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The Gift Presented as a Symbol

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Thesis

THE GIFT PRESENTED
AS A SYMBOL

By

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requirements for the degree of
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2009

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AS A SYMBOL

By

Brice J. Tennant

APPROVED

by

First Reader

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert C. Neville". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends across the page.

Dr. Robert C. Neville
Professor of Philosophy, Religion, and Theology

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To my grandmother
who taught me the art
of *via media*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This thesis represents a theological reconfiguration of a mind. The mind theologically reconfigured is that of the author. During its juvenile and adolescent years, this mind's orientation was shaped by a theological paradigm entrenched in American Protestant Fundamentalism. Through this fundamentalist environment the author's mind was trained in the way of theological literalism that revolved around an entrenched Biblicism. The accounts contained in the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, were literally, factually, and actually historically true.¹ God literally made the world in seven days; Job's boils, trials, and conversation with God actually occurred; Jonah actually lived three days in the belly of a whale; and the miracles Jesus did: the feedings, the healings, the exorcisms, were factual events. Jesus was literally the Son of God, second person of the literal Trinity. Jesus was literally both God and human. Jesus literally died for the sins of humanity and literally resurrected. Jesus literally would return, and the New Jerusalem would literally have streets of gold. Literalism was a blunt instrument that pressed this young boy's mind to try to make sense out of that which seemed beyond belief.²

¹ The author was not familiar with terms such as "Hebrew Bible" or "Christian Bible" at this time. He knew the Bible only as *The Bible*.

² It is interesting to note that amidst this culture of literalism, the Eucharist and baptism were both interpreted as symbolic rites; but, a theory of symbolism was not explicitly expounded.

During undergraduate studies in theology, Christian history, and biblical studies at a moderate Evangelical institution, the author's mind encountered material that shattered his theological worldview. The historical veracity of the biblical accounts was jettisoned along with the theological claims that accompanied them. The author no longer believed that Jesus was both God and human, that miracles and resurrection occurred, or that God was a Trinity. On many days, this burgeoning adult mind did not believe in God at all.

Eclipsing a span of years, the author undertook further graduate work in theological studies at Boston University, School of Theology. During the first year of coursework, the author had the distinct privilege of attending seminars, conversing with, and reading books by Dr. Robert Neville, Professor of Philosophy, Religion, and Theology. Through these multifarious engagements the author was introduced to a different theological approach, a symbolic approach. When this symbolic way of thinking became clear, a realization unfolded before the author's mind: although the fundamentalist theology had been deconstructed and replaced by a figurative and metaphorical theology, an undergirding of literalism had still remained. The theological doctrines of the author's past had been rejected or significantly reinterpreted since they were literally not "true." However, the standard of "literal" still remained an active criterion of judgment. With the introduction of symbolic theology, the author discovered a refreshing mode of thinking. Theological statements such as "God is Trinity" and "Jesus has risen" need not be literally "true," but may be symbolically "true." They may

disclose something about the nature of reality as human beings experience it without being historically factual.³

The argument that unfolds below is the author's first formal move toward constructing a symbolic theology. It is a glimpse of a broader vision that possesses this maturing theologian. This broader vision revolves around gift exchange, and the author perceives that gift exchange may be a fecund symbol for his enduring theological reflection. By conceiving of gift exchange as a symbol this theologian may then be able to critique economic, social, and ethical theories by presenting alternative perspectives enriched by a gift orientation.⁴ As the first step toward this vision, this piece asserts that the characteristics of gift exchange are remarkably commensurate with the characteristics of symbolic engagement, and thus, a reasonable case may be made for viewing the gift, the locus of gift exchange, as a symbol. The progression of the argument is outlined below.

In chapter two preliminary elements of the argument are laid out. Working definitions of "gift" and "symbol" are presented along with terminology geared toward enhancing clarity and cohesiveness. The chapter opens with a principal piece of the argument, that gift exchange and symbolic usage both have an intrinsic triadic structure

³ The author is not implying that symbols lack a diachronic heritage. The point at hand is that the origins of symbols need not be actual events. They may have completely fictive origins and still remain meaningful and "true."

⁴ Such a practice is not alien to gift exchange for Marcel Mauss launched his investigation into gift exchange as "an organized onslaught on contemporary political theory." Mary Douglas, forward to *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls (London: W. W. Norton, 1990), viii.

that, consequently, makes relationship a fundamentally shared characteristic. With this finding established, the eight relational categories to be considered are identified. The next move of the argument appears in the second section of the chapter when the noteworthy commonality, that gifts and symbols function as relational instruments, is developed.

In chapter three the argument continues with the elementary observation that human bodies are necessary for gift exchange and symbolic engagement and that in order for distinct bodies to be in relationship, ritual bridges are required. Since the numerical and ontological composition of the parties involved in gift exchange and symbolic usage fluctuate, an assortment of ritual bridges are needed to facilitate interaction. The second division of the chapter expounds characteristics of ritual (repetition, time, space, tools and technology, and invariance) that are evident in both gift exchange and symbolic use. By means of examples drawn from ordinary American experience, it becomes clear that gifts and symbols mutually utilize ritual bridges and are both shaped by characteristics of ritual.

In chapter four the argument reaches its apex when it is shown that gifts communicate content in the same manner as symbols. Symbols relate to their objects conventionally, iconically, and indexically and transmit content that accords with the respect of the relation. In addition, gifts and symbols are shown to communicate not only through presence, but also through absence when their exchange and employment is expected. When these findings are combined with the preceding discoveries, the weight

of the argument shifts favorably and persuasively toward the thesis that gifts are appropriately viewed as symbols.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STRUCTURAL AND INSTRUMENTAL SIMILARITY BETWEEN GIFT AND SYMBOL

Gift exchange and symbolism have an elementary commonality: relationship. Gift exchange and symbolism are impossible without relationship, and relationship is essential to their internal structure. Gifts are given to someone and objects are symbolized by someone. The connection gift exchange and symbolism have with relationship is not exhausted by structure alone for gifts and symbols are used by parties as relational instruments. Through the instrumental use of gifts and symbols, parties initiate, stabilize, and terminate relationships. This two-fold commonality will be elaborated below. First, the structural commonality of gift exchange and symbolism will be explored, and the unalterable triadic structure that makes relationship intrinsic to gift exchange and symbolism will be highlighted. This discussion will be followed by a brief delineation of the terms that will be employed per structural element along with working definitions for “gift” and “symbol.” Second, the instrumental role that gifts and symbols play in the initiation, stabilization, and termination of relationships will be developed.

Triadic Structure and Terminology

Gift exchange and symbolism share a basic triadic structure. Gift exchange and symbolism consist of two parties separated by a third intervening object, the gift or the

symbol respectively. The numerical composition of each party may vary and parity between the parties is not required for the triadic relationship to function. Also, the ontological nature, or “reality,” of the parties may differ; for example, a human being may gift to a deity. Yet, no matter the party’s numerical or ontological composition (or existence) the triadic structure of two parties linked by an intervening object remains intact.

In order to distinguish between the two parties involved in gift exchange the terms “giver” and “donor” will represent the initiating party of the exchange and the terms “receiver,” “receptor,” and “donee” will represent the receiving party of the exchange. Effort will be spent on pairing “giver” with “receiver” or “receptor” and “donor” with “donee” to minimize confusion. “Gift” will be the lone term representing the intervening object of the exchange thereby maintaining clarity while facing the risk of redundancy.

In respect to the triadic components of symbolism the terms “significator,” “subject,” and “interpretant” will indicate the party utilizing the symbol while the terms “signified,” “object,” and “referent” will denote the party addressed by the symbol. Consistent pairing will also occur between “significator” and “signified,” “subject” and “object,” and “interpretant” and “referent.” The terms “symbol” and “signifier” will stand in for the intervening component of the triad.¹

¹ For easy reference, the pairing of the terms is as follows:
 Gift exchange: giver-gift-receiver/receptor, donor-gift-donee.
 Symbolism: significator-symbol/signifier-signified, subject-symbol/signifier-object, and interpretant-symbol/signifier-referent.

