The Maternal Gift Economy

A Primer

Dear reader,

This is a living document initiated by me and supported with feedback by members of the Nonviolent Global Liberation (NGL) Community. It includes materials produced by NGL, as well as some of my own summarizing. Suggested materials for further study and practice are listed at the end.

This document itself should not be considered endorsed by NGL.

I hope you find this valuable!

Sincerely,

Tyler Wakefield

1. Overview

This is a brief introduction to and summary of the "Maternal Gift Economy" and the pathways uncovered towards it so far by the Nonviolent Global Liberation Community (NGL)[1]. Their work is inspired by diverse lineages, starting with Miki Kashtan's early questioning of money when she was five, and including Gandhi's understanding of trusteeship in relation to resources, Nonviolent Communication as developed by Marshall Rosenberg, Dominic Barter's experiments with the Money Pile, Genevieve Vaughan's understanding of the Maternal Gift Economy, and Humberto Maturana's & Gerda Verden-Zöller's *The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love*.

At its core, I understand the "Maternal Gift Economy" as a visionary yet practical system for resource flow that can be applied and practiced to varying degrees. I relate to it as a vision for society that we can actually access through the "biological memory of our cells," – particularly the memory of being "born into a world in which care for life is the foundation of human systems."[2] This is in contrast to our current patriarchal societies[3] where scarcity, separation, and control are the foundation of human systems.

[1] This document is not an attempt to comprehensively introduce or summarize the diversity of historical or active gift economy cultures, frameworks, or communities of practice. Rather, it focuses specifically on the Maternal Gift Economy and the Nonviolent Global Liberation Community.

[2] Mobilizing Towards Vision - Miki Kashtan and Emma Quayle.

[3] It is beyond the scope of this document to introduce or define patriarchy / patriarchal societies. Several suggested materials for further study can be found at the end of this document that offer discussions and academic frameworks for both patriarchy / patriarchal societies as well as matriarchy / matriarchal societies.



I see the Maternal Gift Economy made possible by two simple (not easy) foundational elements:

1. Faith in the capacity of humans to exist in a field of love that is based on trust and care for the whole, is free of domination and manipulation, and includes the entire web of life. Another way of expressing this is the faith that, despite our patriarchal conditioning, I and others care for all needs, and that, given sufficient conditions, we can work together to find solutions that work for all.

2. A rigorous application of Nonviolent Communication as a framework for collaborating to meet needs within finite resources, which is the material reality in which we live on this earth. The principles and practices that are part of this framework serve as a robust scaffolding to counter the scarcity built into patriarchal societies that results in consuming and accumulating more than we need now.

Why “Maternal”? I orient to this as:

1. A helpful reminder that we are a “mothering species” (Genevieve Vaughan) and that all those who engage in mothering, whether mothers or others, must give unilaterally and unconditionally for years for any of us to reach adulthood. Moreover, the current capitalist system relies on this gift, even though it is not visible.

2. An invitation into deeper faith that this maternal giving is the essence of how resources flow through nature or Gaia.

Capitalist patriarchal societies[4]

- **Social systems**: reproducing scracity through competition, private ownership, control, differential rules
- **Education and socialization**: reproducing powerlessness through obedience, shaming, and enclosure
- **Human behavior**: reproducing separation as hyper-autonomy, denial of choice, judgements
- **"The Story"**: providing the glue and justification of everything through seeing humans as greedy and selfish

Maternal gifting societies[4]

- **Social systems**: reproducing flow through aligning with life's flows, orienting to needs, and leaning on natural authority
- **Education and socialization**: reproducing choice through integrating young people into the community based on needs
- **Human behavior**: reproducing togetherness through ongoing collaboration and integrative decision making
- **"The Story"**: providing the glue and justification of everything through seeing humans as caring stewards of the whole

[4] Two slides from Miki Kashtan’s October 2024 presentation “The Maternal Gifting Paradigm: From Education to Global Economy” at the Reimagining Education 4.0 Conference.



This table is intended to highlight the contrast in perception and action between the two visions. It is not intended to comprehensively define them.

