serve a purpose over and above just raising money? Can there ever be a situation again when time does not mean money?

Making as Gift

If finding/buying the 'perfect' gift means knowing your recipient it then follows that making for others is a gift relationship. In making / designing/ creating the function of knowing and translating our desires into reality becomes a way to communicate with others and to cross boundaries. Giving in this way also follows the typical logic of the circular gift path—creating = giving = transforming.

"But this means that to make and to design something is to create something whose end is not in itself but is rather 'in' the subject *for whom* the object is made (whether that subject is individualized, or is ourselves, collectively, as a whole). On this argument, then, the object is never autonomous, never just 'for itself.' It is in fact—as Elaine Scarry puts it in the important essay which forms the last chapter of her book, *The Body in Pain*—always 'only a fulcrum or lever across which the force of creation moves back on to the human site and remakes its makers.' (Dilnot, p. 149)

Dilnot in his discussion of the designer/maker as giver makes a distinction between the gift-object and the obligated gift, versus the gift given freely, what he calls the true gift. He positions the gift-object with the alienated product—the

product designed simply to fulfill the needs of a commodity driven economy versus the gift given from the designer to the user of 'knowing' the user and fulfilling their needs.

The quilters I interviewed were quite often very sensitive to the gift as fulfilling spiritual needs along with the real / the practical. Spiritual gifts are ones which can not be purchased, they can only be made.

"Now I have five grandchildren...I want them to have a quilt for the future. And if I'm still selling [my quilts] when it comes time for them, then I'll go buy something [for them] at Walmart! Does that make sense?! No." (Valance)

It is from this sense of creating as giving that the corollary 'art as gift' comes. Art is often spoken of in terms of the spiritual, of its reach. Art is often indistinguishable from gift as people are so often moved by art to greater understanding. Standing in front of a great quilt one feels that one has been given the gift of seeing. Art shares the realm of the spiritual. It is for this reason that it often feels inappropriate, even profane, to speak of art in market terms to reduce it down to a price tag. A documentary made in 1991 called *Relative Values* followed the 'selling' of art in the marketplace of auctions, galleries and dealers. Quite often the documentary was downright hilarious. For example, a scene captures a woman 'marketing' Vincent van Gogh's painting *The Sunflowers* over the phone to potential buyers. She could have been hocking swamp land in Florida. The inappropriateness of her demeanor, the obvious lack of deference defies our notions of art and leaves a gap that only laughter can fill.

Along with the gift that an artist gives to others as she creates, there is also a sense that the artist is receiving a gift—the ability to create and thus we refer to the talented as gifted. So often artists will feel that they are simply a medium for the transference of gifts. That creation flows through them and they receive the gift to create and are then able to pass that on in the true spirit of the gift. Hyde speaks to these ideas extensively in the later half of his book, *The Commerce of the Creative Spirit*.

"As essential portion of any artist's labor is not creation so much as invocation. Part of the work cannot be made, it must be received; and we cannot have this gift except, perhaps, by supplication, by courting, by creating within ourselves that 'begging bowl' to which the gift is drawn." (Hyde, p. 143)

As vigorously as Hyde argues the case of art as spiritual thus inherently part of the gift culture versus the marketplace, Louisa Buck and Philip Dodd put forth a different take on art in their book of the same name as the documentary, *Relative Values or What's Art Worth?*. Interestingly, they more often than not end up supporting the contention that art as something other than market commodity. As the following quotes indicate art is simply not the same.

"Collectors and patrons who have made their wealth in other areas of life need art to be a protected species which can provide them with status and aesthetic experiences that their money-making activities cannot deliver." (Buck, p. 163)

"But the problems of trying to analyze sectors of the art market as though they were identical to all other markets is clear when one asks the following questions: does the art market treat art like any other commodity, or are the commodities with which the market deals converted into art by the process of the market?" (Buck, p. 61)

However, there are voices quoted throughout the book that try to refute the art as spiritual gift proposition. Does art spiritualize the marketplace or does the market de-spiritualize art? Or as the following artist contends do they have to be separate and delineated?

