

Sermon

Unitarian Universalists do not have a common creed. We have principles and purposes which we affirm and promote, and which are guiding us in the way we live our lives. Our first two principles are “The inherent worth and dignity of every person;” and “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.”

Because we believe this to be true - and important, we devote a lot of our time and resources to social justice work. Many UUs see this kind of engagement as deeply spiritual. It can help us find meaning in life, or, as many Eastern religions put it, it will help us to accumulate good karma.

At my Easton congregation, we have special “outreach” collections every month. With the money collected, we support many different organizations in the community, from organizations that fight for the environment, to agencies who help individuals with substance abuse problems or people with special needs, to community mediation and scholarships.

We house an Interfaith Shelter two weeks every winter, and help migrant farm workers during the summer. This kind of charitable giving is considered “emergency” help. It’s help for people who have an immediate need like a place to sleep on a cold night, or help with the rent to avoid eviction. Outside of the U.S. we support the relief efforts in Haiti, in cooperation with other churches. I am very proud of the people in my congregation for all the support they give, and I am sure that you here at Wilmington have many similar efforts!

A few months ago, the Easton clergy association was discussing all our efforts to help the people in our community. Many of the pastors were concerned about the potential abuse of our compassion. One of my colleagues brought up another aspect by talking about “Toxic Charity.” He started telling us about the book with the same name by Robert Lupton, and gave a brief description of the attempt of several churches and organizations to get away from traditional models of “doing for” the poor, and moving toward a model of “doing with.”

Lupton, an urban activist in Atlanta, who holds a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Georgia, has worked for decades with churches, government agencies, entrepreneurs, and armies of volunteers. He knows from firsthand experience the many ways “good intentions” can translate into ineffective care or even harm. He writes: “When we do for those in need what they have the capacity to do for themselves, we dis-empower them. Many of our programs, our charities, have succeeded only in creating a permanent underclass, dismantling their family structures, and eroding their ethic of work.”

What Lupton writes in his book reminds me very much of Gandhi’s concept of “compassionate sharing.” Here is what he wrote: “The kind of concern that we show to the needy and the poor is motivated more by pity than by compassion. When we act out of pity, we give the poor what they need on a platter. Such actions are motivated by a desire to do good. It is easy, and requires no commitment, just write out a check and mail it. The result is - the poor become dependent on charity, whether from the government or from individuals.

Consequently, a population already oppressed by circumstances is further oppressed by the charity we give. When people are forced to live in any form of oppression, the two things that they sacrifice are self-respect and self-confidence. The poor buy into the stereotypes that society creates – that they are lazy, that they are incapable of doing anything and that they will forever remain dependent on society.”

Obviously, not all charity is toxic. It is important that we respond immediately to desperate circumstances such as natural disasters, a house burning down, or financial emergencies due to unforeseen circumstances. For example, it is important that we support single parents who earn minimum wage with food stamps. Please don't get me wrong – I do not want to defend the politically motivated hysteria that wants to cut many public assistance programs!

However, often we seem to be unable to switch from “emergency relief” to the more complex work of long-term development. And often what we interpret as crisis, particularly in the U.S., is a different matter. For example, many volunteers who are running food pantries and clothes closets, feel they are meeting a crisis need of unemployed families. Robert Lupton, however, contends that those are chronic poverty issues that deserve a development strategy.

Let me tell you a story Lupton shares in his book: His church's mission group has been bringing Christmas gifts to the children of poor families for several years. Sometimes he accompanied the families who each had “adopted” a needy family to the inner city. On this particular day, he observed how the mother invited in the visitors, how the children excitedly unwrapped the many gifts – and how the father silently slipped out the back door. Lupton writes: “I was witnessing a side of charity I had never noticed before: how a father is emasculated in his own home, in front of his family, for not being able to provide presents; how children get the message that the “good stuff” comes from rich people out there, and that it is free. Our well-meant charity exacted an unintended toll on a parent's dignity.”

One small example of toxic charity.

You can observe it easily for yourself. Whether you volunteer in a soup kitchen, or hand out boots and shirts to local migrant workers, take a close look at their faces, at their whole body language. You will see head and shoulders bent forward slightly, self-effacing smiles, meek “thank-you's” and little to no eye-contact.

One small step to minimize some of the “toxicity” is to establish parity between people of unequal power. For example, by converting a clothing donation program into a thrift store.

Maria Chavez used to get baby clothes and work boots for her husband in the basement of the local church. She felt like a beggar, and was resentful towards the “church ladies” who kept track of how many items she took – there was a limit per person and year. Now Maria goes shopping in the same location: the church now runs a thrift store, a legitimate business that needs customers to pay for the overhead. The prices are very affordable.

