

To You I Give

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ December 9, 2007

When I was about twelve, I wanted to give as well as receive. So for Christmas that year I bought every one of my aunts and uncles a gift. One received a jar of Vick's Vapo-Rub, another a washcloth, a third a small ball. That was my introduction to the special joy in being allowed to give to others. I was so proud of myself.

I speak to you today as one who is intensely aware of the giving nature of this congregation. You are involved. You see needs and you jump in. I speak to you with food for further thought, asking that you take a moment to review, perhaps to reflect upon and theologically consider your giving response style. How many of you hate to walk the streets of big cities? There are so many needy people on the streets, each asking for money, all with a story to tell. Do you ignore the outstretched hands with more than a little guilt? Do you simply not see them? Do you give something and then smart, sure that you are being scammed?

There are some who will tell you to always give; you are in no position to judge. Others that say that if a story is good enough, even if outrageous, give. At Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago one my classmates made up a list of resources available in the area. He passed out these lists so that when one of us was approached by a street person we could engage them in dialogue and hand out one of the papers, hopefully hooking that person up with an appropriate agency. Another colleague figured out her discretionary allowance each month. She would then get that much money in \$1.00 bills and would give them out until she ran out of bills. After a while the street folks knew that she gave when she could and respected her "no, not today" at its face value.

Street begging is a true "touch me" situation.

How many of you have worked in a COPA action? As Jorge has told you, COPA is a LOCAL grass roots movement. Actions are based on feedback from residents about what is needed here in this county. When we form relationships with each other and dialogue together it does not take long before we ascertain our common ground. When that groundswell of opinion rises into a wave of agreement, then we know that we have action potential. We move into strategic planning. We are hooked on a felt level. Sometimes our research and discernment suggests that the real power is not at the local level, but at the state level so we join forces with state wide coalitions to better lobby for our needs. Health care is one such issue. We are better together. Although most of us want single payer health insurance and we will continue to fight for it, we are also intensely involved in the passage of a healthcare bill RIGHT NOW that increases services to those most in need. We are fighting so that employers take fiscal risks as part of their responsibility toward better healthcare for all. Statewide issues, like local ones are felt issues. We feel the pain around us and jump in wanting to be a part of the solution. We focus on our interdependent web. We are one, a part of the community of caring.

This community of care is harder to feel when we give money or sign petitions, actions which can be done on a local level but which are very common on national and global levels. Although the giving may be from the heart, it is harder to personally feel the needs of the cause. Are these actions of less value?

Certainly not! Yet, they are less personal. It is more difficult to feel like an integral part of the movement. How do these causes touch our hearts? We rely on stories. Solicitation letters tell us of Johnny or Mary or Sue. They include pictures. Sometimes we are distracted by the gifts they offer. Who is giving the nicest

backpack this year? Oh, fleece blankets seem to be in style. Let's see if I give at the \$75.00 level I get a cup and a CD but if I give at the \$100.00 level I get an umbrella to show off. Perhaps my name will be announced on the air or placed prominently in a program. The payoff for giving is often different than the payoff in actual hands on effort.

Sometimes our best intentions go awry. Consider the story of giving in Chiapas Mexico. Chiapas, though rich in natural resources is one of the poorest states in the country. It is a microcosm of corporate resource exploitation. It is also the home of many Mayas, Zapatista communities, refugees fleeing from governmental forces and immigrants from even poorer neighboring Guatemala. They are in great need, lacking basic necessities to sustain life. Agencies, NGOs, from other countries bring in truck loads of donations to support them. Unfortunately, these donations are often based on old system giving. This is the system in which "big brother" decides what is best for you and offers programs and gifts which you are expected to gratefully accept, whether or not it meets your primary needs. The gifts, then, are determined by the givers, not by those in need. (It reminds me of a certain US governmental plan which supports family planning only if the grantees promise not to give information on all options available to the recipient.) So, given this premise, - let us give to you what we want and you just be grateful, you can imagine just how these families felt when the donation truck finally arrived in the midst of the Lacandan jungle, backs into the village, and, as it opened its tailgate, the donations tumbled out. There sitting on the very top of the heap was this (hold out 4" pink "stiletto" type shoe). Do you think that this shoe was a response to a voiced or felt need? Yes, it is an extreme example, but it also vividly points out the paradigm of giving so often used in developed countries. On a different scale, how many of us have looked through our food cabinets and "donated" food that has passed its expiration date or articles that are damaged. Are we helping our brothers and sisters? Would your donation be the same if it were to go to your father or mother?