Although difference in the numerical and ontological composition of the parties does not disrupt the triadic structure of gift exchange or symbolism, it is useful to consider these factors when investigating the nature and tenor of the relationship that exists between the parties. Therefore, the following relational possibilities will be taken into account: (1) Individual to Individual, (2) Individual to Group, (3) Individual to X, (4) Group to Individual, (5) Group to Group, (6) Group to X, (7) X to Individual, and (8) X to Group. A “group” will entail two or more individuals that are bound by some form of commonality, and “X” will refer to deities, totems, nature, and similar conceptualizations.² The use of “X” seeks to defer questions about the ontological existence of divine entities while seeking to recognize their existence *for* the individual or group that posits and engages them.

To gain an initial foothold the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of “gift” and “symbol” will be utilized and enriched as the study proceeds. The relevant definitions for “gift” include: (1) “Something, the possession of which is transferred to another without the expectation or receipt of an equivalent; a donation, present;” (2) “Something of value proceeding from a specified source, quasi-personified as a giver;” (3) “An offering to God or to a heathen deity;” and, (4) “Something given with a corrupting intention; a

² Manufactured abstractions of self identity are placed within the category of X. As Paul Tournier describes in *The Meaning of Gifts*, “generous or parsimonious” self-gifts are made in order to reward oneself for an achievement, to console disappointments, to assuage the discomfort that accompanies some tasks, or for self-castigation. Trans. John S. Gilmour (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963), 6-9. Symbols also serve self-communicative functions as Leroy Loemker cleverly remarks, “A thread tied around my finger to remind myself of some task ... is a communication by myself of eight in the morning of three in the afternoon.” “Symbol and Myth in Philosophy,” in *Truth, Myth, and Symbol*, ed. Thomas J. J. Altizer *et al.* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 119.

bribe.”³ The relevant definitions for “symbol” are: (1) “A formal authoritative statement or summary of the religious belief of the Christian church, or of a particular church or sect; a creed or confession of faith;” (2) “Something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else (not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion, or by some accidental or conventional relation); *especially* a material object representing or taken to represent something immaterial or abstract, as a being, idea, quality, or condition; a representative or typical figure, sign, or token;”⁴ and, (3) “An object representing something sacred;” and, (4) “A written character or mark used to represent something; a letter, figure, or sign conventionally standing for some object, process, etc.”⁵

From the outset, gifts and symbols are seen to share a basal commonality since both operate within a triadic structure that is necessarily relational. Being a fixed characteristic, the triadic structure remains constant even as the numerical and ontological composition of the parties fluctuates. Eight relational categories have been identified in

³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Gift.” Preliminary notes regarding the definitions listed: The first definition connotes the “pure gift,” that which is given without any expectation of return. Due to the convincing historical research of Helmut Berking in *Sociology of Giving* and the trenchant philosophical analysis of Jacques Derrida in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* the concept of the “pure gift” will be held as a psychological possibility for the giver who may feel as though the gift is given altruistically, but will not be maintained for the psychology of the receiver since the evidence suggests that a sense of debt, even if minimally registered, accompanies accepted gifts. Aafke Komter supports this distinction in his definition of gift giving. He writes, “Although gift giving in most cases objectively conforms to the principle of reciprocity, subjectively it is felt to be an essentially noneconomic, spontaneous, and altruistic activity, meant to communicate personal feelings instead of being an exchange transaction.” *Social Solidarity and the Gift* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 39. Definition number three will be occasionally referenced, but the author wishes to avoid detailed discussion about the nature and role of sacrifice, though no doubt a worthy topic. Definition number four is listed as obsolete by the *OED*, but is retained here for mindfulness since the impetus to control and bribe is still found to be a live motive fueling some gift exchanges.

⁴ Emphasis in the original.

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Symbol.”

order to flesh out the subtleties that arise when gifts and symbols travel between individuals, groups, and X. And, for clarity, the terms to be utilized and the manner in which they are paired has been outlined along with introductory definitions of “gift” and “symbol” that provide a starting point from which to build.

Gift and Symbol as Instruments of Relationship

Gifts and symbols are not only structurally relational, but are also capable of facilitating and marking periods of relationship. Gifts and symbols are used to initiate relationships, stabilize relationships, and terminate relationships. When negotiating the initial period of a relationship, gifts and symbols function as a lubricant that serves to diminish the degree of friction and anxiety caused when distinct parties come into contact.⁶ The symbolic gestures seen in greeting rituals, e.g., an offered hand or a bowing of the head, indicate sociability.⁷ So too gifts, e.g., a cocktail purchased to prompt an introduction or a gift given to a visiting dignitary, foster geniality by generating a modicum of gratitude. The Western etymology of “symbol” further highlights its role in the introductory stages of relationship. In ancient Greece the symbol was an object, a token that had been broken in two with one half given to each party for the purpose of

⁶ Arnold van Gennep notes that gift exchange is a common feature of rites of incorporation, those rites which facilitate the incorporation of “the stranger” into the group. *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 28. Gift exchange is useful in introductory encounters since “exchanges have a direct constraining effect: to accept a gift is to be bound to the giver.” *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁷ Ronald Grimes classifies greeting gestures as decorous ritual behaviors that not only display sociability but also “roles, statuses, and interpersonal intentions.” *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, re. ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 46.

future validation of identity. The Greek term *symbolos* “referred literally to the putting together of that which had been divided.”⁸

Generally, gifts are exchanged with greater frequency during times of relational insecurity and instability.⁹ The increase in frequency is due to a key attribute of gift exchange—exchanging gifts creates relational bonds. Gifts not only express the intentions and emotions of the giver, but when accepted, gifts place obligations upon the receiver.¹⁰ The goodwill generated by the gift is coupled with an obligation to reciprocate which keeps the parties engaged.¹¹ Momentary reflection upon the gifting behavior of couples embarking on a romantic journey illustrates this point. It is exemplified further when one hears the common recollection, “When we were dating, he/she used to give me so many gifts.” As the period of insecurity transitions into security, the frequency of gifts tends to lessen.

⁸ Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 47.

⁹ Theodore Caplow writes, “What the ethnographic literature on gift giving does suggest is that ritualized gift giving, in any society, is a method of dealing with relationships that are important but insecure. Gifts are typically offered to persons or collectivities whose goodwill is needed but cannot be taken for granted.” “Christmas Gifts and Kin Networks,” *American Sociological Review* 47, no. 3 (1982): 391.

¹⁰ Komter states, “Gifts make people feel morally bound to one another because of the mutual expectations and obligations to return the gift that arise as a consequence.” *Social Solidarity and the Gift*, 43.

¹¹ Although gifts tend to minimize relational tension, Barry Schwartz indicates that “givers and receivers do not always believe in the role they are playing” which produces anxiety and “guilt over the insincerity;” therefore, “the ritual of gift exchange is not understandable by its anxiety-reducing qualities alone; it is itself a generator of anxiety.” “The Social Psychology of the Gift,” *American Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 1 (1967): 7.

The use of symbols to assuage insecurity has ancient roots and is manifest in the interplay between known and unknown, order and disorder. Dexterously describing the old, yet perennial context, Mircea Eliade writes,

In archaic and traditional societies, the surrounding world is conceived as a microcosm. At the limits of this closed world begins the domain of the unknown, of the formless. On this side there is ordered—because inhabited and organised [sic]—space; on the other, outside the familiar space, there is the unknown and dangerous region of the demons, the ghosts, the dead and of foreigners—in a word, chaos or death or night.¹²

The powers of disorder and chaos, whether human or inanimate, were not satisfied with residing on the borders of ordered life, but actively sought to demolish the known and the ordered and return it to chaos.¹³ In order to protect against the intrusion of chaos, symbols were employed along the borders of the known, civilized region.¹⁴

Relationships may also be terminated by means of gifts and symbols.¹⁵ By offering a gift that is repulsive to the sensibilities of the receiver, especially when motivated by the clear intent to deeply offend, the probability of maintaining a congenial

¹² Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 37-38.

