

THE PULSE OF SPIRIT



EMISSARIES
OF DIVINE LIGHT

RELATIONSHIP AND RECIPROCITY

30 MARCH 2009

I would like to speak about relationships and about reciprocity in relationships. Merriam-Webster says that to *reciprocate* is “to give and take mutually; to return in kind or degree; to move forward and backward alternately, as in a reciprocating valve.” The origin of the word *reciprocate* is from the Latin *recipricus*: “returning the same way; alternating.”

So what does it mean to reciprocate in our relationships? It could mean all kinds of things, but I’d like to start with the very simple act of inviting someone to something. It could be to go someplace; it could be to go out on a date, to come over to your house, to do something with you or to share something with you.

Inviting is an important aspect of relationship. It initiates a cycle of relationship when somebody invites another person to be with them.

What is it to reciprocate when somebody invites you to something? Let’s say you invite someone over for dinner. What would it mean for them to reciprocate? The most obvious way to reciprocate would be for them to say yes, I’ll come. That’s a response to somebody in a relationship that will go someplace. If a person is invited to something and they respond in the affirmative, something is happening.

But I want to take it a step further, because let’s say this relationship has been going on for a while, and you’ve invited this person over to dinner for a year. Every month you say, “Would you like to come over for dinner?” and the person says, “Sure, I’d love to!” This goes on for a year, and what are you thinking after a year is over? “Hey, wait a minute—this isn’t reciprocity.” Reciprocity is about something more than accepting my invitation.

In the definition of *reciprocity*, there is *mutuality*. So in the picture I painted, is that mutuality? Not exactly. If in that little example there’s an inviter and there’s an invitee, it works up to a certain point for one person to always be the inviter and the other person to be an invitee. But at some point it probably wears old. If there is really to be reciprocity,

the person who has been the invitee has to at least think about bringing over a dish, and maybe becoming the inviter him- or herself. That's the alternating part in what it means to reciprocate. There has to be some way in which the roles alternate if there is to be real reciprocity and mutuality.

If it doesn't go there in a relationship, and it never goes there, we may begin to feel uncomfortable with that. It doesn't feel healthy to us; it doesn't feel like there is real flow. It is not balanced. If we've been inviting that person to dinner every month for a year, we might say, "Why don't you invite *me* one day?" Something breaks down in our relationships if we don't move in the direction of reciprocity. At some point, the inviter probably says, "I've had enough of this. I think I'll invite somebody over who might invite me back one day."

There has to be a spirit of generosity for us to reciprocate in relationships. If we are not coming from a generous place in ourselves, we may think that "Well, who would want to come to *my* house, my humble abode? Who would really want to be with me? Who would want to eat my food? I'm really not a good cook." That kind of humility could actually be a lack of generosity, a lack of a sense that one has a gift to give and that it's important that one give one's gift.

I would like us to explore reciprocity further because I think that, as we do, we may see that this principle is vital to many things. So let's think about raising children as another example. Do you think it might be important in raising children that children have a chance to reciprocate in some way? If as parents it is, for us, all about taking care of the kids, all about doting on the kids, all about raising them, telling them what to do, nourishing them and all the rest, and there's no awareness that the child has something to give back, do you think that's a healthy relationship?

Sometimes parents ask the question: "Should I be always the parent with my kid, always the one in charge, always the one who's the authority? Or should I be a friend to my kid?" Sometimes people argue about those things and talk about the dangers of being a friend to children. The uncomfortable answer is, a parent has to be both a parent and a friend. In some way, a parent can never stop being a parent. They can never stop having ultimate authority for raising that child and for taking care of the child. But if there's never an opportunity for the child to give something back to the parent that is meaningful to the parent and that's appreciated by the parent, what kind of a relationship is that? And what is being taught to the child? Isn't the ultimate teaching to the child the experience that they have something to give in life, that they have something to reciprocate in kind, as the definition says? In that way, there is friendship to share.

One way of reciprocating is for the child to receive what's given, and receive it gratefully. But there's something to be given back—breakfast in bed, or whatever it is. Of course, later in life, the aging process has a way of forcing this on parents, if they become old and

decrepit and have to receive care from their children. But there is something that can work out voluntarily before that, so that there is a flow, so that there is mutuality. And a parent doesn't have to give up their crown as a parent to let that happen.

It takes self-assurance, if you are a parent, to let there be reciprocity with your children. There has to be care that the child is not left thinking that there's no adult at home. Yes, there's an adult at home, but there's an adult who is assured enough that they can receive something back, assured enough so that it isn't the parent who's the only person in the house who could have a good idea about something, who might have something to say, who might have something to teach, who might have a good idea about a direction to go. Those are all ways of letting a child reciprocate.

I heard about this principle in action when I was traveling in Bangkok about nine years ago. I was working with a young man who told me the story of a year in which he was a monk. In that society, people are very conscious of those to whom they owe deference and respect. As this young man told me, when he became a monk, all the deference and respect that he had showed his parents was then shown to him. And when the year was over, the place of respect was handed back to his parents. He was profoundly changed by the experience.

So how about us here in the Dome this morning? For those who come here on a Sunday morning, if this was all about you being talked to, that wouldn't be a lot of fun. It would grow old. In the context of our program, we have this wonderful word: *response*. Response—the idea is that if somebody offers something in the written or spoken word, there's something to come back in response. That could be words of appreciation—“Great job!” or “Thank you very much.” And if we are speaking, it's wonderful to have people appreciate what we've offered—and certainly better than the alternative.

