

**Card-carrying Giver**  
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N.B.—These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship—supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer—and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.



Working at a bookstore for several years, a certain pattern becomes apparent in a yearly basis. It soon became clear that, from Remembrance Day until New Year’s Eve, that is when the place is really happening. Though I preferred the sales floor, on occasion I worked the cash, where I quickly found that people can drastically change demeanour as soon their money is involved. It was there that I also

became aware of a deep prejudice engrained in me: a prejudice against the folks who got the gift cards.

It took me a long time to clue in to what possible utility these gift cards might have as gifts. For starters, I thought, there simply seems to be no way around the fact that the price is inevitably always on the gift. Secondly, I would be hard-pressed to see how gift cards were any different from money... beyond the fact that they can only be used at the establishment where the card was bought, and therefore had reduced utility. Thirdly, it seemed to me that there was some intrinsic “cheat factor” involved in giving the undefined gift, without apparent evidence of having gone through the trouble of thinking through what the recipient would really want.

The conventional wisdom of gift-giving revolving around thought and effort given by the giver unto the givee remains true to me, but there’s a certain incompleteness to this formula that gift cards reveal.

Anyone who has ever been in urgent material need knows that sometimes the best gift can be cold hard cash; at other times the most

appropriate gifts are things that money simply cannot buy. And other times still, the most inspiring and welcome gifts come unexpectedly—in ways and at moments unintended by the giver, when the receiver takes the initiative to be a full participant in breathing new life to a present from the past.

I have embraced a newly-found respect for gift cards, because to me, they illustrate most starkly that opportunity for the givee to engage in the gifting process.

Beyond the long walk or short ride to the store, gift cards embody a neat foresight to give the receiver just enough choice to select a gift, but not so much choice so that the value of the card will go to anything other than some indulgence: the reduced utility of the cash value somehow seems to be offset by a friendly limitation to use that value exclusively for one's own enjoyment, perhaps multiple times.

This interactive dynamic drives home to me that other side to the whole giving equation: that in complement with the giver's thought and effort, there is the element of the givee's own thought and effort: a recognition that constant re-engagement with a gift makes it consistently more plentiful.

Because something interesting happens when recipients take up their own measure of thought and effort into a gift: the gift keeps on giving, sometimes far beyond what the original giver may have intended.

The interactive gifting process involves recognition of fuller stories, be they the toils and sacrifices behind the giver's offering, or the diverse needs of the receiver. I wish to share some of these stories.

Let me begin with a sweet and heartbreaking story. That of Jeanine Deckers—the Singing Nun—who joined a Dominican order of nuns in Belgium and was soon drawn to writing music; inspired by the founder of the Dominican order, she wrote an international hit: *Dominique*. It topped the charts in the early sixties in several countries, spun out as many translations, and it remains a joyful earworm, one that can instantly conjure the droll and quaint images of nuns having fun.

Deckers became known as Soeur Sourire—Sister Smile and decided to donate the rights and proceeds of her music to her convent—a gift to her physical and spiritual home of many years.

The story took an unexpected turn as she eventually left the convent to pursue her musical career. It did not go well for her. She never reached the same popularity that was brought on by *Dominique*. She decided to start a special school with a fellow former sister: Annie Péscher. But they eventually fell in financial difficulties when the Belgian government demanded back taxes for royalties from her music—funds they were unable to produce after those royalties had been donated to her former convent. In financial despair, the two women decided to end their lives.

My sources are unclear as to whether Annie and Jeanine were lifelong friends or partners in life; what is clear to me is that their love for each other was such that they had shared their life and their death together.

It pains me that, in those moments before they swallowed an overdose of medication, the joy that a simple song brought to millions, in discreet doses across the planet, was obscured. It pains me that, in those moments of despair, their worth and dignity seemed to have vanished to them.

Unbeknownst to them, that overdose did not take a heritage. No longer on this earth, Sister Smile still brings smiles with her joyful song; her tragic story, a part of the gift. A gift that was more than a copyright to her convent; one that included music she shared with the rest of the world beyond her initial intentions.

There is another, perhaps less tragic story of an ongoing gift. I have shared here before about my ongoing infatuation with Niagara Falls, and of my particular fondness with Goat Island State Park, straddling the border between the Falls. It was there that I was surprised to find an odd monument—it is in your orders of service—an imposing bronze statue of Nicola Tesla.