¹³ Describing this antagonism, Eliade writes, “Because they attack, and endanger the equilibrium and the very life of the city (or of any other inhabited and organised [sic] territory), enemies are assimilated to demonic powers, trying to reincorporate the microcosm into the state of chaos; that is, to suppress it. The destruction of an established order, the abolition of an archetypal image, was equivalent to a regression into chaos, into the pre-formal, undifferentiated state that preceded the cosmogony.” *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39. It seems fair to say that symbols of the “Centre,” e.g., a temple, a mountain, a tree, have a radiating effect that also protects against the “outside” forces. See pp. 41-47 for Eliade’s elucidation of symbols of the Centre.

¹⁵ According to van Gennep gift exchange also features in rites of separation, those situations where the individual leaves his or her group thereby becoming “the stranger” to another group and where the once incorporated stranger takes leave of the new group. *Rites of Passage*, 35-36.

relationship is slim.¹⁶ Presenting a life-long vegetarian with a gift of smoked salmon or an advocate for endangered wildlife with a hunting safari sufficiently illustrates this point. Other modes of giving or not giving also indicate termination of relationship. One mode appears when a donee reciprocates a gift of exact value to the original donor.¹⁷ A second mode occurs when one refrains from giving a gift when the context calls for or “requires” an offering to be made.¹⁸ And the returning of formerly accepted gifts is another mode that signals the cessation of the relationship.¹⁹

History provides ample situations where symbols have been used to end relationships. A most obvious example is a yellow Star of David forced upon Jews marking them for civic, and potentially physical, death. The shaving of a slave’s hair and subsequent branding marked the end of the slave’s relationship with freedom in America. Not all gifts and symbols used to terminate relationships occur within the mood of hostility or ill will, for example, receiving a gold watch upon retirement, but such

¹⁶ Schwartz observes that both parties of a gift exchange judge the gift “according to some frame of reference” and that “a giver may therefore express contempt for the recipient by purchasing for him an inferior gift.” “Social Psychology of the Gift,” 5.

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸ Theodore Caplow, “Rule Enforcement without Visible Means: Christmas Gift Giving in Middletown,” *American Journal of Sociology* 89, no. 6 (1984): 1321. To use Caplow’s example, a husband who abstains from giving his wife a Christmas gift signals a desire to dissolve the relationship. Ibid.

¹⁹ If not a holistic cessation of relationship, at least a cessation of the former manner of the relationship.

extreme conditions unambiguously expose the point and show the relational potency of gifts and symbols.²⁰

Gifts and symbols not only have an indelible relational structure, but they also have the capacity to instrumentally impact relationships. Gifts and symbols may be used to initiate relationships, stabilize valuable relationships that are threatened, and signal the termination of relationships. With the elucidation of these similarities complete, the way is now open to discuss another host of significant characteristics that gifts and symbols share, those that fall under the auspices of ritual.

²⁰ The example of the gold watch comes from Schwartz. Schwartz holds that “the gold watch presented at retirement is normally more representative of a feeling of good riddance than of recognition for achievement; it is indeed a gilded ‘pink slip.’” “Social Psychology of the Gift,” 6.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RITUAL ASPECTS OF GIFT AND SYMBOL

Thus far it has been shown that gift exchange and symbolism are constitutionally relational due to their unalterable triadic structure and that gifts and symbols are used to initiate, stabilize, and terminate relationships between parties of diverse composition. In this chapter a second constitutional element will be presented. In order for gift exchange and symbolic engagement to transpire, human bodies are required. And for distinct entities to interact, ritual bridges are needed. Given the fluctuating composition of the parties capable of exchanging gifts and employing symbols, a variety of ritual bridges must be utilized. Following the elucidation of these bridges, the ritual characteristics of repetition, time, space, tools and technology, and invariance are elaborated in conjunction with their impact on gifts and symbols.

Ritual Sensibilities Found in Gift and Symbol

Prior to delving into the aspects of ritual that are manifest in the use of symbols and the exchange of gifts, an obvious, yet essential component must be pointed out. For gift exchange, symbolic usage, and ritual to transpire, action is required.¹ And, in order for there to be enactment, physical bodies are necessary.² Gift exchange requires

¹ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, no. 110 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 37.

² Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 66.

embodied action for the selection, donation, and reception of the gift. And a scepter encased in museum glass is a quiescent symbol when the museum is closed but awakens under a reflective patron's gaze. Furthermore, in the hand of a ruler, the symbolic potency is maximized. A ritual that has been transcribed, e.g., the divine liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, is a latent ritual awaiting the enlivening action of vocalization. Whether the kinesthetic movement is minimal or strenuous the human body in motion is an elementary component of gift, symbol, and ritual action.³

Moving toward more elusive observations, gift exchange and symbolic usage bring distinct parties into relationship, and, as Ronald Grimes postulates, anytime distinct entities encounter one another a "ritual bridge" is required to span the chasm of difference and facilitate interaction between them.⁴ Since the composition of parties under consideration here varies and since the purpose and motivation fueling their interaction also varies, the rules, behaviors, or "ritual bridges," governing their interaction differs accordingly.⁵ In order to illuminate the assorted ritual bridges that guide the behavior of the parties involved in gift exchange and symbolic usage, four of

³ Ernst Cassirer postulates the ability to generate symbols is a uniquely human capacity, the one that transformed humans into "humans." Describing human beings as "*animal symbolicum*," Cassirer captivantly writes, "In the human world we find a new characteristic which appears to be the distinctive mark of human life. ... Man has ... discovered a new method of adapting himself to his environment. Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the *symbolic system*. This new acquisition transforms the whole of human life. As compared with the other animals man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives ... in a new *dimension* of reality." *An Essay on Man: an Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 26, 24. Italics in the original.

⁴ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 45.

⁵ Recall the following relational categories utilized in this piece: (1) Individual to Individual, (2) Individual to Group, (3) Individual to X, (4) Group to Individual, (5) Group to Group, (6) Group to X, (7) X to Individual, and (8) X to Group.

Grimes' six "modes of ritual sensibilities" will be utilized: decorum, ceremony, magic, and liturgy.⁶

The sensibility of decorum is the primary ritual bridge for Individual to Individual encounters, and, consequently, decorous behavior undergirds every relationship where an individual is involved.⁷ Decorous actions are conventional, that is, they are socially approved behaviors that foster sociability and enable social movement.⁸ Decorum instructs individuals on when and how to give/receive gifts and use symbols in ways that are socially acceptable. Decorous ritual behavior is quickly revealed in gift exchange and symbolic usage by examples of nonconformity. Consider a parent blurting out the content of child's birthday gift before the child has had the opportunity to independently discover it or a congregant partaking of the Eucharist prior to the words of institution; these behaviors clearly violate decorous protocols.

Decorous acts are primarily transmitted by acculturation, and the transmission may be so subtle that it becomes "invisible to practitioners."⁹ This subtlety easily translates into a failure of individuals to recognize the "optional character" of decorous

⁶ Grimes' mode of "ritualization" will not be discussed since ritualized acts are foundational to human behavior and "flow with or without our conscious assent." *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 42. The other mode of "celebration" is not currently relevant, but would be pertinent when discussing expressions of gratitude in response to the gift. Grimes recognizes that ritual behaviors are not readily and cleanly parsed into these six categories, but when behaviors and events exhibit a predominance of one sensibility over the others he sees classification to be useful. *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷ Decorous patterns are, therefore, foundational for group interactions as well.

