

And the Tree Was Happy

By Abigail Corrington

“For it is in giving that we receive,” wisely asserted St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan order (thinkexist). His words captivate the true meaning of altruism as understood in daily life. However, his affirmation echoes the less common economics version of this concept. Is generosity characterized solely by goodwill and kindness of the heart, or is there a subtle factor of self-interest involved? Shel Silverstein’s touching children’s story, *The Giving Tree*, addresses this question and several other economic ideas through the tale of a munificent tree who gives all she has to offer to a little boy she loves, no matter how great the request.

The most evident economic idea of the story concerns altruism and generosity. These two characteristics are vital in life, for it is those who give that gain the most. However, it is human nature to make decisions and act based on what is most advantageous for oneself. For example, a wealthy philanthropist may donate a large sum of money to an underprivileged family because it makes him feel good inside. This is not to say that his generosity was driven by selfishness, but rather self-interest. His increased level of happiness was the utility, or measure of satisfaction, involved in making the decision to bequeath a portion of his capital. Thus, people desire to obtain the maximum utility possible because it is in their best interest to do so (Flynn 176).

In *The Giving Tree*, the tree infinitely gives of herself for the boy’s good, whether by allowing the little boy to “gather her leaves,” “swing from her branches,” “sleep in her shade,” “take [her] apples... and sell them in the city,” “cut off [her] branches and build a house,” or “cut down her trunk and make a boat,” all so that the boy “will be happy.” Each instance of giving is

followed by the words “And the tree was happy,” demonstrating that the impetus behind the tree’s magnanimous offerings is the pursuit of her own contentment (Silverstein).

It is highly important to note however, that this observation is not a question of ethics, but rather a comment on the behavior of *homo economicus*, or economic man (Flynn 175). In fact, many respected economists, such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill, hold that it is this pursuit of individual self-interest that produces the greatest possible economic benefits for society as a whole through the power of the invisible hand, or the ability of the free market to allocate capital, enterprise, labor, and land to their most valuable and efficient use (economist). Therefore, the poignant, vast openhandedness of the tree represents not only boundless love, but also a crucial element of economic vitality.

A still more subtle economic truth present in the narrative concerns scarcity, the condition that occurs when there is an unlimited number of wants, but limited resources (McConnell 3). Earth’s natural resources, such as trees, fish, and ore, cannot possibly satisfy the enormous magnitude of the world’s needs and wants. This unavoidable truth is the reason for popular environmental campaigns, such as sustainability, pollution control, and biodiversity protection projects. The purpose of these undertakings is to offer the most efficient way to allocate resources.

In *The Giving Tree*, the boy’s wants are boundless, ranging from “money” to a “house” to a “boat.” The accommodating, magnanimous tree is plenty willing to satisfy any of the boy’s wants and needs, given that she is capable of doing so. All she has to give is herself– a natural resource. Thus, when the boy needs money, she gives him her “apples” to “sell.” When he needs a home, she freely allows him to “cut off [her] branches and build a house.” When he wants, simply for pleasure, to travel “far away,” the tree selflessly lets him “cut down her trunk”

and make a boat. At this point in the story, the tree has given the boy anything he ever desired. However, when the boy returns as a fragile, elderly man, the tree sorrowfully warns him that she has “nothing left to give” because all she is now is “an old stump,” validating the concept of scarcity (Silverstein). Because the tree is a natural, nonrenewable resource, her capacity to give is not boundless. She has provided endlessly, and as a result, has been reduced to practically nothing, for she is only one tree, too small to satisfy infinite wants.

The tree, who started out big and beautiful in the beginning, abundantly healthy, with leaves, branches, apples, and a solid trunk, has by the end of the book, been transformed into nothing more than a stump. This extensive change of the life of the tree represents another universal theme of economics— that of opportunity cost. Economics is principally concerned with the efficient use of a scarce supply of resources, and the idea of opportunity cost plays a fundamental role in guaranteeing that resources are in fact being used efficiently. To attain more of one thing, the opportunity to attain something else is relinquished. Thus, the cost of that which is gained is the value of that which is forfeited to obtain it (economist). Economists refer to this theory when they assert that “there is no free lunch,” for if one is treated to a meal, rendering it “free” to them, there is however, a cost to someone else— in due course, to society. Scarce inputs of land, equipment, farm labor, kitchen labor, and managerial ability are necessary. Because resources can be used in alternative production endeavors, they and the other goods and services they might have produced otherwise are sacrificed in making the meal available (McConnell 3).

In the children’s book, each gift given to the boy by the tree has a greater value than meets the eye. For instance, the opportunity cost of selling the tree’s apples is consuming them as the boy did when he was younger, the opportunity cost of cutting the tree’s branches to build a

home is swinging from them, and the opportunity cost of cutting down the tree's trunk for the sake of building a boat is climbing it. Although the boy attains something beneficial from the tree on each occasion, there is a significant cost endured, as evidenced by the tree's final condition as a stump, reduced to nearly nonexistence.

Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* is a timeless classic that has touched the hearts of young and old alike and spurred much contemplation on its implications, challenging the reader to interpret its many messages. Is it right to give freely and without bounds? Is it acceptable to continue to take that which is given, if done appreciatively? Is absolute, unreserved self-sacrifice beneficial or harmful? This epic is arguably one of the most thought-provoking children's stories in history; however, its simple words and line drawings contain an even more cryptic lesson on economics, if looked upon closely enough. Through analysis of the decisions and actions of its characters and the events that unfold during the plot, the book's economic morals may be discovered and appreciated, allowing the reader to ruminate on many different— and unexpected— levels.

Works Cited

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