For Maria and her family, there is no limit on the number of visits. They are greeted as valued customers, which affirms their self-esteem. One of Maria's girlfriends even works part-time as a cashier at the thrift shop.

Sounds to me like a system of genuine exchange, and a win-win situation for all!

Toxic charity is also found far away from home. My friend Obed whom I met in seminary, hails from Ghana. He was at Lancaster Theological Seminary studying to become a minister on a full scholarship from the Lutheran Church of America. In exchange for this financial support, Obed was going to be a pastor in his home country, helping with education, social programs, and spiritual development.

He shared with his fellow seminarians how grateful he was for this, and how much more sense this kind of financial help made than the costly mission trips and service projects that many churches pay for. Churches in the US actually spend more than \$5 billion annually on such trips!

Obed gave us examples about groups coming to Ghana to help. In one instance, a group of young people were given the task to paint the local church. In one summer, the same church was painted three times by three different groups! Not only was that a completely ridiculous waste of time and energy, the locals could easily have painted the church themselves, making some money and taking pride in their community.

Obed told us that much of the help that is offered from well-meaning people in the U.S. does not empower those being served, nor does it engender healthy cross-cultural relationships. Poverty is only relieved short term, and the local quality of life is usually not improved. Much too often this kind of charity erodes the work ethic of the recipients, and deepens their dependency on others.

In his book, Lupton talks a lot about community development, and about empowering people, as an alternative to toxic charity.

Gandhi's concept of Compassionate Sharing, rooted in the Culture of Nonviolence, speaks of people acting out of "com-passion" by getting involved in trying to rebuild the self-respect and self-confidence of the poor. It means launching "constructive programs" designed to help the poor stand on their own feet and do things for themselves. Gandhi called this "Trusteeship." In other words, we should consider ourselves "trustees" of the talent that we possess; we should be willing to use the talent, not so much the money, to help the poor realize their potential.

We have many opportunities to help people to help themselves, to empower them to find their own solutions, to preserve their self-esteem by letting them be in charge of their own growth and development. Let me give you a few examples:

You all know, I'm sure, about *Heifer International*. Initially, there is a gift – a goat, a llama, a water buffalo. But the recipient needs to do all the day-to-day work to make sure that he or she can earn a living with the help of this animal. And – the recipient has to pass on the gift in the form of the first offspring from his animal. So the gift keeps giving.

Another great example for empowering people is micro-lending. There is for example *Kiva*, whose tagline reads "To empower people around the world through a \$25 loan." On their web-site they tell the story of Mindonio, who lives in Honduras. He needs

\$1050 to buy fertilizer for his coffee plants. He will have 14 months to pay back the loan. The money goes back into the accounts of the hundreds of donors, and they can either donate it again for another recipient, or pull it out.

On the insert in your order of service I have also listed *Opportunity International*. In addition to micro loans, this non-profit helps over four million people with saving money, buying insurance and job-training. Their microfinance products make it possible for market vendors to fill their stalls with goods, artisans to make a profit, educators to expand schools and farmers to move beyond subsistence.

One of the best examples of local engagement in community development is Habitat for Humanity: individuals who want to be homeowners have to work hard to reach this goal. Yes, they do get an interest free loan, and the house is sold to them at cost, but they have to have a minimum income, they must not have any debt, and they have to invest hundreds of hours of “sweat equity.” Being a Habitat volunteer is a great way to help people in need, without creating dependency, without undermining self-esteem and self-worth.

I would encourage you to take a closer look at how you, as individuals or as a congregation, help the needy people in your community. Be aware of the tendency to put a “band-aid” on a situation that needs a different kind of healing. Be also aware of the temptation to transform people’s lives according to your ideas, your imagination! This is another aspect that Gandhi addressed: “The problem is when we try to resolve the problems of the poor, we go with our own preconceived notions and try to fit the poor into this plan. Our approach usually is: “we know your problem and if you listen to us we will solve it for you.”

Gandhi is right: The most important decision makers and “movers and shakers” in relief efforts will have to be the people who receive support.

I challenge you to explore together different types of outreach. Maybe - instead of giving money, you can give of your talents and skills. You could help a person to write a good resume, you could help him to prepare for a job interview.

You could help a family by insulating their house in order to reduce electricity bills. You could provide or organize child care for a single mother who needs to go to work.

Believe me, there are many examples. The possibilities are endless.

Let me close with a quote by Gandhi: “When we are working for and with the poor, we need a great deal more humility than we possess. We have absolutely no idea what poverty means, what it is to live in ignorance, what it means to be homeless and destitute. If we don’t know what their life is like, how can we find solutions that will be helpful? The poor must become a part of the solution if they are the central part of the problem.”