⁸ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 46. In his study of Christmas gift giving rules, Caplow frequently notes that participants consistently conform to rules and patterns of behavior unknowingly. Regarding the recorded behavior of Christmas gift exchange in Middletown, Caplow writes, "In effect, the rules of the game are unfamiliar to the players, even though they can be observed to play meticulously by the rules." "Rule Enforcement," 1317.

ritual behavior.¹⁰ And, according to Roy Rappaport, the majority of ritual acts share this characteristic of invisibility. Rappaport asserts that participants “do not specify all the acts and utterances constituting their own performances. They follow, more or less punctiliously, orders established or taken to have been established, by others.”¹¹ The acts of ritual are, or are perceived to be, inherited, and participants do not perceive themselves to be innovators. Decorum’s tendency toward invisibility is captured in the following account given by Theodore Caplow:

Nobody in Middletown seems to be consciously aware of the norm that requires married couples with children of any age to put up a Christmas tree, yet the obligation is so compelling that, of the 77 respondents ... only one ... failed to do so. Few of the written laws that agents of the state attempt to enforce with endless paperwork and threats of violence are so well obeyed as this unwritten rule that is promulgated by no identifiable authority and backed by no evident threat. Indeed, the existence of the rule goes unnoticed. People in Middletown think that putting up a Christmas tree is an entirely voluntary act. They know that it has some connection with children, but they do not understand that married couples with children of any age are effectively required to have trees and that childless unmarried people are somehow prevented from having them. Middletown people do not consciously perceive the Christmas tree as a symbol of the complete nuclear family (father, mother, and one or more children). Those to whom we suggested that possibility seemed to resent it.¹²

As this valuable account describes, decorous ritual behavior informs the actions of individuals in respect to symbols without the participants directly apprehending the applicable behavioral codes. In this case families install the symbolically pregnant Christmas tree, not because external authorities dictate such, but because “that’s just how things are done.”

¹⁰ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 46.

¹¹ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 32.

¹² Caplow, “Rule Enforcement,” 1310.

The sensibility of ceremony moves beyond decorously governed Individual to Individual encounters into the realm of those occurring between Individual to Group and Group to Individual. Ceremonious ritual has a secondary impact on Group to Group encounters too. Through ceremonial ritual the individual is “invited,” according to Grimes, “to surrender idiosyncrasies and independence to some larger cause.”¹³ Under these conditions the individual adopts a subordinate position toward the group and the group assumes a dominant position toward the individual.

A particular example drawn from the life of Martin Luther King illustrates the effects of a Group to Individual gift exchange. When the Nobel Peace Prize was bestowed upon MLK in 1964 his vision and energies that had been focused on race relations in America began to broaden to include world-wide concerns. Under the force of international recognition, King began to weigh his idiosyncrasies, e.g., philosophical views and social strategies that had been geared toward American problems, against international concerns of racism, war, and poverty.¹⁴

Ceremonious ritual behavior, while subsuming the individual to the group, is also characteristically competitive in relation to other groups. Ceremony tends toward polarizing perception “often dividing the world into ‘us’ and ‘them.’”¹⁵ Polarization is achieved by shedding nuanced understanding for forms and stylized actions that disclose

¹³ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 47.

¹⁴ King writes, “I now had to give a great deal of attention to the three problems which I considered as the largest of those that confront mankind: racial injustice around the world, poverty, and war.” *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: Intellectual Properties Management / Warner Books, 1998), 262.

¹⁵ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 48.

competitiveness through exaggerated confidence and defensiveness. As Grimes describes, during ceremonial ritual, “The ‘other side’ is caricatured, since ceremony both expresses and creates ‘our’ solidarity as opposed to ‘theirs.’”¹⁶

An event laden with symbols employed ceremoniously is the United States naturalization ceremony.¹⁷ During the ceremony individuals moving through the process of obtaining citizenship, while raising their right hand, speak the following oath:

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by **the** law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.¹⁸

The ceremony is a celebrative event for those acquiring citizenship, but a close reading of the oath swiftly uncovers the assimilative and dominant features of the ceremonial ritual bridge. The individual is to “abjure” former personal allegiances and submit to the governance of the United States “without *any* mental reservation or purpose of evasion.” Here idiosyncrasies are exchanged for the identity of the group. The polarizing and combative aspects of the ceremony are evident when the individual swears to “abjure”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ A brief, yet incomplete, list of symbols exercised during the ceremony follows: (1) American flag, (2) Pledge of Allegiance, (3) Singing of the Star Spangled Banner, (4) Standing for the Oath and the Pledge, and (5) Judge’s robe and gavel.

¹⁸ “Oath of Allegiance for Naturalized Citizens,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; available from <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.5af9bb95919f35e66f614176543f6d1a/?vgnextoid=931696981298d010VgnVCM10000048f3d6a1RCRD>; Internet; accessed 23 June 2009. Emphasis in the original.

‘them’ and to “bear true faith and allegiance” to ‘us’ while also swearing to “support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America *against* all enemies.”

Magic as a ritual sensibility engages the relational parties of Individual to X, Group to X, X to Individual, and X to Group. Magical ritual behavior operates within a mechanical, causal framework where the individual or group presumes, or willfully suspends disbelief, that a certain act or set of actions will automatically cause X to enact a determined effect. Just as one cogwheel turns another, so too does a magical rite move X.¹⁹ Consequently, in terms of relationship, the individual or group views X as a means to a desired end, and X has severely restricted autonomy and is controlled by the individual or group.²⁰ The sermons of “prosperity gospel” ministers provide abundant examples of the magical ritual sensibility and gift exchange. In these sermons congregants are informed that if they give ten percent or more of their income it will “activate” or “release” the blessings of God toward them.²¹

The ritual sensibility of liturgy is the bridge that facilitates the encounter between Group to X and X to Group. The goal of liturgical ritual is for participants to become “attuned to the way things are;” to experience a “tapping [into] the way (*tao*) things flow or connecting with the order and reason (*logos*) that things manifest.”²² Liturgical

¹⁹ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 49. Grimes defines the ritual sensibility of magic as “any element of ritual understood as means to an end. If a rite not only has meaning but also works, it is magical. Insofar as it is a deed having transcendent reference and accomplishes some desired empirical result, a rite is magical.” *Ibid.*, 48-49.

²⁰ Clearly, if the desired end does not occur, the efficaciousness of the ritual is called into question.

²¹ For a contemporary example see Pastor Creflo Dollar’s sermon, “Tithing Divine Insurance,” available from www.creflodollarministries.org.

²² Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 51.

behaviors reflect a relational posture of receptivity wherein the participants wait upon the disclosure of X. X responds to the receptivity of the participants and discloses “the way things ultimately are.”²³ Due to the sublimity that liturgy strives for, liturgical actions may tend toward the awkward and “clumsy” as participants seek that which is beyond their ken.²⁴ The Christian observance of Easter, particularly the period between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, provides an example of both gift and symbol within the context of liturgical passivity and anticipation where the resurrected Christ becomes a symbol for the reality of the gift of forgiveness, reconciliation between God and the participant.

To this point it has been established that encounters between distinct entities of variegated composition are shaped by the ritual bridges of decorum, ceremony, magic, and liturgy. Interaction between individuals is facilitated by saturating decorous ritual behaviors that have been invisibly imbibed by individuals, while ceremonial ritual sensibilities surface when individuals encounter groups and are subsumed under the identity of the group. The sensibility of magic ritual action manifests when individuals or groups seek to mechanically manipulate X for a predetermined outcome, while, contrastingly, liturgical ritual patterns move groups to wait in anticipation for disclosure about the nature of reality from X. By means of winnowed examples the presence of these ritual bridges in gift exchange and symbolic employment has been demonstrated.

²³ Ibid. Grimes states, “Every liturgy aspires to answer every question, to declare, ‘This is the way things are.’” Ibid., 52.

²⁴ Ibid., 51.

Repetition, Time, Space, Tools and Technology, and Invariance

Turning to the further exploration of ritual aspects, it will be discovered that gift exchange and symbolism exhibit three modes of repetition (occurrence, substance, form) and foster three perceptions of time (transitional, concentrated, anticipated); that space subtly communicates values and erects boundaries; that the use of tools and technology engenders heightened experience for those involved; and, that gift and symbolic events promulgate a sense of invariance to participants and observers.

