TOXIC CHARITY

How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)

ROBERT D. LUPTON

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Chapter Three

The Anatomy of Giving

Giving is no simple matter, not if giving is to be ultimately redemptive. And there are no cookie-cutter formulas for getting it right. Theologians and social practitioners, while agreeing on the value of generosity, differ widely in their opinions about its application. The struggle to find the optimal path is exemplified in the following accounts.

It was my first Christmas living in the inner city, the first time I had the luxury of relaxing on a Christmas Eve in the living room of a low-income family. Usually I was rushing back and forth from the suburbs with vanloads of presents and food for the poor, organizing toy parties, coordinating adopt-a-family gift deliveries. This year was different. I was no longer a commuter. I was a neighbor.

My decision to live in the city came after a decade of counseling struggling inner-city families. Over time it became ap-

parent that the best chance for these families to build hopeful futures lay in effecting change from within their neighborhoods. When our organization, Focused Community Strategies, decided to direct the work more locally, several of our staff committed themselves to move in, become neighbors, and join the community in this transformational effort.

That's why Christmas Eve of '81 I celebrated the season as a newcomer to this urban neighborhood, sipping coffee with one of my new neighbors.

Bare floors were swept clean, and clutter was picked up. The smell of Pine-Sol hung in the air. Front windows reflected the light from two plastic candles. A small artificial tree on a corner table blinked with a single strand of colored lights. The children, antsy with anticipation, paced from window to window, waiting for Santa's helpers to arrive.

When the knock finally came on their front door, their mom greeted the visitors—a well-dressed family with young children—and invited them to step inside. A nervous smile concealed her embarrassment as she graciously accepted armfuls of neatly wrapped gifts. In the commotion, no one noticed that the children's father had quietly slipped out of the room—no one but their mom.

Not until the guests were gone and the children had torn through the wrappings to the treasures inside did one of the little ones ask where their father was. No one questioned the mother's response that he had to go to the store. But after organizing these kinds of Christmas charity events

for years, I was witnessing a side I had never noticed before: how a father is emasculated in his own home in front of his wife and children for not being able to provide presents for his family, how a wife is forced to shield her children from their father's embarrassment, how children get the message that the "good stuff" comes from rich people out there and it is free.

Only after becoming a neighbor was I able to see what we had done. Christmas Eve in that living room, I became painfully aware that not all charity is good charity.

Even the most kindhearted, rightly motivated giving—as innocent as giving Christmas toys to needy children—can exact an unintended toll on a parent's dignity. Inadvertently I had done just that. Not just this time but many times.

This kind of charity has to stop, I vowed. The cost was just too great, the emotional pain too severe. There had to be a better way.

So much of our holiday season, from Thanksgiving till Christmas, is consumed with giving—turkeys distributed by the score, free feasts in the church fellowship hall, heaping food baskets for seniors, Santa parties for kids. Giving is supposed to be a joyous process, but throughout our various giving activities I had overlooked the darker side. Emotional price tags were attached to each of these charitable events. I thought, too, about our church clothes closet and food pantry—did those have the same issues at play?

About that time I happened across the devastating words

written by Jacques Ellul, a French philosopher and lay theologian, in *Money and Power:*

> It is important that giving be truly free. It must never degenerate into charity, in the pejorative sense. Almsgiving is Mammon's perversion of giving. It affirms the superiority of the giver, who thus gains a point on the recipient, binds him, demands gratitude, humiliates him and reduces him to a lower state than he had before.

Charity a perversion? Toxic? That thought clung to me for weeks. Every interaction with low-income neighbors became suspect. I began studying the facial expressions of those I ushered into our church clothes closet. I noticed how seldom recipients gave me direct eye contact. I watched body language as I handed out boxes of groceries from our food pantry—head and shoulders bent slightly forward, self-effacing smiles, meek "thank-yous." I observed, too, how quickly recipients' response to charity devolved from gratitude to expectation to entitlement.

In moments of silent introspection, I observed my part in the anatomy of giving: I expected gratitude in exchange for my free gifts. I actually enjoyed occupying the superior position of giver (though I covered it carefully with a facade of humility). I noted a hidden irritation at those who voiced their annoyance when free food stocks ran low. I grew weary of filtering through half-truths and manipulative ploys as I

sought to equitably dispense resources. This thorough look at the anatomy of my charity eventually exposed an unhealthy culture of dependency.

With the research intensity of a Louis Pasteur searching for a causal relationship between germs and disease, I examined broader aspects of charity under the microscope of my new awareness. I discovered that the toxins deforming relationships were not confined to our organization or the neighborhood I served. Everywhere I looked, I observed the same patterns, from overseas church mission trips to the inner-city service projects of campus organizations. Wherever there was sustained one-way giving, unwholesome dynamics and pathologies festered under the cover of kindheartedness.

Since that 1981 Christmas Eve, it has baffled me that in a global communication era no watchdog organization warns of the dangers of charity, especially given the growth and popularity of this industry. Now, everyone is getting in on the charity train, from rock groups to youth groups, from TV celebrities to elementary-school children, from Fortune 500 corporations to campus fraternities. And across the board the benevolence business is almost entirely unexamined.

Doing *for* rather than doing *with* those in need is the norm. Add to it the combination of patronizing pity and unintended superiority, and charity becomes toxic.

BUT ROCK STARS AND church groups are not the only ones leading with their hearts rather than sound reason and intel-

lect. Governments and world leaders are plagued by similar blind spots.

Take Haiti, for example. No other country in the Western Hemisphere has received more charitable aid and services from governments and nonprofits. Yet its poverty and dysfunction continue to deepen.

During the four decades prior to the devastating earthquake of January 2010, $8.3 billion in foreign aid flowed into Haiti. Yet the country has ended up 25 percent poorer than before the aid began. The current earthquake tragedy has ballooned additional aid commitments by another $9 billion from thirty-nine countries. But the prognosis for sustained improvement is no better today. "The problem is not goodwill," says anthropologist Timothy Schwartz, longtime Haiti resident who emailed from the midst of the earthquake devastation. "I don't even think the problem is resources. . . . The big problem is lack of accountability, lack of a mechanism to pressure aid agencies into effective, long-term development." Schwartz has witnessed it all firsthand.

Decades of free aid from well-meaning benefactors has produced an entitlement mentality and eroded a spirit of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency. The outpouring of more aid, though necessary to preserve life in a time of disaster, is ultimately worsening the underlying problem. Humanitarian responses unaccompanied by disciplined development strategies become a curse on a country. Dambisa Moyo, in her best-selling exposé, *Dead Aid*, writes about assistance to her native

Africa: "The reality is aid has helped make the poor poorer and growth slower. Aid has been, and continues to be, an unmitigated political, economic and humanitarian disaster for most parts of the developing world."

If giving our resources hurts the poor as often as (or even more often than) it helps, how are we to be responsible stewards of resources? From my painful Christmas Eve drama until the present, this question has been my persistent companion.

Parity vs. Charity

For three decades now I have experimented, both in the living laboratory of my urban community and in Third-World settings, with methods to minimize the toxins and foster health in the relationships between the haves and have-lesses.

It is delicate work, I have found, establishing authentic parity between people of unequal power. But relationships built on reciprocal exchange (what I call holistic compassion) make this possible. Thrift stores, unlike free-clothes closets, are legitimate businesses that *need* customers to pay the light bill and make weekly payroll. And unlike clothes closets that place limits on the number of visits and garments a recipient is allowed, a thrift store relies on attracting paying customers to purchase as many clothes as they are able. When the customer is necessary to ensure the business's survival, there is equity of power. And parity is the higher form of charity.