



## About gift giving and harvesting in the garden of the generations

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I confess. I still have not read Genevieve Vaughan's book „For-Giving“. And so far I have not yet been to any of her workshops on gift economy, which my father has organized over the last years (which I want to catch up with as soon as possible ...). Yet sometimes it does not need that much of an input to grasp something of the essence of a message.

Some time or other this sentence kept cropping up. “Give what you can and take what you need.” That sentence has accompanied me all over the last year and has become my mentor who releases bit after bit of its wisdom. In our community garden I soon found my field of practice where I could bring this basic assumption down to earth and into research. Spring brought my first aha experience, when the beetroot in the field for winter veggies were still soft shoots, almost invisible amongst the weeds. Whereas the summer veggies – just as in the previous year – got attributed to private plots and cared for individually, we had decided at the beginning of the season to also have a communal field for winter veggies. The idea was to do the work communally during regular garden days.

Yet there were a few regulars only who looked after the winter veggies. Others came to look after their summer veggies only, or did not show up at all. The few who attended to the winter vegs were confronted with endless overgrown rows, and that sight alone was enough to drown their spirits. What to do - how were we to react? We decided to this time not to do the usual: getting the others to shoulder their load of responsibility, to secure “fairness and equality”. This type of thinking is rooted in the old logic of exchange. All must contribute equally, and get only that much as they have contributed. Within the logic of exchange giving and taking is clearly defined. And at any time, yet at the latest at the end of the season, one must be able to sum things up.



A basic idea of gift economy, “give what you can, and take what you need” points towards a different direction. Because “give what you can” must also include to mean: “Do not give what you can't.” Only when I am free not to give can I give freely. And only what has been given freely is really a gift. Both is true for the people present on the winter veggie field as for those not present that often.

So we decided to focus on the quality of giving and givers, and I started my self observation. When my spirits were high and the doing in itself provided joy (which in most cases it does in the garden anyway) my giving was a free gift out of abundance. Then it was easy for me that I was there and others were not. My giving was not linked with the expectation that others should give, and how much they should give. However, when I was already tired, when in the midst of an unfinished row time had come for me to have a rest or stop working altogether, when then I told myself: "Come on you have got to finish this" then things felt different. When I had already crossed the threshold into the country of excessive demands then very soon I came across my reluctant self pity ("why me?") and my brain talk ("how on earth are we to cope with all this?").

In talking with others yet another realization came up: Free giving is possible only when I can let go of prefabricated targets and follow exactly what feels really adequate for me. When I give what (for the time being) I cannot give – be it because of seemingly outside necessities or because of my own inner tyrant – then I lose that inner composure out of which I can gift from abundance.

On the level of the group this means that although all are responsible for each individual's healthy giving this is, however, less easily possible, when we, as a community, stick to "what we have aimed at and already sown into the earth". It is not that easy to accept as a group that perhaps we simply have started too much, or have underestimated the time available of the people concerned. For me personally it was very helpful to hear the leading team of the garden say: "What we can't do simply won't happen." And I also know that others had difficulties all the same to see some tiny little seedlings get drowned under the weeds.



Yet at harvest time that was of little importance, since our field gifted us with heaps of vegetables, and we hardly could harvest all, and there were also many beautiful beetroots. Even some heads of cauliflower had gone into seed, because they did not get picked in time. When reflecting at season's end we discovered that here we had to learn something about the second part of the sentence: "...take what you need."

When sharing we heard that some of us were that busy with their summerfield, with catching up with childhood memories concerning work in the vegetable garden or with unpredictable events in their lives that they hardly found time for the winterfield. Consequently they did not dare to harvest there. Towards the end it was Heidi's and Bruno's turn, who in contrast had worked a lot for the winterfield. They said: "We have enjoyed the time on the field so much and cannot possibly eat all we have cultivated. You must harvest as well. That is your contribution. By doing so you honour our work which we have done for the plants." I am really happy to find in the feedback of these two gardeners incorporated the text which in spring we had put up on a sign near the winterfield:

"All you do here is a gift. A gift to the plants which can grow better with your help. A gift to the humans who will enjoy their fruit. A gift to yourself, because here you can harvest food for body and soul."

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