Repetition may be manifest in the time of the ritual's occurrence (the annual American celebration of Thanksgiving), the substantive content of the ritual (the theme of liberation in the Jewish festival of Passover), the structure or form that the ritual takes (opening a Major League baseball game with the national anthem), or an amalgamated repetition of any of the three.²⁵ Repetition of occurrence is witnessed in gift exchange when gifts are given on birthdays or anniversaries; of substance as seen in Valentine's Day gifts that repeat the theme of love; and of structure as in the ceremonial granting of an honorary doctorate. Likewise, symbols manifest repetition in occurrence (the Roman Catholic donning of violet vestments during the Lenten season), substance (the theme of enduring commitment imbued in a wedding ring), and structure (the intersecting vertical and horizontal lines of the Christian cross).

The characteristics of time in respect to ritual may be divided into three general categories: transitional time, concentrated time, and anticipated time.²⁶ Rituals occurring

²⁵ Robbie Davis-Floyd, s.v. "Rituals," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed.

²⁶ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 70-71.

during times of transition mark “changes in social status, seasonal transitions, and moments of crisis in histories and lifecycles.”²⁷ These transitions may reoccur frequently or be “once-in-a-lifetime” events.²⁸ Concentrated time refers to how time is experienced by participants during a ritual. When participants “concentrate” on the ritual at hand, time may be “experienced both as timeless and long, as well as timely and of short duration.”²⁹ The category of anticipatory time seeks to capture how reoccurring ritual events shape and texture the lives of participants. Rituals mark time for participants by creating distinctions and cycles thereby fostering a “sense of the way things flow.”³⁰ By means of the ritual cycle, “time,” writes Grimes, “is not timeless, leaving us feeling as though it hardly exists,” but is instead, experienced as a sense of “timeful[ness]” where time “weighs on” and “reminds” the participant.³¹

In the simple example of a parent giving a child his or her first bike, transitional time is illustrated for both gift exchange and symbol. As a symbol of maturation the bike marks the child’s transition into a life of greater independence. Staying with the aforementioned gift exchange, concentrated time may be perceived when the parent presents the bike to the child. Immediately, the child’s attention is captured and concentrated on the gift (and hence, the giver). For symbol, a person may experience concentrated time when contemplating the meaning of a specific symbol or a set of

²⁷ Ibid. See van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* for a penetrating investigation into ritual events that accompany the critical transitions of human life.

²⁸ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 71.

²⁹ Ibid. The participants’ act of concentration “consecrates” the ritual according to Grimes. Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

symbols. When reflecting upon the American flag, one's attention becomes "concentrated" on this complex symbol with its symbols of 50 stars, alternating stripes, and colors: red, white, and blue. Anticipatory time is writ large for gift exchange when children bombard their parents with questions about the arrival of Christmas. The timely appearance of Cupid, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus function as symbols that create temporal distinctions and establish a cyclical rhythm for many Americans.

A brief excursus is useful at this point to discuss a commonality between symbols and gifts that also relates to time. Symbols and gifts both have a lifespan. As Paul Tillich asserts, symbols are born in a particular period in order to address a particular cultural need.³² When the culture and the need suffer significant alteration then the symbol deteriorates and dies. Similarly, gifts experience birth and death. Gifts are born in the mind of the giver and die when they have been received, or if reciprocity is taken into account, the gift dies once it has been reciprocated to the original giver. This is a structural cycle of birth and death, and this cycle parallels the cycle of a ritual event and symbolic usage. Gifts also experience another form of birth and death, one that is tied to social convention. What constitutes a gift, what determines when a gift is given, and how a gift is received and reciprocated is deeply informed by custom as Helmuth Berking shows as he traces the social evolution of gift exchange.³³ As social customs are born and

³² *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 43. Tillich writes, "Like living beings, they [symbols] grow and they die. They grow when the situation is ripe for them, and they die when the situation changes." Ibid., 43. Eliade emphasizes the intentionality behind the creation of symbols when he writes, "Images, symbols and myths are not irresponsible creations of the psyche: they respond to a need and fulfill a function, that of bringing to light the most hidden modalities of being." *Images and Symbols*, 12.

³³ Berking traces the evolution of gift exchange in Part II of *Sociology of Giving*.

die, so too with gifts—yet, symbols and gifts experience rebirth; they come to life in new contexts and then march toward death once again.

Returning to the discussion at hand, the characteristic of space is described by Grimes as “a matrix of ritual life. It is a generative center.”³⁴ The space in which rituals transpire may be permanent or transitory, but no matter its duration, space is generative since it dynamically shapes the experience of performers and observers.³⁵ Through space the values and identity of the participants are conveyed, both to themselves and to others. Space receives the values and identity of the participants by means of selection, design, and construction.³⁶ In the selection, design, construction, and utilization of space for ritual action, multiple types of boundaries are established—boundaries such as “inside/outside, hidden/revealed, open/closed, front/back ... [and] participant/observer.”³⁷ Through space, boundaries between people and between people and information are drawn and communicated.

One needs only to reflect briefly upon a Greek Orthodox cathedral to see the interaction between space and symbol, participant and observer. The architectural footprint of the cathedral symbolically represents the cross of Christ, the icon screen

³⁴ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 72.

³⁵ In Caplow’s study of the Christmas season, Middletown III, he found the unwritten and strictly followed rule that Christmas gifts must be exchanged in decorated space, whether the space was domestic or non-domestic (offices or restaurants), and that the decorations must be temporary. “Rule Enforcement,” 1311-12.

³⁶ Selection, design, and construction are matters of degree. The selection of a ritual space may range from the nearly haphazard to the rigorously evaluated while design and construction may be absent. If design and construction are involved degree also enters in through a number of factors, e.g., time invested, quality of craftsmanship, quality of materials, etc.

³⁷ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 72.

concretely symbolizes the separation between heaven and earth, and attendance of vespers celebrations at the cathedral reasonably identifies Greek Orthodox Christians from those who pass by.³⁸ The effect of space on gift exchange becomes clear through a simple imaginative exercise. Imagine a fortieth anniversary gift exchange. The husband intends to give his wife the tradition gift of rubies to celebrate their forty years of marriage. He has carefully selected a stunning pair of earrings for the gift. Now, to inject space into the equation, he has selected two potential locations for the exchange. The first is an elegant downtown restaurant, and the second is on the beach near the crashing waves. Both selections have their romantic qualities, yet it is clear that the response of his wife will be informed by the different qualities of each. In the restaurant other patrons are latent observers; on the beach, they may likely be alone. In the restaurant, they will be separated, in some measure, by a table, while the beach presents minimal spatial restrictions. The choice resides with the husband and will reflect his desires, but without laboring this example further, it is clear that space is a significant factor in gift exchange.³⁹

³⁸ The following commentary was found on the website of The Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Columbus, Ohio: "A great deal of symbolism and meaning exists within the architecture of the Cathedral. Everything one sees has a special meaning and purpose. It is the embodiment of the Orthodox heritage and it serves as a constant reminder of our living Orthodox tradition. The architecture and art of the Cathedral speaks volumes on the Orthodox faith and on the relationship that exists between God and man." John G. Bizios, "Our Cathedral," available from <http://www.greekcathedral.com/index.cfm?page=OurCathedral>; Internet; accessed 24 June 2009.

³⁹ Commenting on the effect gifts have on group boundaries, Schwartz states, "Gift exchange influences group boundaries by clarifying them; and the more group boundaries are defined, the greater favorability of intragroup over extragroup exchange." "Social Psychology of the Gift," 10-11. Not only are boundaries demarcated in gift exchange, but as intragroup relational bonds are strengthened, less exchange transpires with external groups. *Ibid.*, 11.

