

The Shoemaker and the Elves / Lewis Hyde / The Gift (1983)

Hyde's idea is that when we receive a transformative gift, it must change us before we can truly pass it on.

He describes this as a three-part process. First, we receive a gift. Something is given to us that awakens a new possibility - a capacity, insight, way of seeing, or way of being. Second, we enter into a process of gratitude. For Hyde, gratitude is not simply saying "thank you"; it is the inner work of allowing the gift to shape and transform us. It creates within us a desire to respond to the gift in a way that honours what we have received. Third, the transformation is completed when we are able to give the gift away freely - when what we have received has become sufficiently part of us that we can offer it to others.

The gift is not fully realised when it arrives. It is fully realised when we are truly able to give it away.

In the story of "The Shoemaker and the Elves," a shoemaker is down on his luck and has only enough leather to sew a single pair of shoes. He cuts the leather out and goes to bed, planning to sew the shoes in the morning. During the night, two naked elves come and make the shoes. The Shoemaker is speechless with astonishment when he finds them. Not a stitch out of place! The shoes are such a masterpiece that the first customer to appear in the morning pays handsomely for them, and the cobbler has enough money to buy leather for two pairs of shoes. That night he cuts the leather out and goes to bed. Again, in the morning the shoes are made, and again they sell for such a price as to afford the leather for four pairs of shoes. In this way the Shoemaker soon prospers.

One evening ('not long before Christmas,' the tale says), the cobbler suggests to his wife that they stay up and see who has been helping them. They leave a candle burning, hide behind some coats, and, at midnight, see the elves come in and set to work. In the morning the wife says to the Shoemaker, "the little men have made us rich and we should show our gratitude for this. They're running about with nothing on and might freeze! I'm going to make them each a shirt, coat, jacket, trousers and a pair of stockings. Why don't you make them each a pair of little shoes.' The cobbler willingly agrees, and one night when the clothes were finished he lays them out on the bench in place of the leather. He and his wife hide behind the coats to watch.

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The elves are surprised and pleased to find the clothes. They put them on and sing –

'We're sleek, we're fine, we're out the door:
We shan't be cobblers any more!'

And they dance around the room and away. They never return, but everything continues to go well with the shoemaker and he prospers at whatever he takes in hand.

The tale is a parable of a gifted person. It describes the time between the initial stirrings of a gift (when it is potentially ours) And the releasing of a gift (when it is actually ours). In this case the gift is the man's talent, carried by the elves. The shoemaker is poor, to begin with. His own worth is not available to him for some reason that is never explained. But then, while he is asleep, it begins to come. The process is always a bit mysterious. You work at a task, you work and work and still it won't come right. Then, when you're not even thinking about it, whilst spading the garden or stepping into the bus, the whole thing pops into your head, the missing grace is bestowed. That's the elves, the 'magic touch' by which our tasks take on life. The process does not end there, however, for the elves have need of us, as well. It is a curious detail in the story that these mannequins so skilled with the needle and thread are unable to make themselves some clothes, but that seems to be the case. The outfits and, above all, their freedom depend on the shoemaker's recognition and gratitude.

My general point here is that a transformative gift cannot be fully received when it is first offered because the person does not yet have the power either to accept the gift or to pass it along. But I should qualify this. Some part of the self is able to apprehend the gift. We can feel the prophet future. I am reminded of the odd phenomenon of the 'instant cure' in psychotherapy: sometimes in a very early session a patient will experience a total lifting of his or her neurosis. For a brief period, say a week, you will experience a longed-for freedom. Then normalcy will descend, and then the years of labour to acquire that freedom as a true position. The gift is not ours yet but the fulness of the gift is felt, when we respond with gratitude and with desire. The shoemaker in this tale is completely asleep when the first gift arrives, so we can't say he really acquired his talent. But he does feel something being roused in him and he gets to work.

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Once a gift has stirred within us it is up to us to develop it. There is a reciprocal labour in the maturation of a talent. The gift will continue to discharge its energy so long as we attend to it in return. The geometrical progression of exchange between shoemaker and elves reaches a sort of critical mass when the man finally decides to stay awake and watch the shop. We husband, or protect, our gifts when we cannot do without them, or when they are not fully formed. (We protect our gifts while they are fragile or while we depend on them for our own survival.) But once his poverty has been relieved, the cobbler wonders where his riches have come from – curiosity replaces anxiety – and he and his wife stay up to see the elves. At this point we might say he wakes up to his gift.

What can we make of the initial nudity of the elves, the clothes they are given, and the result of that gift?

To put clothes on a thing is a kind of acknowledgement, like giving it a name. By this act we begin to differentiate what was undifferentiated. Sometimes we are unable to escape from a bad mood, for example, until we have correctly articulated the feeling. Articulation allows a slight gap to open between the feeling and the self, and that gap permits the freedom of both. In this story the clothes realise the gift (that is, they make it real, make it a thing). Note that the Shoemaker makes his first pair of shoes (Within the tale) to dress the elves. It's the culmination of gratitude – of the task of fully receiving what he has been given. Now he is a changed man. Now he has worth that can be communicated.

The shoes he makes are a return gift which simultaneously accomplishes his own transformation, and frees the elves.

This depicts what I mean when I say that the end of the labour of gratitude – the completed gestation of the right response to being given something of value – is similarity with the gift, or the one who gave it. Only now is the man is a real shoemaker, as the elves were on the first night.

A gift isn't fully realised until it is given away, then. Those who will not acknowledge gratitude, or who refuse to labour in its service, neither free their gifts nor really come to possess them.