But if all that was said in response to what I offer in words was, “Well, thank you very much; you did a great job,” there would be something missing, wouldn't there? Because to reciprocate is not only to receive with appreciation; to really reciprocate means that in some way you're going to trade places with the person up here. In some way, you're going to say to the person up here, “Okay, now it's your turn to listen and receive appreciatively, and it's my turn to deliver. I have something to say.” That's true reciprocity, isn't it? Reciprocity isn't just being thankful for what somebody else has offered, as you receive it. Reciprocity is about trading places with them.

We have a custom here of letting people have a chance to say something in the latter part of the hour. We also have a custom of people having the opportunity to come up here and say something, and to say something in writing, or to say something in our service expansion period, as we call it. We would all probably feel frustrated if, in those opportunities, all we were hearing from other people was appreciation for what was said by the person at the lectern. We would probably think, “Well, this is getting old.” And

why? Because there is no mutuality in that situation. In a family, mutuality is the opportunity for the child to in some way step into the parents' shoes and take responsibility for what the parents had been taking responsibility for. In this context, it's the opportunity for anyone who is here to take the responsibility that the person up here was taking.

The person at the lectern might judge, "Well, you didn't really take *as much* responsibility as I was taking," and the parent may think the same thing. But of course, when the child first learns to reciprocate, they aren't going to be able to do it with the fullness that the parent does it. That's not the point. The point is that there has to be the opportunity to reciprocate, to learn and step into what the other person is doing.

If we don't do this on purpose, I believe we do it by accident. In the example with the child, isn't that what child rebellion is about? "Hey, you're keeping me down. You're not encouraging me to reciprocate"—in good and healthy ways, in ways that are sanctioned by the family. "And if I'm going to take responsibility, I've got to kind of take it into my own hands."

If reciprocity isn't sanctioned in an organizational setting, the tendency is to put somebody up on a pedestal and then knock them down. The unsanctioned way to bring reciprocity is, first of all, to adulate someone; to first say: "Hey, you take responsibility and we'll just honor you for doing it." And then, when that gets old, say, "Hey, we don't like the way you're doing it, and we're going to kick the pedestal out from under you." That's the unsanctioned, unconscious way of dealing with these things. I have the idealistic notion that we could do these things on purpose and do them well, and be stronger for it as a person and as a collective body of people.

I've got another example of the issue of reciprocity. Some of us are familiar with a story about Jesus in the New Testament. It was the end of what I would respectfully call a rant by him in the 23rd Chapter of Matthew, in which he vehemently addressed the scribes and Pharisees. People have deep feelings about this story because it marked a turning point in events that led to the crucifixion. I'd like to step back from the emotionality that this may contain for us, and look at what was being said and how it's applicable to any pattern of spiritual leadership.

At the conclusion of this address, Jesus spoke these words: "Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." (*Matthew 23:39*) In terms of relationship, what was he saying? "This relationship is over." And why was it over? I think it has exactly to do with the topic we're considering this morning—reciprocity.

I don't think any of us are thinking that this was a selfish man who needed blessing—that he conducted a public ministry to gather blessing to himself from other people. He was

offering blessing; he was offering healing, inspiration; he was teaching, he was putting his life at risk. He was offering and offering and offering, and what was coming back wasn't reciprocating what he was offering.

It is like that person who for a year is inviting someone else over for dinner and nothing's happening back. Of course, people appreciated what Jesus was giving them, at least to some degree; I'm sure those who were healed were very appreciative. But apparently no one had the idea that they had something of blessing to offer back to him. Apparently they thought they would just continue to be blessed. No reciprocity.

At other points, his followers protested that they didn't know what was going on. Jesus had been teaching, teaching, and teaching. Finally he challenged them by saying, "Whither I go ye know, and the way ye know." (*John 14:4*) You do know! And you are not reciprocating. You're not acting on what you know and teaching what you know. You're just waiting to hear it out of my mouth—no reciprocation.

So he was offering a blessing and he was offering a teaching, but there wasn't reciprocation. And on that basis he ended up saying, this relationship is off. We can't keep doing this like this.

What does it take for us, if we are receiving a blessing from another person, to allow that to go so deeply and move us so profoundly that we take responsibility for offering that blessing ourselves? And if we are learning something from another, what does it mean to let that learning go so deeply in us, to be so profoundly changed and moved by that learning, that we assume the responsibility ourselves for bringing forth wisdom and teaching that would be useful to the other person?

I'd like to close by reading something I wrote last weekend in England. We had a seminar in Oxfordshire. It was a warm and beautiful English spring, with daffodils and the like, a very rural setting, and we had a time of being in the outdoors. I was thinking about this matter of reciprocity with the earth. This principle of reciprocity applies to relationships with people but it also applies to some very big things, like our relationship with the earth and our relationship with the Invisible. I thought about how I, and I think others, have a tendency to be in a relationship with the earth that attempts to take possession and control, without paying attention to what is being offered to us already, without actually receiving what's being offered and honoring it. So I wrote some words in Oxfordshire that I'd like to close with, which are about that.

*You loved me from the beginning
When I ran through that path in the woods
And swam in the dark water of your slow-moving river.
You looked after me as I lay, broken-hearted,
Among the daisies and the long, warm grass.*

*You told me stories in fireflies that lit the night like city lights
And in shimmering curtains of undulating color that invited me into your heavens.
You loved me better than any mother ever could,
With the comforting lap of your waves on my little boat,
And your radiant warmth on my shoulders.
So thank you, dear One, who has nourished this boy for so long.*

May we have the generosity to give and the openness to receive.

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29 March 2009*

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