Tools and technology are prevalent in ritual and they “often fulfill both utilitarian and symbolic functions.”⁴⁰ Robbie Davis-Floyd observes that tools and technologies utilized in ritual are particularly potent for “mediating [the] perception and experience” of participants due to “the heightened, set-apart, and formalized structures of ritual.”⁴¹ The Eucharist chalice is a prime example of an object that, during Mass, has a functional use, containing the wine, and a symbolic use, representing forgiveness. Wrapping paper shares this dual operation in gift exchange. Functionally, wrapping paper heightens anticipation and surprise by hiding the gift, and symbolically, it represents aspects of the donor’s identity.⁴² Just as the employment of technology in everyday human activity shapes human experience, so too do ritual objects and tools shape experience, but in a more penetrating way.⁴³

The final characteristic of ritual pertinent to this piece is invariance. Through the punctilious repetition of inherited behaviors, ritual generates and perpetuates a sense of

⁴⁰ Davis-Floyd, “Rituals.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² On the role of wrapping paper, Berking writes, “The act of wrapping helps to raise the dramatic intensity of a situation which comes down to an airing of a mystery. The aesthetic concealment here serves a large number of functions. It makes the small appear larger, the trivial more meaningful. It highlights the time and effort that the giver has been prepared to sacrifice. And it focuses all attention on the present and the act of unwrapping it, which creates enough time for the situation to be appropriately structured. The recipient may bring into play every legitimate feeling of uncertainty: he may display nervousness and curiosity, remove the wrapping with clumsy fingers, so as finally to slip into the climax with gestures of surprise and pleasure. What is allowed to children—unbridled curiosity and a drive to possess, which treats wrappings as mere hindrance—is forbidden to adults on pain of ridicule. They are required to behave with both spontaneity *and* rule observance (while not appearing to follow any rule), both curiosity *and* restraint.” *Sociology of Giving*, trans. Patrick Camiller, Theory, Culture, and Society (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 8. Italics in the original.

⁴³ Davis-Floyd, “Rituals.”

inevitability.⁴⁴ Once a ritual begins there is a momentum that propels it toward completion.⁴⁵ Few participants steeped in conventional behavior commit acts that intentionally disrupt or halt the progression of a ritual once it has begun.⁴⁶ The sense of inevitability engendered by ritual is so poignant that few people even recognize the possibility of disrupting the ritual prior to its “natural” conclusion. However, there is a measure of freedom in ritual behavior, no matter how invariant the ritual appears. Fundamentally, and in most situations, the person is free to participate or to abstain.⁴⁷ Also, even the strictest rituals tend to have some degree of freedom and leniency within the pattern itself. Even the most formalized ritual acts bear within them some degree of imprecision, and flexibility flows from the obvious fact that no two people can perform the same act identically.⁴⁸ Both Rappaport and Grimes warn that perceiving rituals to be completely static is erroneous. Rappaport proclaims, “Although the congregations performing them may not be fully aware of it, liturgical orders do change through time, that various elements of liturgical orders are differentially susceptible to change.”⁴⁹ And

⁴⁴ Davis-Floyd records that the anthropologists Sally Falk Moore and Barbara Myerhoff ‘suggest that ritual’s insistence on repetition and order evokes the perpetual process of the cosmos, thereby metaphorically implying that the belief system being enacted has the same permanence and legitimacy as the cosmos itself.’ “Rituals.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ It would be a rare experience to witness a groomsman interrupt a wedding, a congregant disrupt a Eucharist celebration, or a child break out in song during the Pledge of Allegiance.

⁴⁷ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 36. Although, abstention may set in motion a host of painful consequences.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Grimes writes, “We can no longer assume that all forms of ritual are static. Ritual and tradition are not synonyms. Ritual and creativity are not mutually exclusive.”⁵⁰

Invariance pervades gift exchange for once a gift exchange has been initiated a sense of inevitability arises as the gift moves from donor to donee. The fundamental and unalterable triadic structure of donor-gift-donee contributes significantly to this sense, yet, just as in ritual, gift exchange has a constitutional freedom within it—the gift does not have to be offered. Freedom is not limited to the donor alone since the donee may disrupt the sense of inevitability by rejecting the gift.⁵¹ However, in some situations, e.g., gifts exchanged between visiting heads of state, great risk may be involved in abstention or rejection.⁵² Given the vast spectrum of degrees of formality in gift exchange, from the spontaneous to the rigorously formalized, levels of invariance differ; yet, as explicated above, subtle variations will arise even in the most stylized gift exchanges. Each American President will offer the gift differently, even after being informed of and practicing the protocol. In less formalized gift exchanges, there exists a higher degree of flexibility and creativity that allows the donor to determine the location of the exchange,

⁵⁰ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 62.

⁵¹ Schwartz makes a keen point here, however, when he indicates that once the gift has been initiated by the giver an irreversible act of hostility has been launched against the receiver’s freedom since the receiver’s scope of freedom has necessarily been limited to acceptance or rejection, each with their attendant consequences, by the original act of giving. “Social Psychology of the Gift,” 5. Elaborating on the power politics of giving and receiving, Berking declares, “In terms of the theory of power, moral superiority of the one corresponds to self-degradation of the other demanded by the situation. The gift-giver sacrifices part of his resources. The recipient cannot shake off a suspicion that he has placed his autonomy in peril. The uneven situational distribution of symbolic power is one, but not the only, reason why giving has a positive connotation in contemporary societies, while receiving appears to be shot through with mixed feelings.” *Sociology of Giving*, 8.

⁵² The risk to one’s identity when rejecting a gift is depicted in Marcel Mauss’ analysis of potlatch. He writes, “One has no right to refuse a gift, or refuse to attend the potlatch. To act in this way is to show one is afraid of having to reciprocate, to fear being ‘flattened’ [i.e. losing one’s name] until one has reciprocated.” *The Gift*, 41.

the gift to be exchanged, the time of the exchange, the ethos of the exchange, etc., but even this freedom is tempered by the force and expectation of convention.

The triadic structure of symbolism, significator-signifier-signified, again fosters an air of invariance and inevitability, and yet, unlike gift exchange, the invariance of symbolism, in one regard, is absolute. The symbol “\$” will provide the fodder for this exploration. When one’s eyes fall upon \$ the absolute invariance of significator-signifier-signified has been set in motion. There is the viewing of the object and the nearly instantaneous mental signification of the object.⁵³ This process is not subject to change. However, invariance may be skirted in the area of interpretation. \$ may be interpreted according to the public interpretation or according to a private interpretation, to borrow Raymond Firth’s terminology. The individual viewing \$ may interpret it as the symbol that commonly refers to American currency or the person may formulate a private, unique interpretation, say, that \$ symbolizes skewered delicacies. Similar to gift exchange, the force of convention diminishes the probability of private interpretation for conspicuous symbols, although never entirely eradicating the possibility.

Gifts and symbols exhibit repetition in occurrence, content, and/or structure along with the ritual perception of time being marked by transition, concentration, and anticipation. The utilization of space and the legion of possibility it offers projects values and boundaries to observers as well as self-referentially. And the heightened experience gained through the ritual use of tools and technology is likewise apparent. Moreover, the significant aspect of invariance, the sense of inevitability that is fostered and shared by

⁵³ Charles Peirce calls this mental production the “interpretant.” “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 99.

gift exchange and symbolism has become clear. Through the review of these characteristics of ritual and their unambiguous presence in gift exchange and symbolic engagement the similarities between gift and symbol are seen to be plentiful.

CHAPTER FOUR

GIFT AND SYMBOL AS VEHICLES OF COMMUNICATION

The commonality between gift exchange and symbolism that has been explicated thus far is extensive. Gifts and symbols have been found to be intrinsically relational. They share an instrumental relational capacity to initiate, stabilize, and terminate relationships. They traverse the distance that arises between distinct parties in relationship by means of various ritual bridges. They bear the marks of ritual repetition. They experience ritual time. They are impacted by ritual space. They make use of and are used as ritual tools. They encourage an ethos of invariance. Now, gifts and symbols will be found to communicate in similar ways, both through their concrete presence and their absence. By leveraging the semiotic theory of Charles Peirce and Robert Neville, gifts as symbols are found to bear conventional, iconic, and indexical relationship and convey commensurate content to participants and observers. Additionally, absent gifts and symbols, when expected or anticipated, correspondingly broadcast messages requiring interpretation by those involved.