"Marketplaces...can be hotbeds of human exchange and interaction. They can be sites of pleasure and passion, sources of anarchistic energy. In our culture, the pleasure of this anarchy is reserved for the few. So when we set art against commerce, we distort both...To define art as a *spiritual* activity, and then to deny human commerce any spiritual value, well, that's ludicrous' Allan McCollum, artist" (Buck, p. 66)

Gifts of Transition

A clearer division between gift and market is evidenced by gifts of transition—selling rather than giving at certain times and within certain relationships is unthinkable. The transformative power of the gift is a concrete expression of our emotions at times of change—birth, death, stages of life. We give gifts when a child is born, when they leave school, when people marry and on anniversaries that celebrate this event of transformation. Of ten the gifts are purposeful in that they help people in their transition from one stage of life to another. Gifts of transformation are the most prevalent within the quilt making community. Almost all the quilters I spoke with marked the momentous occasions in their family life by making and giving. Familiar quilt genres have developed out of this connection—baby quilts, wedding quilts have their own designs, naming conventions and materials. In particular, wedding quilts symbolize the support and help that a community intends for the new couple starting out and typically setting up their own household. It is also an important site of kinship bonding a process often completed through gift giving mechanisms. Mary Corcoran, a Toronto artist, describes the process of the making of a group quilt to mark the marriage of her daughter.

"It was an expression of community love and support...It was a very bonding thing to do between the families. Because I know some of the weddings that I've gone to in my past, the bride's family sits on one side and the groom's on the other and it is kind of like *we* and *they*. And they sit there surveying the far side and wondering who this new group is that they may have to live with or perhaps never see again. And I didn't want that to happen." (Corcoran)

Mary's daughter's response to the wedding quilt was equally indicative of the importance of gift at that time in her life. "In her email she wrote that this was the most incredible gift that she had ever been given." (Corcoran)

Gift as Legacy

Customs of funereal gift giving, the transformation from life to spirit, often are the weightiest of all gift giving experiences. In times of death the giving can move in various directions. The living can support the newly dead—helping them to complete a successful transition to spirit. Many myths and folk tales recount stories of the need to help the dead in this manner. If the gift giving is circumvented or interrupted the spirit who has not transitioned successfully comes back to haunt or plague the living. But there is also the gift that the dead give back to the living. At a material level the living often inherit the most precious of the deceased's possessions as a way of holding onto a part of the person. The deceased has also left behind a spiritual legacy that the living must honour or face the often dire consequences of defiling that gift. This defilement is often caused by converting gifts into market economies.

“...few scholars have asked hard questions about why families have sold quilts that had been passed down through generations, and no one has drawn attention to the fact that Holstein and others have made fortunes on their collections while the individuals from whom quilts were bought made a few hundred dollars at most.” (Bernick, p. 138)

Creating heirlooms is a major preoccupation within the quilt making population and their families. The quilts that will be passed down from generation to generation are the most important quilts a quilter will make.

“Family members often encourage fancy quilters ‘to spend long hours at the quilting frame producing an item they know will eventually be theirs.’” (Bernick, p. 140)

Various concerns are often reiterated by the quilters I spoke with about legacy. The legacy quilt must be worthy of that important function—it is often the most time consuming quilt a woman will make. This quilt must express what the quilter holds dear—their level of skill, their idea of what patterns and designs best embody what they would like people to remember of them. An interesting concern that several women mentioned was that the quilt contain their physicality—they expressed the hope that their actual DNA, genetic coding be preserved by using fabrics they have worn or that in the process of working on the quilt that it become imbued with this coding. Again the majority of women interviewed expressed the desire that their gifts be used. The quilters felt even legacy quilts should be functional not just preserved—the gift should stay in circulation—once again the gifts must continue to give or cease to be gifts.

