

## **Sharon Gaskell – Social Justice vs Charity**

### ***The arrogance of Charity***

Not long ago, at Starthrower Foundation's home in Cap-Haitien, Haiti, we received visitors who were new to us but not new to Haiti. They wanted to spend a few days with us, in order to get an idea of the work we do with the youth in this area. Perhaps we could work together, they said.

And so, even with our limited resources, we accommodated them. Carmene cooked the entire day, and Jack pumped water to fill the reservoirs before he went home at 4 p.m. Everything was ready. I gave our guests a tour of our compound, including our well and generator, as well as the reservoirs on the roof. After a great meal, drinks and conversation on the gallery, our visitors showered and went to bed. We provided each of them with a comfortable bed with clean sheets, an effective mosquito net and, as we had electricity this day, the benefit of a fan to cool them.

When I rose at 3 a.m., I found that all our water reservoirs were empty, and no one had bothered to tell me. Perhaps our visitors thought the water reservoir could magically refill itself. Not wanting to inconvenience our guests in the middle of the night, I phoned Jack to ask him to make his way to work early to pump water for the guests to use when they woke. Then I began to prepare breakfast for them.

Jack had not yet arrived when our visitors rose, so I offered each a wash basin filled with our precious potable water, which we purchase in five-gallon containers. Instead of understanding the sacrifice represented by their being able to wash at all, and in potable water at that, one guest testily said, "I'd rather have a shower!"

Such insensitive comments can stem from ignorance, especially when expressed by those who have never witnessed abject poverty. In this case, such a comment by a person with experience in Haiti and familiar with its challenges seemed more arrogance than ignorance. This attitude is not uncommon. In the intervening months, others have visited and shown similar disregard for the conditions we face: One wanted me to book diving trips; others have called asking for help with transportation then failed to show up. And so it goes. I have reflected on this callous attitude. Is it simple ignorance of the true absolute nature of poverty? Or could it be a learned response?

Over the past decade, I have become immersed more deeply in the beauty, and in the misery, of Haiti. And though this immersion has produced much personal suffering, it has also produced great joys, and a unique perspective of the privileged world of those who have not only the basics of life, but much, much more. And from my unique perspective, I think that there's been a major shift in society's attitude towards the poor.

When I was growing up, I was taught that charity was a virtue equated with love. But these days, that perspective of charity meaning love has changed. Now, 'charity' seems to assume that the poor of this world can be 'fixed', that they can be 'saved' or 'rescued' if the rest of us would only donate \$30 a month to 'charity'. We get to feel good, that we've done our part, that now the poor will be fixed, and we get a tax receipt, too.

This idea of charity has assumed an arrogance that, I think, is not consciously intended. It is just there, in actions, often in words. It comes not because we have great wealth but, because of an accident of our birthplace and circumstances, we have access to education, jobs, housing and social services. To those who live in absolute poverty, these things we simply claim as our birthright are indeed great wealth.

Yet even the small bits of our wealth that we dole out in the name of charity are not freely given, but have strings attached. Everything needs a tax receipt. Material 'stuff' is valued over keeping people alive because, in our sheltered, privileged lives, we have not internalized the reality of the poor of this world. The poor, including our young people here in Haiti, do not eat on a daily basis. They have no water, potable or otherwise. They drag themselves to school (paid for by others) even though they are ill – with malaria, typhoid, a tumor – because they understand that education offers them the only possibility for change.

The arrogance of charity puts a priority on material things. Items such as used clothing, computers etc, are helpful but secondary. To situate them as priority is to miss the point. Think for a moment: If you lose your job, for example, you would know what help you need to get back on your feet. Perhaps you need transportation to get to a new job. How would you feel if, instead of bus fare or gas money, some well-intentioned person gave you a hammer? If only you'd asked, you tell the donor. The hammer is very nice, but I can't ride it to work.

The humility of justice calls us not to do things FOR the poor of this world but rather do things WITH them, in service, in community, in negotiation, in partnership. They know what they need. We just have to ask and listen. 'Charity' maintains a distance; 'Justice' smells the stench, suffers the heat, cries over each death, and cheers each small success.

More than intellectualizing the word 'justice', we need to live it. Reflection is a powerful conduit which requires only the willingness to look within, and ask yourself, 'What am I doing and, most importantly, WHY?'

We've changed, and not for the better. I challenge you to become a human being rather than a human doing. To make justice a priority in our lives, we must consciously slow down and be present, and think and reflect. Reflection can help us understand, and to let go of the instinct that we deserve our privileged lives. The arrogance of charity says, "I come first. After my needs are met, I will give you the leftovers, the things I do not need to make my life comfortable. Give me my daily shower, a tax receipt for my donation, cover my expenses and then I will do something."

These attitudes cripple rather than heal. Justice comes without strings. It gets down on its hands and knees in service, negotiates with, listens to, and says that the needs of each person on this planet are just as important as mine and yours. Justice challenges our comfort. We like our lifestyles, our possessions, our activities.

A medical professional in Canada recently said to me, "Please do not tell me any more about your work in Haiti. I think it is better if we do not know as it would make us too uncomfortable." Self-care slides into self absorption, and the potential for justice is aborted.

It is humbling to realize that my needs are not the most important in this world. It is exhilarating to realize my place in the big picture, and that my spirit has the potential to open to fullness not possible within the current mindset we call charity.

What is your wealth? Is it community? Family? Connections? How are you employing it in the service of life? What are the strings you attach? What would happen if you let them go?

Justice challenges us to place the same value for every life and to provide what is due without expecting gratitude and a tax receipt. Stop and reflect on the last time you were not thanked for your generosity. Let go of the need for someone's gratitude, and feed this hungry world.

And to the person who would shower when others are dying of thirst, I say, "12 percent of the planet uses 85 percent of the water. When you get home, you can shower all day long, if you want."

And that is the difference between the haves and the have nots: The haves get to leave, to go home where it's comfortable; the have nots must stay and endure.