

I have come to an unexpected place these days.

When I open my eyes in the morning, I'm astonished and awed. I look around at the bedroom, the nightstand, the sun coming in the window, all of it – and I think of how amazing it is that any of it is there, and that I am seeing and hearing and feeling it. This feeling arises again and again during my days, like a splash of cold water on my face. Wake up! Pay attention to the miracle!

For years I've woken up and just ignored the incredible fact of my existence and the existence of the world around me. Was that simply being acclimated to it, like the weather? Was I simply numb to it? Or had it become so ordinary that it was no longer worth my attention?

These days, I think there's nothing ordinary about it. What the hell is this all doing here? Why is it here? Why am I here in the midst of it all? Why are you here? That bird, that butterfly, that Walmart?

Is it natural? Unnatural? Did it spring like drop of sweat from God's brow? Or emerge from some primal explosion? There are no answers, only conjecture. You can drive yourself crazy going down that rabbit hole.

It's a miracle, this gift. Please don't ever get used to it.

That gift was also given to the person next to you, and the person next to them and so on and so on, all the way to the other side of the world and back. It was given to the animals, the plants, the bugs, the rocks and the seas, the sun and moon and stars. To all of Creation. Which is a verb, by the way.

And along with this gift of existence, we were also given other gifts. What to do with those gifts is a theme prevalent throughout the religious and spiritual traditions of the world, and it goes something like this:

Every aspect of our existence is a gift from the Spirit of Life, or God/Allah/Jehovah, or Wakan Tanka, or the Ground of Being, or the Great Mystery, or whatever you want to call its source. Our lives, our breath, our sight, our bodies, our reason. Our food, our shelter, our parents, our children, our lovers and partners. Our technology, all our stuff, the land, the water, the air.... all of these and more, every bit.... these are all gifts for us to steward in service of the greater good. We are not entitled to any of them. They do not belong to us. We just get to borrow them for a time, and they need to be returned in good shape.

For those to whom much is given, much is expected.

Because, as Lewis Hyde has written so beautifully - the gift must always move. We must always be passing these gifts along in one fashion or another, with gratitude.

Think of a whirlpool, or a tornado, the river, or a cloud. They have form only because of what is flowing through them. So it is with the world, and our lives.

A gift that is not consumed or freely passed on becomes, in Lewis Hyde's words, "a commodity." A commodity is something whose exchange is simply transactional, makes no connection, leaves no connection. They create no enduring relationships. This is why commodities are associated with both freedom and alienation.

We cannot hoard these gifts. When we do, the connections made by these gifts are broken. When the gifts of life cease to move, to flow, the world stands still and turns brittle.

Among other things, we get inequality, as great piles of these gifts are turned into profit and stop flowing, and accumulate in the hands of the few. The flow is broken, and we find ourselves in a world being consumed, eaten up.

For this is the paradox of the gift. When the gift is used, it is not used up. I think of the story I was told as a child, the parable of the loaves and fishes. What is given away feeds again and again, while what is held onto feeds only once and leaves us hungry for more.

Our gifts must be returned to the world and to the great circle of life. And that, quite simply, is how we are called to live.

And as the gifts pass through our lives and our hands and our hearts, we bless them and add to them, and send them on, so that the world may thrive in mutual flourishing.

This is not just a prayer, but a way of action, of being in the world.