John Tropman speaks to this issue from a theoretical, theological perspective. He is a professor of Social Work at the University of Michigan. Through his works,^{1,2} Tropman has compared the Protestant ethic with what he calls the Catholic ethic. He suggests that in the Catholic ethics model we are all one community. Supreme value is not placed on how much money you earn or your vocational status. A spirit of helping each other is suggested. We all cooperate to meet the needs of the group. By meeting everyone's needs, we all get a fair share. The concept of judgment is not used to decide whether or not to respond. Although this view is sometimes called the basis of a welfare state mentality, I believe that not to be the case. The conceptual difference is in the premise, "we are one." To me, a welfare state is one in which the poor are considered "the other," whereas in the "catholic" ethic we are all one family. To me, the Protestant ethic yields the sense of the other. Theologically, many Protestants believe that election into God's kingdom is predetermined. There are those that are elected and those that aren't. It is an either/or status, rather than a fluid one as suggested in Catholicism. Even for those sects which do not believe in predetermination, there is a sense of the individual as the center of one's destiny. Leading a good life, being favored by God's grace, will yield positive results. Thus, perhaps, those who are poor are unworthy and one questions why they are in that condition and whether or not one should help them. So the poor must show themselves worthy in order to receive assistance. Studying the history of the social justice movement in the United States, clearly highlights the tension between the so named Protestant and Catholic ethics. In some of our programs we give solely based on need. In others, the recipient must adhere to certain standards in order to receive assistance. One method is to design a program and accept folks into it. Another is to accept the person and to design the program around that person's needs.

¹ Tropman, John E. *American Values and Social Welfare: Cultural Contradictions in the Welfare State* Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1989.

² Tropman, John E. *The Catholic Ethic in American Society: An Exploration of Values* Josey-Bass Pub.: San Francisco, 1995.

Sometimes there is a marriage between global and particular needs, resulting in more personal involvement. Contrast the Chiapas fiasco, with this more personal story. Several years ago UUFSCC member and physician John Isherwood went to Nicaragua on a protest march against the contras. As he toured the villages he saw great needs. In the village of El Qua, he asked what type of aid they could use. He was informed that, yes the communities needed medical supplies which he as a physician could supply but what they really wanted was something that service agencies knowing the immense level of primary need in the area would not necessarily think of. The folks in El Qua were part of a terrible civil war.

Families were being torn apart. What they requested was something to remove them even for a short time - from the political and economic realities which were tearing them asunder. There was one activity that everyone enjoyed and so they asked, could he bring baseball equipment. The nurse was certain that baseball equipment would allow families to once again play together.

Dr. Isherwood returned to the States and through the assistance of his friend Pat Dillon, editor of the Mercury News, got this story out. After the first article was run, the Mercury News received a small amount of baseball equipment. Thinking that the promotion was a bust, but committed to persevere through two more appeals, they continued. By the third article, the donation containers were overflowing. On his next trip to Nicaragua, John Isherwood took, in addition to medical supplies, over \$50,000 worth of baseball equipment. Almost immediately they could see the impact of their actions as folks were playing baseball throughout the area. Sounds of baseball are very different from sounds of war.

In conclusion, I ask two questions: To whom do you give money and for what purpose? Do you ideologically think out the reasons that you give to certain causes and not to others. Do you consider how much money the particular agency spends in administrative costs? Do you favor legislative action, food and water relief, or infrastructure development? Perhaps the good monitoring work of agencies working for peace is important to you. Like the street beggars do you feel guilty using the labels and notepads that come with solicitations if you don't give them money? What do you do with the nickels and rosaries? How do you feel about stamped envelopes for easy return?

What is it that you want as a result of your giving? To make a difference? To be recognized for your philanthropy? Are you simply doing your duty, living your conscience, making a difference. Are you following Jesus' commandment to love your neighbor and following the eight Beatitudes? Are you living the Five Pillars of the Islamic faith by fulfilling your duty? Are you accumulating merit as in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition? Or are you accumulating mukoduka – no merit. Eido Roshi says that Zen practitioners should aim for no Buddha, no virtue whatsoever. Or do we give as Shantideva says “with no sense of reward, but simply make spontaneous responses, like the hand reaching out to assuage the pain of the foot.”³

I leave you with two readings:
The first is by Edward Everett Hale:

I am only one
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything
But still I can do something.
And because I cannot do everything
I will not refuse to do the something
That I can do.

³ Boyce, Barry, et.al. “Forum: Too much meditation?” *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly*, Summer, 2007

And the second is a rabbinic quote from the Talmud:

Life is short and the task is great...
You are not expected to complete the task,
But you are also not free to ignore it.
- Rabbinic quote