

## RECEIVING KINDNESS

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Last week I was queuing to pay for my parking. The person in front of me had a R100 note to pay for her R5 parking. My parking was free. I had been there under an hour.

She was asking around the queue for change and I gave her my R5. Simple reason – I knew that the last time I paid with a large note, I got the change in 50c pieces!! That would be R95 change in coins she would get.

When she realized that I was giving it to her for her parking because I didn't need it, she became edgy and refused it – and paid with her R100 getting R95 back in silver and copper coins.

Now while it was entirely her choice as to whether to take my R5 or not, I was left saddened by her embarrassment that I, in effect, had offered to pay for her parking. Passing me a few minutes later on our way to our respective cars, she shook her head firmly and said “no no, I could not possibly take your money.” I reassured her that it was fine either way and went on with my day.

So what happened here? I hadn't offered to pay off her bond or for her child's high school education. It was opportune that I had R5 in hand and was 10 mins short of having to pay for my parking and she didn't have R5. That's all.

But something else happened that seemed far more complex than the simple impulsive gesture intended.

Social interactions require reciprocity. Friendships and relationships, in fact society, cannot prosper without give and take. Yet receiving is not easy.

We are so used to a world in which there are hidden agendas, opportunistic people and freebies with obligations, that it is understandable that we should be cautious. We are told that there is no such thing as a “free lunch”.

However we are also encouraged to “practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty”.

In fact if you do a Wikipaedia search of the term “practice random kindness”, the example is - when you pay at a toll booth, to also pay for the car behind you. The reason – none at all except to spread kindness.

Kindness is infectious, so is generosity.

Giving and receiving are fundamental behaviours that connect all life into an interdependent whole.

Harville Hendrix in his book “Receiving Love” writes about how many relationship problems are caused by not being able to recognize and take in that which is good from another. In that way we are left without the nourishment of what that person has to offer.

Social theorists find that reciprocity is a concept practiced across all ancient and modern cultures. In fact in some, it is not an option to refuse something that is offered. Reciprocity is about maintaining harmony, civility and a key to a rich and balanced life.

Yet in many western cultures giving is experienced as multi layered. Dutch sociologist Aafke Komter writes that expressing positive feelings is only one motive for giving. The others may be about gaining power, promoting self interest and expressing hostility.

We might resist receiving because it feels as if it reduces us, the receiver, to the weaker position. Receiving then means that we have to give up control. It also involves giving up believing that we know everything and accepting that others have something to offer.

While dynamics of giving are acceptable in relationships of love and trust, they can make us uneasy in other contexts. There is also the fear that it looks as if we are expecting to get from others without having something to give in return or without working for it.

Laura Doyle writes that while receiving may be difficult and loaded with conflicts, if we don't learn how to do it, we are going to lose out on a lot. When we receive a gift, help or a compliment from another there is a connection that is created between you.

Being seen, loved and appreciated heals and strengthens us. But only if we accept it.

We are free to interpret and frame the experience of giving and receiving in any way that takes us out of stuck ways of thinking that limit our appreciation and enjoyment of it.

The poet Kalil Gibran in his 1923 masterpiece *The Prophet* writes “ **see first that you yourself deserve to be a giver, and an instrument of giving. For in truth it is life that gives unto life – while you, who deem yourself a giver, are but a witness.**

**And you receivers – and you are all receivers – assume no weight of gratitude lest you lay a yoke upon yourself and upon him who gives.**

**Rather rise together with the giver on his gifts as on wings”**

So..... if I had been offered the R5 for my parking would I have been able to take the gesture of goodwill graciously and comfortably? I will have to think about that.