How Symbol Communicates

According to the semiotic theory of Charles Peirce and the adapted form it takes in the work of Robert Neville, symbols relate to their objects in three ways:

conventionally, iconically, and indexically.¹ Symbols may express more than one of these approaches, for they are not mutually exclusive.² The manner of the relationship between a symbol and its object is always “in a certain respect” since it is the subject who determines the relation via interpretation.³ How the interpretation is determined and whether or not the interpretation is accurate are questions of import, but for the purpose at hand, what is most vital to perceive is that the determined relationship conveys information about the object to the subject.⁴ The information may be accurate or mistaken, but whatever the veracity of the correspondence, the act of correspondence is a communicative act.

A symbol that relates to its object in a conventional way communicates its content to the subject not due to any particular trait or unique feature of the symbol itself, but due to its general social use.⁵ For instance, the copyright symbol, ©, conveys its meaning of

¹ The selection of Peirce and Neville as the primary theorists of symbols for this piece provides the author, a newcomer to the study of semiotics, with a narrowed scope that, otherwise, would be overtaxed by the host of theorist from the fields of philosophy, religion, psychology, anthropology, and sociology.

Neville uses the term “conventional” instead of Peirce’s term “symbol” so that “symbol” may be used “as the generic term for sign.” *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 37.

² In regard to the combination of relations in religious symbols, Neville writes, “Nearly all religious symbols are sufficiently complex that they have conventional, iconic, and indexical reference at once.” *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴ It is important to remain mindful that the content a symbol communicates is not derived from itself alone, but is also informed by a web of symbols, a system of symbols. This does not mean that a symbol cannot be analyzed in isolation, but it does mean that the isolated analysis will be limited and will fail to attain a broader view of the symbol’s communicated content. When discussing layers of meaning, Neville labels symbols taken in isolation as “symbol fragments” and those considered in relation to other symbols as “symbol complexes.” *Ibid.*, 89-90. When considering the impact of symbols on human behavior, Neville employs Clifford Geertz’ concept of “thick description.” “Thick” descriptions seek to account for how the symbolic network impacts behavior while “thin” descriptions analyze the impact of isolated symbols. *Ibid.*, 22-24.

lawful protection by general social agreement and not due to any structural attribute of ©. Symbols that relate to their object conventionally communicate their particular content to the subject because social convention has thus determined it.

For Peirce and Neville a symbol has an iconic relationship to its object when the symbol has an “internal structure” that is, in some respect, “like” that of its object.⁶ Unlike the arbitrariness of conventional reference, a symbol that relates to its object iconically is placed into relation with its object due to the subject’s determination that the symbol and object share a particular likeness. On account of this perceived likeness, an iconic symbol may be said to “disclose” content about the real nature of its object.⁷ For the subject engaging the iconic symbol, “Reality is then experienced in part as it is disclosed to be.”⁸

A dynamic relationship exists, then, between the subject and the object when iconic reference is invoked. The subject begins with a concept and then determines that an object is like the concept in some respect. At this point, the subject has invested energy into the iconic symbol, but has yet to receive anything from it. Through contemplation of the iconic symbol, the subject may begin to perceive aspects of the concept not formerly conceived and therefore withdraw content about the concept from

⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶ Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic,” 104; Neville, *Truth of Broken Symbols*, 38.

⁷ Neville, *Truth of Broken Symbols*, 40. Eliade, speaking of symbols in broad terms writes, “The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality—the deepest aspects—which defy any other means of knowledge.” *Images and Symbols*, 12.

⁸ Neville, *Truth of Broken Symbols*, 40. Along similar lines, Tillich asserts that the symbol “not only opens up dimensions and elements of reality which otherwise would remain unapproachable but also unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality.” *Dynamics of Faith*, 42.

the symbol. Hence, through the iconic symbol, reality may be disclosed or revealed to the subject. This dynamic disclosure may be illustrated as follows: the Bald Eagle may be selected as an iconic symbol of prowess on account of its deft and deadly hunting skills, and through contemplation of the Eagle's concrete expressions of potency, e.g., powerful wings, keen sight, and razor-sharp talons, disclosure about the concept "prowess" may occur. The understanding of prowess moves from a generic concept of deftness to an enriched view where prowess is characterized by speed, agility, penetrating perception, and efficient weaponry.

Describing a symbol's indexical relationship to its object, Neville tersely states, "Indexical reference is a symbol's pointing to or indicating its object, whatever else it says iconically or conventionally about the object."⁹ And Peirce writes,

A rap on the door is an index. Anything which focusses [sic] the attention is an index. Anything which startles us is an index, in so far as it marks the junction between two portions of experience. Thus a tremendous thunderbolt indicates that *something* considerable happened, though we may not know precisely what the event was. But it may be expected to connect itself with some other experience.¹⁰

The content communicated by an indexical symbol is directive.¹¹ Indexical transmissions charge the subject to launch an inquiry, the findings of which may involve encounters with conventional and/or iconic symbols.¹² Indexical symbols disclose content about their object, yet in a different fashion than iconic symbols. The content disclosed

⁹ Neville, *Truth of Broken Symbols*, 41.

¹⁰ Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic," 108-09. Italics in the original.

¹¹ Peirce writes, "Some indices are more or less detailed directions for what the hearer is to do in order to place himself in direct experiential or other connection with the thing meant." *Ibid.*, 110.

¹² Neville, *Truth of Broken Symbols*, 41.

by an indexical symbol is both direct and indirect or derivative. The content directly disclosed involves perspective and a way of seeing. It says, "Look at this, in this way." The disclosure is the new way of approaching the object, which is not disclosure of the object *per se*; yet, indexical symbols foster derivative disclosure since the "new approach" undoubtedly causes the subject to perceive the object from a different perspective thereby generating new content about the object.

By means of Peirce and Neville's three-fold taxonomy of a symbol's relationship to its object as being conventional, iconic, and/or indexical, it becomes clear how symbols communicate content to their subjects. Symbols conventionally relating to their objects transmit content that is determined by general social consent; iconic symbols communicate and disclose content about their objects due to perceived likenesses between the symbols and their objects; and symbols with indexical relationships to their objects transmit directive content, content that calls for a new point of view.

How Gift as Symbol Communicates

Below, Peirce and Neville's semiotic theory is applied to gift exchange, and it becomes evident that gifts have the capacity to communicate content that shows conventional, iconic, and indexical reference. Confidence in the case being argued is justifiably bolstered when these findings are placed alongside the previously delineated similarities that gifts and symbols possess.

When a gift bears conventional reference, the gift already has an embedded meaning that has been predetermined by social convention. Such a gift does not receive

its meaning due to the characteristics that it possesses nor from the efforts of the giver, but due to the normative declarations of the societal context. When the giver selects a gift with conventional reference, the content primarily intended for communication most likely aligns with the predetermined message. The red rose gifted on Valentine's Day is an example of a gift that has conventional reference. As a symbol of love, the red rose is presented by the giver to the receiver in order to transmit the conventional message, the message that has been encoded into the rose not by the giver, but by convention.

Traditional anniversary gifts offer a host of other examples. On a fifth anniversary convention dictates that a gift of wood is to be proffered, on a fifteenth, crystal. Wood and crystal are gifted on these dates not because wood aptly expresses the passage of five years or crystal fifteen, but due to the seemingly arbitrary selection of convention.

However, a point of interest surfaces here. Although the composition of these anniversary gifts are determined by convention, the actual shape the gift takes, the actual item selected for the gift remains, to a degree, within the scope of the giver. The giver is free to choose a gift made of wood or crystal that iconically or indexically relates to the receiver. Such gifts demonstrate that, as a symbol, a gift may convey its communicative content in more than one respect.

