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The Giving Season

It's easy to become cynical about the "holiday spirit." For a few weeks every year, we focus on giving — to family, friends, charitable organizations. But soon after the new year, most of us return to a self-centered status quo.

Hypocrisy?

Not at all, according to evolutionary anthropologist Michael Gurven. Chair of integrative anthropological sciences at UC Santa Barbara, he argues that giving to others is a fundamental part of human nature — but so is being selective about who we give to, and under what circumstances. Therefore a "season of giving" makes perfect sense.

"The impulse to connect with others is a human universal, and a major way we do this is by giving and sharing," Gurven said. "When you compare us to our nearest primate relative, chimpanzees, we share a wide range of resources and give freely — not just upon request or in response to begging."

That's especially true at this time of year, when the air is filled with familiar melodies of carols proclaiming peace and goodwill.

In his research, Gurven approaches human behavior from an evolutionary perspective, which posits that our habits and motivations often echo behaviors that allowed our ancient ancestors to survive and thrive. Our impulse to give to others, he argues, very much reflects our biological legacy.

Early and again late in life, Gurven notes, we depend upon others to take care of us. These experiences imprint on us the importance of sharing.

“Even in hunter-gatherer societies, people can’t make ends meet until they’re in their late teens,” he said. “That means the first 18 years of life, you need to receive food from others. That can also be true in your productive prime — say your 30s and 40s — if you have a lot of hungry mouths to feed in your family. On the other hand, chimpanzees can feed themselves shortly after weaning.

“Humans grow and develop slowly, and it takes a long time to become a successful food producer, be it in hunting, farming or gathering,” he continued. “That training period requires subsidies from other individuals. Cooperation is not just a curious human attribute — it’s a large part of who we are.”

That said, as philanthropists, “we are very selective,” Gurven noted. “If we gave everything we produced away every day, we’d be destitute. So we are strategic about what we give and who we give it to. If you’re primed to give all the time, it could become overwhelming, and then you might not want to give at all.”

So many of us wait until the holidays — the time of year when “all of the signals that inspire giving are turned up really high. When you’re at a supermarket, the Salvation Army is right outside the door. You can’t avoid them.”

Gurven believes all those opportunities to give can produce a certain contagion. “Generosity is in the air,” he said. “Everyone around you is giving, and we’re competitive.

“If you get an appeal in the mail that starts ‘Dear Friend’ or ‘Dear Brother,’ the charity is creating a fictive social relationship that might pull on your obligation to give to family or close ties,” he continued. “When a friend donates to a charitable cause, you might see it on social media; it’s virtue signaling to everybody ‘see what I just did,’ which could inspire others to do the same thing.”

Then there are those holiday ‘white elephant’ parties, which Gurven notes are “opportunities to bring people together and remind them to think about each other.

“Some people act altruistically no matter what,” he said. “They have to watch out that they don’t get exploited. For the rest of us, context matters, culture matters. The holiday season focuses us. We recognize how important our social networks are,

so we spend money on gifts for family and friends.”

OK, but why do we take the time and effort to select presents for our loved ones, rather than just giving the gift we can be assured they will like: cold, hard cash?

“When you exchange gifts with people in your social network, (well thought out) gifts have a lot of symbolic value,” Gurven explained. “An economist would argue that money is the best gift because you can get anything you want, which should maximize your satisfaction. But that’s too easy. It doesn’t show much about your relationship; it just shows you have a thick wallet.

“If I’m giving you a gift that was both costly to me and shows that I’ve been paying careful attention to your likes and dislikes,” he went on, “from your perspective it signals, ‘He must really value me.’ As a result, you’re more likely to value our friendship and want to interact in the future. That’s a big deal.”

So take care when choosing those gifts, and don’t feel bad when your donations drop off in mid-January. Both, Gurven said, are prime examples of human nature.

About UC Santa Barbara

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