After consideration, it is no accident that Tesla is commemorated in Niagara—on both sides of the border, in fact. His monument there is still framed by the old arch entranceway of the first hydroelectric station

at Niagara. Appropriately, all current power stations there now still make use of a technology—among the many—that he contributed to the world: Alternating Current.

Unlike Jeanine Deckers, Tesla died at an older age of 85, of natural causes. Perhaps the greater tragedy of his life is the lack of recognition for his contributions during his own lifetime.

Nonetheless, he too encountered dear friends. He was buddies with Mark Twain, who enjoyed his presence, and with the people who would dine with him on occasion and who were willing to endure his meticulous cleanliness rituals at restaurants, in exchange for some shared time.

And now, I still find myself receiving Tesla's gift, seeing it brighten the faces in this room, hearing it power my voice through this microphone, and reading from pages printed on a printer powered by Tesla's signature power source, Alternating Current.

I've been throwing some pretty big names around. But known names aren't a prerequisite for perpetual giving; there are uncountably more stories of constant giving that I could keep on recounting; some more bittersweet than others. In what has become one of my favourite scriptural sources, CBC's *Ideas* with Paul Kennedy, there is an insight shared by one Matt Wrigley, who celebrates his latest purchase: a brand-new graphite composite fishing rod.

Interesting thing about this graphite composite fishing rod—nobody knows how to make it: the president of the company doesn't know how to make graphite; the graphite manufacturer doesn't know how to assemble fishing rods. The retailer doesn't know how to distribute it and the distributor doesn't know how to sell it.

It is a wonder of our current world, Wrigley remarks, that everything we have and do is based on the cumulative collective knowledge from countless fellow humans that are with or before us, collected incrementally and in discrete doses. From the standardized screws holding the chairs on which you're sitting and the nails holding these rafters of our roof, the collective cumulative gifts are recreated as gifts the moment we actively recognize them again. Their contributions are not always acknowledged at the time, but when we recognize the

long walk they and others have gone to bring it to us, we are perpetually blessed by those gifts.

Indeed you don't need to be a big name, or an anonymous name in the carbon graphite lab, or the fishing rod assembly line. These are merely among the more visible reminders of the opportunities for constant gifting that are ever-present.

I have shared this morning the reading from Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales. I am a big fan of Wikipedia and their spearheaders, like Jimmy Wales, or Sue Gardner at its Foundation bureau. I respect the commitment they make to equitable access to knowledge, and the model they offer for making active giving and receiving a routine matter of life. In the words of Jimmy Wales, an opportunity to participate in something special "...like a library or a public park. [...] a temple for the mind. It is a place we can all go to think, to learn, to share our knowledge with others." Something that sounds like home!

Wales' personal appeal mentions one particular way of contributing, through gifts of money—a recognition of the realities that entail running a top world-class website. But anyone who's used the site can see that the gifts can come in many more diverse forms.

From fixing a comma splice, to offering a free license for a submitted photograph, to writing entire sets of articles, the giving and receiving in Wikipedia is cumulative, collective, and comes in iterated, discrete doses. Moreover, I am inspired by the prospect of participating in a project that reaches 450 million people, including me, and you. And anything that reaches 450 million people, must affect 8 billion folks.

These gifts of talent, time and treasure, each come with a heritage that reflect the rich stories of their givers, and moreover, appear to the receivers in multiple ways: in tunes that stir the heart, in lights that brighten a room, in fishing rods of mysterious origins, in screws that hold our chairs, and articles that we each can read and write—these are gifts that keep on giving.

And here's the best part. Whatever thought and effort you put into your gifts this holiday season, chances are we're yet giving even more than we realize. Be they in specified items, in promises of time spent

together, long walks for others' sake; Christmas cards and gift cards, SIM cards or e-cards—all of these can signify great care and endearment, and when the receivers participate in them by remembering their source and consistent impact, they are allowing ancient blessings to grace them yet again.

It is in this way that the food on the table, the money on the plate, the work at the office or factory—the fixed comma splice—all become gifts that can be enjoyed now, and can also be enjoyed years into the future. The moments of mindfulness, and participation in them, are opportunities to be the bankers in an economy of abundance. Our contributions in this process are opportunities to be investors in a marketplace of plenty. And the acts of mindful giving and receiving foster a world of perpetual richness. So may it be, alleluia!

Amen.