	Patriarchal Capitalist Economy	**Maternal Gift Economy**
We relate to resources as	Owners	Stewards flowing resources to meet needs
We give and receive resources through	Exchange dynamics (e.g. transactions, trades, demands, threats) or direct force (e.g. theft, dumping)	Wholehearted giving and receiving free of exchange dynamics (i.e. giving and receiving are uncoupled from each other)
Our protocol for taking economic action (i.e. giving or receiving something)	Does it maximize my/our personal access to resources?	Am I / Are we wholeheartedly willing and able to give this? To receive this?
When allocating resources that are seen as shared rather than privately owned, we're guided by ideals of	Deserving, fairness, equality	Caring for everyone's needs (No such thing as privately owned resources, so we're always guided by this ideal)
We generally view money as	A need	Not a human need. Rather, a strategy in the current moment for accessing resources that tend to material (not relational) needs
We're conditioned to use money to...	Address relational needs (e.g. requesting a raise to soothe an unmet need for appreciation)	Access resources that cannot be accessed by any other creative strategy that is within capacity and willingness

2. Discerning Needs

Given its direct focus on needs, our ability to practice the Maternal Gift Economy is dependent upon our ability to discern and communicate about needs in ourselves, others, groups, and the entire web of Life. The following partial list[5] of universal human needs can be a starting place to reflect on our needs, and practices of Nonviolent Communication can support individuals, pairs, families, relationships, and groups in the collective needs discernment process and the creative collaboration process of finding strategies to address needs that work for all.

Universal Human Needs – Partial List

(without reference to specific people, time, actions, things)

Subsistence/Security

Physical Sustenance
Air
Food
Health
Movement
Physical Safety
Rest / sleep
Shelter
Touch
Water

Security
Consistency
Order/Structure
Peace (external)
Peace of mind
Protection
Safety (emotional)
Stability
Trusting

Freedom

Autonomy
Choice
Ease
Independence

Power
Self-responsibility
Space
Spontaneity

Leisure/Relaxation
Humor
Joy
Play
Pleasure
Rejuvenation

Connection

Affection
Appreciation
Attention
Closeness
Companionship
Harmony
Intimacy
Love
Nurturing
Sexual Expression
Support
Tenderness
Warmth

To Matter
Acceptance
Care
Compassion
Consideration
Empathy
Kindness
Mutual Recognition
Respect
To be heard, seen
To be known, understood
To be trusted
Understanding others

Community
Belonging
Communication
Cooperation
Equality
Inclusion
Mutuality
Participation
Partnership
Self-expression
Sharing

Meaning

Sense of Self
Authenticity
Competence
Creativity
Dignity
Growth
Healing
Honesty
Integrity
Self-acceptance
Self-care
Self-connection
Self-knowledge
Self-realization
Mattering to myself

Understanding
Awareness
Clarity
Discovery
Learning
Making sense of life
Stimulation

Meaning
Aliveness
Challenge
Consciousness
Contribution
Creativity
Effectiveness
Exploration
Integration
Purpose

Transcendence
Beauty
Celebration of life
Communion
Faith
Flow
Hope
Inspiration
Mourning
Peace (internal)
Presence

This list builds on Marshall Rosenberg's original needs list with categories adapted from Manfred Max-Neef. Neither exhaustive nor definitive, it can be used for study and for discovery about each person's authentic experience.

[5] © 2021 Miki Kashtan, created with Inbal and Arnina Kashtan. Excerpted from the "NVC Basics" Learning Packet, available for download without a paywall at https://thefearlessheart.org/store/learning-packets/

3. Additional Resources

For those looking to study the Maternal Gift Economy more deeply than this primer, and as articulated directly by Miki Kashtan, I recommend:

- Brief blog post: Every Tree Wants to Make a Forest: Choice, Togetherness, and the Maternal Gift Economy
- Deeper reading: Restoring Flow Using Nonviolent Communication
- 2hr Video Podcast: Work That Reconnects Network Webinar: Maternal Gift Economy with Miki Kashtan
  - *Note: several people offered feedback that listening to this conversation unlocked understanding and faith that was not found by reading the written materials alone, and that the conversation provided tangible examples that helped land concepts. Some also shared that the conversation offered a connection to the humanness of the author that was hard to access in the written materials that could be experienced sometimes as dry, dense, or abstract.*
- Short article: Material Risk Sharing for a Livable Future
- Blog Post: From Exchange to Gifting Part Three: Reintegrating into Flow One Experiment at a Time
- Convergent Facilitation: a practical decision-making and facilitation framework designed to find solutions that work for all, including resource flow decisions.

For those looking to study some of the work that underpins the Maternal Gift Economy work, I recommend:

- Nonviolent Communication Basics
- Embracing Nonviolence as an Orientation to Life
- Why Patriarchy Matters – Making Sense of how We Got Here
- *The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love* (particularly chapter 3)
- The work of Genevieve Vaughn
- The work of Heide Göttner-Abendroth and International Academy HAGIA for Modern Matriarchal Studies, particularly *Matriarchal Societies of the Past and the Rise of Patriarchy: West Asia and Europe (2022)*



Image Sources

cover | CIFOR-ICRAF
p1 | James Goodman
p3 | Tambako The Jaguar
p5 | UN Women Asia and the Pacific