Giving Way to Giveaways

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At my graduation party we had a meal. When natives say there is a meal there is a party, and when there is a party there is a meal, and where there is a meal there is a grandma preparing food by the sweat of her brow. She has things and people on her mind, loses track of them, and rediscovers them in a new place. She calls me the name of my father now because we look the same and because we eat the same. Her grandson is growing along with his appetite, along with the distance between them. A long time stood between him, her, and greasy frybread followed by corn soup. Stirring till her arms couldn’t stir. At my graduation party, grandma gave me a belt too big for me, with room to grow. I think grandma wishes she could feed me frybread till my gut grew to fill the newfound space between us. At my graduation party, an honor song was sung for me and my cousin who also looked and ate like his father did. Grandma was losing two baby boys to whom, in her mind, the stars belonged. At my graduation party, my grandma gave me a hug. Unabashed in her caring, caring for a bashed boy. Her tradition of threaded history on leger paper made its way to now and knitted its purpose into creation the tighter and longer she squeezed. At my graduation party, my grandma sat stoically still, not cause she was mad, but cause she hoped her unflinching would keep time and her baby boy, and his belt, and the frybread followed by corn soup in the same place. And the sweat on her brow dried.

At my graduation party, my auntie motioned me towards her. With her hand clenched in a fist, I could see cash scrunched within her grip. She took hold of my hand and slid a crisp ten
dollar bill. "I’m proud of you," she said. I did what I thought was right. "It’s okay auntie, I don’t need the money." Her smile vanished; she looked at me as if I had taken the ten dollars, torn it in half, thrown it to the ground, and stomped it into oblivion. On ceremonial grounds, there is nothing worse than refusing a gift, than biting at the hand that feeds. Stubbornness tells the soul that it does not need a nurturer, that it can be its own giver.

Gift-giving has never been a tradition unattached from native culture. When colonists arrived boldly on the shores of the easternmost frontier and were quickly humbled by what they saw as an unforgiving land, the tribes taught them how to tend and till the ground. And when their seeds could not muster the courage to rise in a new place, the tribes gave of themselves. When the pilgrims were on their knees with hands clasped to the sky, they were nurtured to rise. The colonists were on a forgiving land but would never show it the respect it was owed. If only they had been more cognizant of the gift they were given. If only they had given thanks.

Natives are a people who are thankful to be giving, so much so that there are ceremonies dedicated to the practice: giveaways. When a person is being honored, be it for an accomplishment, an upcoming or ongoing challenge, or for a naming ceremony, they recognize those who have supported them along the way—the backbone that keeps them upright. One caveat is that the person who is being honored cannot speak. How can one express their gratitude without their voice? Their actionable giving. On ceremonial grounds food is served by the honoree to others, filling the stomachs of those who spiritually fed them. Money is shared discreetly to those who supported them, so as not to boast the wealth they possessed. Pendleton blankets are draped across shoulders, acting as an eternal hug.

On my dad’s tribal reservation, which resides on the Alabama-Mississippi state line, which is a forgotten land, which hid them from Andrew Jackson, buried among the pine trees,
among the muddy roads that never got paved by the government because they too forgot that those people ever existed, there is where the MOWA Choctaw reside. In that little community is a high-hill known as Nani Chaha, right off Red Fox Road. My father was told we came from the top of that hill. High enough to be with the trees, low enough to be with the ground. Entrenched enough in the thickets of pines to be unseen. Sometimes people would visit the hill for the first time and leave feeling as if they have been there before. Sometimes that ground would leave behind gifts. No one knew who put them there or to whom they were addressed. Nani Chaha took that responsibility and recognized those in the community who were burdened by loss. On its escarpment by its feet there would be canned foods and appliances for whomever needed them. There was no catch. Take what is needed. Give what you could. A little hill gave birth to a people and a ceremony of giving.

On ceremonial grounds, generosity rules. Another thing about the Choctaw: we have a fascination with basket weaving. Many women weave them to carry some things and transport others. As a matriarchal tribe, women held and kept things together much like the strands of each basket do for the whole of the basket. When their calluses built into little hills on their fingers, they were leaving behind gifts of their own. A basket that does not crack or have holes that lets things seep out is a remarkable testament to giving. Remarkably, some were so tightly knit, that not even water would drip through, and water always finds a way to get through. It can be hard to contain and even harder to keep pure. The baskets and womens’ labor saved every sprinkle because it knew that its people needed every last drop.

On ceremonial grounds another honor song is sung for another native newborn. Their birth is a protest without ever having said a word. They come from a lineage that was meant to be cut from the world like their umbilical cords, yet they are here. They harbor with them an
obligation to give more than they take all the days of their life. That is their duty as a native in this world. As is the case with every person, they will stray from those teachings of giving when they feel that the world has done nothing but take from them. They will stuff their own satchels with dirty money and unload them in the wrong places. Places that will violate and try to block their journey towards continual generosity. They will discount the fact that ceremonial grounds are everywhere; that it is the powwow grounds, chaotic kitchens and their dinner tables, church offering plates, that it is the earth, gift-givings by the Christmas tree, all the forgotten little acts of giving, and that it is the places where losses are successively interrupted by wins. The homesteads of philanthropy are wide open, but the baby may forget that. After embarking on this new path for a time, they will turn the other way. There in that direction, they will see outstretched hands beckoning them with a call to tradition. Those teachings they once forgot the route to, will thump at that baby's conscience. A hurt heart now gives way to giveaways, to honor songs sung in the name of those they love, and to a grandma’s hug that extends beyond their range of comprehension.

This is ritual: giving to the unworthy, loving the unlovable, forgiving the unforgivable. I hope that Nani Chaha is always seen, that its glory is not too obstructed by the pine trees and their pines that darken the grass beneath them when they fall. Every person has a Nani Chaha. Glancing at my own a second time, I walk to its majesty, and at its base lies the belt from graduation. I put it on and it’s more snug than before. Either I’ve grown or it has shrunk, but belts don’t shrink. I’m back at my graduation party now. Grandma’s smile goes from cheek to cheek, seeing her keen handiwork in full action. As is the nature of grandmas, she wants to shower him with gifts everyday. She gifted him a life that can never be fully repaid, but gifting is not really about returning the favor anyways. That type of giving would be conditional. It would
have a catch. That type of giving would expect something in return. It would ask questions that don’t need to be asked. It posits an ugly falsity that rips at the reeds that hold our baskets, the hills that hide our pride, and the ceremonial grounds that are fighting to remain holy. No one is looking for that. The type of giving that belongs in our gifts and in our gracious philanthropy is one that perpetually returns to humility, generosity, empathy, and integrity. One that tightens reeds, gives of itself, and builds hills that surface among the pines as a beacon of grace.