



WORLDS APART

Presents and parties versus gifts and celebrations

BY LEONARD CARR



CELEBRATIONS ARE THOSE SPECIAL TIMES IN LIFE where you mark the culmination of one stage of life and inaugurate the next. Ceremonies vividly capture, for the sake of memory, the significance and meaning of people and events. They remind you of how your life is constituted by your connectedness and belonging. With each change in your social and emotional landscape, you are in a sense dislocated from old certainties and therefore forced to relearn your world.

This means relearning your role, for example, from transitioning from parent to in-law. Your social status is redefined, for example, from being single to being a partner in a couple. Your identity from being a person in your own right to being identified by your being, for example, somebody's mother or passing from student to graduate. Transitions change your

social status, for example, marking your transition into becoming an elder in your family and community.

Ceremonies provide the framework that enables all concerned to relate to the person in their new role and integrate them into the community. Ritual shapes and organises the behaviour of all participants to conform to this new role and status. This can be witnessed most vividly in the symbolism of the wedding, where the groom invites the bride into their new house, symbolised by the chuppah. It is for this reason that you invite your community, family, friends and others to witness your transition, and by their participation and presence, confirm your new status and endorse your new role.

Your experience of life-changing events with the accompanying changes in your roles, status, identity and position in the

world would forever seem unreal if not inaugurated and marked by a special event. You do not take any real notice of or remember the everyday and the ordinary. You need ceremony to help you to interpret and negotiate your movement through life's transitions. You need special occasions to anchor these new realities in your mind, heart and actions, and to create a memorable reference point for the new reality.

With transitions, you have to relearn and renegotiate your relationships in the face of the socially and psychologically changed landscape. With these transitions come changes in your respective expectations of each other. To have mere intellectual knowledge about changes would feel abstract and unreal. You are able to embrace and settle into your new reality when it feels tangible and real. Things feel real when your emotions and intellectual understanding come together and are embodied in ways that allow you to fully experience the new reality. Through ceremony and ritual, you get to embody your mental and emotional transition over the threshold from one state of being or reality to another.

The same principles apply when you, or an element of your world, changes in ways that are experienced primarily through a sense of loss, like becoming ill or disabled or someone significant moving in or out of your life. Rituals in the face of loss and mourning, celebration, coming of age, anniversaries and graduations, help you to negotiate life transitions.

It is important to mark birthdays, especially decade transitions, with celebration rather than 'partying'. It's a time to review meaning in your life, to acknowl-

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edge, thank and honour all those who contribute to making you who you are. Sadly, most people have lost the concept of celebration. As a poor substitute, someone invented parties as plastic fake imitations that stand in for and pretend to be true celebration.

The reason that parties are so empty is because they usually mark the ending of something that people are glad is over, like a New Year's Eve party, or the hope of something vague and undefined happening in the future that keeps people looking for love in clubs. In both cases, there is an attempt to create authentic, deep feelings like connectedness or joy out of nothingness. This is reflected in the awkwardness of the interaction, the emptiness of the conversation, the smiles, the hugs, the kisses, and the loneliness of the eyes. It is demonstrated in the stale, predictable, well-worn party routines that people recycle from one party to the next. Parties are, in essence, the celebration of nothing to celebrate. Parties are enjoyed through the anaesthesia of alcohol and drugs, combined with manufactured intensity, aided by the distraction of loud music, lights, gyration and flirtation.

What people really crave is the authentic celebration that helps to enrich their experience of life and deepen the connection with those important to them, through the sharing of meaning and significance at pivotal points in life. True celebration is an appreciative act – it is an intense experience of the joy that results from the sense of having benefited and been enriched by what has passed, whether in the personal, material, emotional or spiritual realm.

It is the proper celebration of, for example, personal growth, significant relation-

ships, blessings, achievements, fabulous moments and contribution that make you feel rich and substantial. The mere contemplation of such abundance evokes sparkling feelings of celebration. Understanding and acknowledging what there is to celebrate also fills you with a sense of richness that gives you inspiration and sustenance for your journey into the stage of life.

This appreciative approach to celebration can be extended into the universal way people mark important celebrations through the giving of gifts. From an appreciative perspective, in the giving of gifts it really is the thought that counts. This is, of course, conditional on the giver having actually given thought to the choice of gift and to the manner in which the gift is presented.

A gift is a communication – it conveys a symbolic message from the giver to the recipient. The true purpose of gift-giving is to build affiliation, connection or closeness in a relationship. The true art of gift-giving is to find the gift and present it in a way that expresses your true intention and enhances your relationship.

Through the giving of a gift, you are investing thought, time, energy and resources in the other person and into the relationship. Your investment builds the bridge that dissolves the sense of separateness between you and the other person. You are, through the authentic act of gift-giving, symbolically bequeathing part of yourself to the other person as a mark of your regard for them.

If you are upset with someone and feeling alienated from them, give them something and see how quickly the closeness returns. A gift that is chosen and presented with love and care, no matter how small, conveys an authentic message that

makes the receiver feel acknowledged, valued, loved or appreciated. An object, no matter how expensive, that is given mechanically in an impersonal way, leaves you feeling empty at best, cynical and even insulted at worst.

Not only do thoughtless or insincere gifts not make the recipient feel any richer; they make them feel poorer, patronised and condescended to. Just like empty parties can stand in for real celebration, material objects offered as gifts can be used as a substitute for what the recipient needs or would prefer from the giver. This creates alienation and disconnection in the world.

The implication of these thoughts is that gifts do not have to be material or expensive. You need to consider what loved ones, friends or employees really want from you. For children, especially in a busy and materially driven world, meaningful time spent together, discussing and choosing something and thereby doing a project together, and getting to know each other better through the experience – is a great gift, even if the actual gift is modest.

Consider what gift you could give to the important people in your life that would make them feel valued, loved, cared for, appreciated, honoured, cherished or privileged, depending on the relationship?

Any time you want cause to celebrate, set about making sense of the vast landscape of your story by recalling how special occasions, people and gifts punctuate and frame each important life transition. Appreciate anew the role that significant others have played in your life, either by supporting and celebrating who you have become, or by frustrating and opposing you, thereby helping you to grow in wisdom and strength.

Every celebration, especially those that inaugurate new phases of life, invite you to review your past, deepen your appreciation of the present moment and make conscious choices about how you would like to shape your future. These intense and magical times give you the opportunity to review your life story, deepen your appreciation of the narrative that shapes your experiences, and enhance your meaning in life. **■**

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