A gift that is marked by iconic reference demands more interpretive energy from the giver than a conventional gift. In order to select an iconic gift, the giver must identify the trait that is to be reflected in the gift and interpretively identify a gift that represents this chosen trait. Schwartz provides an excellent illustration of a gift that represents a

particular aspect of the receiver's identity when describing the imposition of identity through gift exchange. He writes,

The gift as an imposition of identity is well seen in its burlesqued form, the 'Office Pollyanna,' the ideal type of which obtains when gift recipients are chosen at random and presented with inexpensive items which make comical or witty reference to that part of their personal makeup which, in the eyes of the giver, is most worthy of exaggeration.¹³

Through the "Office Pollyanna" gift the giver has forged an iconic symbol, although in exaggerated form, by selecting a gift that mirrors, from the giver's point of view, a particular trait of the receiver.¹⁴

Ralph Waldo Emerson propounds a theory of gift that includes iconic reference, but instead of the receiver's identity being represented in the gift, it is the giver's identity that is symbolized. He writes,

The rule for a gift, which one of my friends prescribed, is, that we might convey to some person that which properly belonged to his character, and was easily associated with him in thought. But our tokens of compliment and love are for the most part barbarous. Rings and other jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts. *The only gift is a portion of thyself.* Thou must bleed for me. Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing. This is right and pleasing ... when a man's biography is conveyed in his gift ... But it is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something, which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith's.¹⁵

¹³ Schwartz, "Social Psychology of the Gift," 2.

¹⁴ Extending the use of Schwartz to illustrate iconic reference in the gift, he writes, "Indeed, gift giving is a way of free associating about the recipient in his presence and sometimes in the presence of others." Ibid.

¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts," American Transcendentalism Web, available from <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/gifts.html>; Internet; accessed December 2008. Italics added.

According to Emerson, the gift should primarily refer iconically to the giver's identity (and not conventionally or indexically),¹⁶ and as his examples declare, the primary trait that should be iconically represented in the gift is one's industry.¹⁷ Whether iconic gifts refer to characteristics of the giver or the receiver, they may be said to disclose content about the giver/receiver since they narrow the scope of vision and concentrate attention upon a particular trait in a particular fashion.

Like the gift expressing iconic reference, the gift expressing indexical reference involves an interpretive determination by the giver. Yet, with the indexical gift, the giver does not attempt to focus attention on a trait of the receiver, but instead seeks, through the gift, to direct the attention of the receiver toward something else. The direction proffered by the giver moves beyond simply encouraging the receiver to "look" since it charges the receiver to "look" through a particular lens, to look in the proffered direction *through* the proffered perspective that has been determined by the giver. Through this approach, an indexical gift functions as a symbol that discloses both direct and indirect, derivative content to the receiver.

When an uncle gives his adolescent nephew a book of Wendell Berry's poetry the uncle has presented to his nephew, who is unfamiliar with poetry, a gift with indexical reference. The gift delivers explicit directional content to the nephew as it calls him to investigate an unfamiliar landscape, and the gift provides the nephew with a way of

¹⁶ The gift moves into the realm of indexical reference when Emerson uses the term "biography" since it seems to indicate a call for the receiver to look at the whole of one's life and not simply one's industry.

¹⁷ Caplow's findings from the Middletown III study indicates that Emerson's theory is now outmoded, that is, if it ever reflected a norm. Caplow writes, "Although handmade objects are appropriate Christmas gifts, most gifts are commercially purchased." "Christmas Gifts," 389.

seeing this new landscape, that is, through the binoculars of Berry's poetic voice.¹⁸ As the nephew begins to read Berry's poetry and make discoveries about the landscape for himself, the derivative content of the indexical gift becomes manifest.

Functioning as a symbol, a gift communicates conventional, iconic, and indexical content to the parties participating in and observing an exchange. The way in which a gift relates to a receiver is "in a certain respect" that is established by the giver and imbedded into the gift by selection. The relation established between the gift and the receiver is an interpretive move on the giver's part, and once the gift is presented to the receiver, it provokes an interpretive response from the receiver and any observers present. Given the inherent hazards of communication, there is no guarantee that the relationship determined by the giver and encoded in the gift will be interpreted by the receiver and observers according to the giver's intention; but, the gift as a symbol is a vehicle of communication whether the intended message is decoded accurately or inaccurately.

Beyond conventional, iconic, and indexical reference, gifts and symbols communicate through abstention. Abstention communicates content to the receiver only when a gift is expected or when a symbol would normally be employed. Contemplating the giving of a spontaneous gift and then deciding not to execute the exchange does not reflect a transmission of content to a second party, but is analogous to talking to oneself. Similarly, removing one's wedding ring while gardening does not typically generate feedback from one's spouse. However, when a second party anticipates a gift exchange or symbolic usage to occur, say, when a ritual cycle indicates that one should occur, and

¹⁸ The gift of a particular author, in this scenario, Wendell Berry, contains an implicit message for the neophyte nephew: Berry is a trustworthy guide, a sound representative of the field of poetry.

the giver withholds a gift or engagement with a symbol, then a message has been transmitted from the giver to the receiver, significator to observer—not through the concrete gift or symbol, but through its absence. The actual content transmitted may vary and is open to the second party's interpretation of the first party's motive for refraining, but the key point is that an absent gift or symbol, when ritually anticipated, communicates content just as a concrete one would. With this last piece of the argument advanced, turning to the final assessment is timely.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The foundational assumption of this paper's argument has been that if object "A" has characteristics similar to object "B," especially if the common characteristics meet two conditions, one, they are traits of import, and two, there are multiple points of commonality, it is then reasonable to conclude that object "A" may be effectively classified with object "B."¹ Based on this assumption, the primary task of this piece has been to identify key attributes of gift and argue, with the aid of accessible evidence, that symbols possess comparable traits. If the argument has unfolded cogently and if the evidence has been convincing, then the thesis that it is reasonable to view the gift as a symbol may be justifiably accepted.

Recapitulating the argument, the main points run thus. Gift exchange and symbolic usage have a rigid triadic structure that makes relationship an indelible attribute. Alongside the structural commonality, gifts and symbols possess an instrumental potency to initiate, stabilize, and terminate relationships. In order for gifts to be exchanged and symbols to be employed human bodies in motion are required, and ritual bridges facilitate the interaction between distinct bodies of diverse composition with multifarious effects. Gift exchange and symbolic engagement are permeated with decorous ritual behaviors that are "invisibly" propagated by acculturation. Through

¹ Tritely stated, "If it quacks like a duck, it's a duck." And, if not a duck, then at a minimum, an extremely well disguised and crafty creature.

ceremonious exchange and usage the identity of individuals is subordinated to the identity of the group and an environment of competition is fostered. Gifts and symbols magically utilized suppose a mechanistic perspective, and when liturgically mobilized, the exchange of gifts and the use of symbols may appear awkward as participants receptively await sublime disclosure.

The correlative attributes of gifts and symbols are not exhausted by ritual bridges alone, but cover an array of other significant ritual aspects. Three modes of repetition (occurrence, substance, form) are witnessed as well as three modes of time (transitional, concentrated, anticipated) experienced. Gifts and symbols both have a lifespan as they move from birth to death. Exchange and employment transpires in generative space that mirrors values and erects boundaries. Gifts and symbols make use of tools and technology to enhance the experience of participants and are also capable of functioning as tools themselves. A profound sense of invariance accompanies the exchange of gifts and the use of symbols, but a modicum of freedom remains for those involved.

Gifts conform to the method of communication utilized by symbols. By means of the determination of the giver, gifts bear conventional, iconic, and indexical reference. Conventionally referring gifts transmit messages encoded by social convention that is affirmed and repeated by the giver's selection. Iconically referring gifts disclose content to the receiver that has been specifically targeted by the giver and perceived to be likened in the gift itself. And indexically referring gifts broadcast directive content that

encourages the receiver to turn attention toward something determined by the giver through the perspective proffered by the giver.

Gifts and symbols communicate not only through their presence, but also through their absence. Absent gifts and symbols are not inert. When an exchange or engagement is anticipated or expected, and yet, does not occur, content is still conveyed to the parties concerned even though the concrete gift/symbol is lacking.

In light of the abundance of elementary characteristics that are verifiably shared by gifts and symbols, viewing the gift as a symbol is warranted. As described in the introduction, this thesis represents the initial stage of a longer journey embarked on by the author. The ramifications of the thesis that gifts may be conceived as symbols have yet to be comprehensively charted, but the measured progress achieved here will undoubtedly advance the expedition.

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