Gift as Transcendence

“...anything contained within a boundary must contain as well its own exhaustion...for we are only alive to the degree that we can let ourselves be moved...” (Hyde, p. 20)

If gifts are agents of transition they also function as powerful symbols and devices of transcendence. The gift has the unique ability to cross boundaries, to transcend and in doing so bestows these qualities, this movement, on the recipient. In particular the art of a culture contains the recipe for transcendence. Buck and Dobb in their writing refer often to the transcendent power of art and contrast it with the earthbound world of the market economy.

"Why is it that the rich and powerful—or those who wish to become so—gravitate towards art? In what terms do they value art? What do they think they are getting when they buy it? A kind of immortality? Something that will redeem their money-making activities?" (Buck, p. 18)

Gifts also help us transcend the limitations of our own physicality. Art/spirit/gift is often seen as the antidote to spiritual or physical pain. It is the distraction, the call to higher spirit and the path to enlightenment. As evidence of its lofty position consider the conditions which we often view art—in almost mausoleum style museums or white walled galleries—both sites of quiet contemplation and reverence.

"But there are few investments that can offer the rich the return that art does: secular immortality."
(Buck, p. 105)

Within the quilting community this power of transcendence is often expressed as a wrapping of warmth, protection and love that a quilt can provide. Particularly in times of physical sickness the quilt is viewed as part of the healing, infused as it is with spirit, the power of gift and love/eros. One quilter told me that when she feels ill she will wrap herself in a quilt that covered her father as he lay dying. She experienced the quilt as endowed with the spirit her father left as legacy and sensed its ability to share that spirit and hasten her healing processes.

Women's Role in the Gift Giving Economy

"...so long as these assumptions rule, a disquieting sense of triviality, of worthlessness even, will nag the woman or man who labours in the service of a gift and whose products are not adequately described as commodities..." (Hyde, p. xiv)

It should come as no surprise that gift giving, the unheralded activity that it is, is the providence of women within our culture. Traditional roles within the paternal family have dictated women's position as the vessel for the eros thus their importance within gift giving traditions. They are the 'amateurs' creating out of spirit without the need for market valuation. Naturally, this is a hotly contested issue. This position can be equally viewed as confining and oppressive or, on the flip side, liberating in that women are not forced to validate their work in terms of the market and thus freer to experience spiritual dictates.

In his writing on gift, Hyde dedicates a chapter of his work to the position of women within gift giving traditions. He actually tackles the tricky issue of the giving away of women as part of gift exchange as possessions that have worth as gifts. The discussion of 'woman as gift' is outside the scope of this essay but it does underline the intimate connection women have with gift in contemporary society. Even though it is rare for a woman to be blatantly 'given away' in North American culture, she often is still looked to as the facilitator, advocate and instigator of gift giving. Within the quilting world this is particularly true.

"Quilts represent home, family, and community values rather than monetary ones, even to women who sell their work, which is probably why they are willing to part with their quilts for such staggeringly low sums. What I find significant, however, is that quilters express less conflict

between utilitarian and aesthetic values than they do between the cluster of associations they attach to quilts and money. That a quilt is useful, in other words, is part of what makes it beautiful. That a homemade artifact, embedded in the history of a family, might have a high monetary value, on the other hand, is often not a welcome or even salient feature of quilt-ownership within the traditional quilt culture. Contrast this with the assumption made by most participants in the artworld that utility *detracts* from aesthetic value, may indeed, even disqualify an artifact as a work of art, while monetary value, when it is not considered irrelevant, is seen as enhancing its value as a work of art." (Bernick, p. 141)

Once again the scope of this discussion is immense. In asking quilters about their thoughts on this conundrum the responses were unwavering. The women felt their position was enriching and superior. Is this the response of a group of marginalized people desperately searching for a way to validate their position or is a wisdom learnt through creating and giving?

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