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## Giveaway

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# Giveaway

**Abstract**

"A real Lakota giveaway, like the one I attended, the old-ways ritual that may have been practiced right here, was no garage sale."

Posting about a Native American tradition from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/giveaway/>

**Keywords**

In All Things, generosity, Indians of North America, ritual

**Disciplines**

Christianity

**Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# in things

March 7, 2019

## Giveaway

James Calvin Schaap

*“. . .be content with what you have,  
for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’” Hebrews 13:5*

Not long ago, I sat in a giveaway—or a descendent ritual of what once was. I was not the only white guy in the place, but almost. It was a birthday party, and the woman at the heart of things was joyfully practicing her old Lakota ways by giving things away: jellies and jams, hats and scarves, a quilted table runner and the grand prize, a full-sized quilt. She had made it all and was giving it all away via numbers we took when we came in. When I won a jar of canned pickles, I was thrilled. But the drawings continued, and I ended up with a gorgeous quilted table runner that the birthday girl, who was 98 years old, had sewn herself.

I walked up to the front, where she gave me the gift. And then I walked back and, at the back of the room, protested to the woman’s daughter. “I’m not family—some great-granddaughter should really have this. . .”

She looked at me as if I’d uttered an obscenity, and I got the message: the blessing of the ritual was not my getting but her mother giving. That is what it was all about. She smiled at me, but her expression made it clear: “Don’t muck things up.”

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On an April morning a few years earlier, I felt a notion of what a “giveaway” might have been like 150 years ago. I wanted simply to forget the one-dollar price tag on this or that

piece of jetsam that we were pedaling at our garage sale, but instead, I gave it all away. Long before any white people lived here, this was Yankton Sioux country where giveaways happened ritually; for instance, they happened during the births and deaths of family members. Garage sales happen ritually here every last-weekend in April, but they are not prompted by death or joy—although some may be attributable to Marie Kondo.

That day out on the lawn, my wife was not wearing a blanket, nor I a loincloth—thank goodness. We were neither re-enactors nor wannabes. Almost everything we sold we will not miss. We were simply lightening the load before moving.

A real Lakota giveaway, like the one I attended, the old-ways ritual that may have been practiced right here, was no garage sale. Some people would give away horses, the most precious commodity that Native Siouxlanders ever owned.

I first read about a Lakota giveaway on a Sunday morning in a book about the Yankton Sioux. Giveaways were a means by which wealth was distributed and people gained stature and strength. Those men and women rich enough in spirit to give away what they valued grew in esteem because of their devout care for the poor—an ethic practiced by Native people long before my great-grandparents lugged the New Testament into the hinterland and talked about what Jesus told us all about those who are less blessed than we.

By 1870, when my great-grandparents came to Siouxland, white folks had determined Native American giveaways to be among a handful of heathen rituals from which savages had to be saved. That Sunday morning when I had first read about them, we marched off to church an hour later for what was, I remember, a powerful sermon about our incredible materialism, the kind of ethic, a century ago, we might have seen in practice had we not determined the Yanktons should give up their heathen ways.

We didn't make much money that April morning, and I didn't shed a tear for anything people carted off. Now give away my iPad?—that would be another story. Or our checking account, or my mother's stocks and bonds, our IRAs. Had those things been out there on the driveway to be taken away for the asking, it would have been a giveaway in the ancient Lakota tradition.

We didn't do that. Who would?

Standing outside on a perfect April afternoon, I couldn't help but think of tall grass prairie all around full of people—Native people—coming by, looking around, all of them smiling.

That's what I thought about, out on our lawn, at our Saturday moving sale. Just for a moment I had a sense—a fleeting vision—of what a real giveaway might feel like, the kind of thing that would have happened here long, long ago, an ancestor of what I was a part of sometime later in the reservation.

It was a kind of Lenten exercise to feel myself so committed to the things of my life, the treasures, those that “spark joy,” to recognize, after a fashion, those things that I worship.