

"Something for nothing is everything": A middle-class epiphany

BY GINA BECK
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Yesterday, while my family rode the bus to Goodwill, my husband pointed out a message spray painted on a concrete wall. The message, in white paint, was "Something for nothing is everything."

I wondered what the person thought when they chose to spray this message? Were they referring to something in a symbolic sense, like love? Or were they



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referring to something in a physical sense, like material possessions?

Perhaps the person meant both and perhaps the intent is more a message about generosity, one's willingness to give without the expectation of receiving something in return.

Lately, I have been feeling extremely grateful and in awe of the generous community I live in. In my neighborhood, something for nothing is a common site. It looks like a cardboard box filled with goods the previous owner no longer needed, left and offered to passersby on a street corner. It looks like the fancy structure my family calls "the free closet" where people along the street can choose to take or leave something in the outdoor closet fitted with a rain repellent roof, hooks and shelves. It is common to find clothes, shoes, household items and other goods here. Something for nothing is the Naked Baby Party held quarterly, where a group of parents gather to toss the clothes their kids outgrew into age-sorted piles and then pick out clothes that will fit their kids. It also looks like the Little Free Libraries, shaped as wooden houses perched on four by four posts filled with books that I can grab to

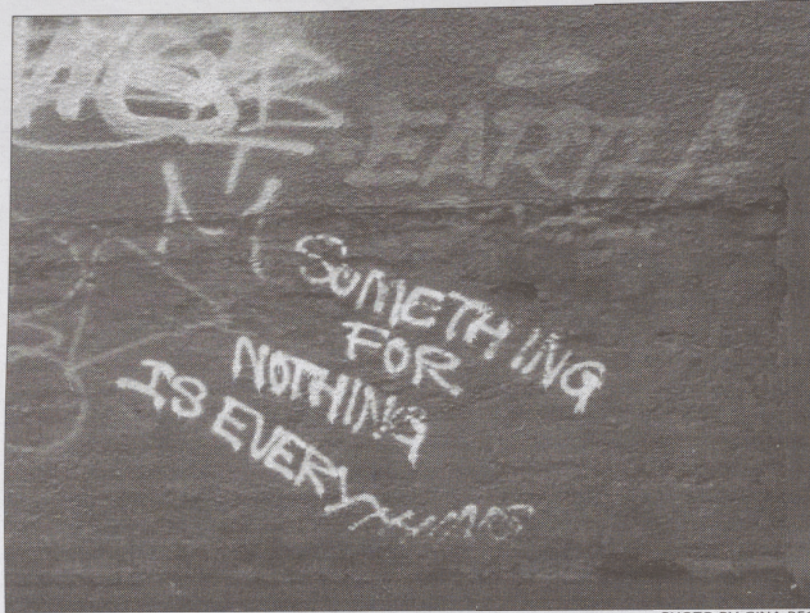


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read and later return or bring a different book to offer.

Most recently, something for nothing is the group I joined on a social media platform encouraging people in their communities to buy nothing. In this philosophy, neighbors offer up what they no longer want, or ask for something they need. In the first few days I joined, the posts were addictive. A neighbor would post a hot commodity and many would express interest, leading to a lottery-style winner. This happened to me a few times and I felt elated (a double stroller, a wireless keyboard, a potty training seat), but then it all seemed beside the point. It felt like I was simply accumulating more things, even if I was buying nothing.

It began to seem like a middle-class community giving things to each other, even though they have means to buy what they need.

This was my assumption. As increased feeds from this group popped up, I realized

it was more than just a community of the privileged class giving to the privileged class. People were using this group to gather hygiene products for a local shelter, they were using it to accumulate no longer used baby carriers to donate to refugee parents. This, I thought, was better than donating to a multi-billion-dollar corporation for a tiny tax break.

What I found interesting was the giving versus the asking. The few times I came across someone asking for something, I noticed the response from the community was barely existent. It made me wonder why this was the case. My conclusion was regarding our attachment to our things. When people offer up their things, in this virtual group in my real-life neighborhood, they are parting with items they no longer are attached to. However, when people ask for something, they are asking for people to relinquish their attachment to objects prior to a willingness to do so on their own. And this fits closely with our cultural ties to

materialism and individualism. I believe another reason why the posts asking for items receive little response is due to our western beliefs about handouts. Even in my liberal, eco-friendly, grassroots, progressive, neighborhood, the perception about people asking for things for free is entrenched in our beliefs about their worthiness as a person. We would rather give willingly than be asked.

This brings to surface the cliché "one's man's trash is another man's treasure." But it is more than that, because it is providing the opportunity to reuse, share and eliminate the demand for manufacturing new things. And this cliché dominates because it perpetuates the belief that some people are lesser, the lesser being the person finding treasure in someone else's trash.

It seems that we are in an era where we are realizing our abundance of "things" are in excess. That excess is making us more willing to part with stuff we seldom use. Our attachment to objects seems to be waning and our desire to hold only to essentials is priority.

When my family got off the bus and entered Goodwill, the item we wanted to purchase was not there. This particular item had not been donated for a tax break.

Our next stop was to look at the mall, but then it occurred to me to wait to go home, to get on my computer and ask my new community in the neighborhood I live in to see if someone had this item and were willing to part ways. There were no offers. And while no one offered their own (it is possible no one in my community had one in their possession to give) it felt nice to have this as an option instead of feeling forced to buy something new.

So maybe we will buy nothing, and in the case of our current need we can makeshift something for nothing, because it is everything.



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