

Hurting Good

A year or so ago a minister of my acquaintance put up a group message on the British ministers' chat line. I won't mention his name. He said he was looking for a social action project for his congregation to take up, that being one area in which they were lagging behind.

Something about the way he put the question made me flinch. He made it sound as if he was thinking of shopping for a new pilates instructor, or maybe buying a cat. Something to add to a soup recipe. I thought: God, man—the world is falling apart out there; surely it can't be all that difficult to think of something that might help the world a bit. Global warming, refugees by the million, food banks in every neighbourhood, violence toward women, gays and trans people—how much time do you have?

I considered a few sarcastic replies. One would be to start an online community matching left leg amputees with right leg amputees, so that they could share a pair of shoes. But I thought that might offend someone. These days it's all too easy to offend people. I once innocently told a joke about a dyslexic person in a sermon and was told off afterwards, more than once.

What I wanted to say to my colleague was that social action had to spring from real perceptions of real need or real injustice. That you need to feel it. That you couldn't just pick a topic from a list and expect everyone to get on board. But I didn't send a sarcastic reply, because, however shallow the idea might seem, the idea would almost certainly spring from an urge to be useful. Even the notion of reaching out beyond the walls of the church to help others, in however feeble a way, has in it the seeds of spiritual understanding. So, as the British say, I shut my gob.

I was delighted that this congregation of Unitarians and Universalists asked me to do a weekend focussed on social action. I was a little surprised to find that I was in some way considered well-informed about all this because people know that I spent about ten years doing volunteer work in poor countries in Africa and Latin America. For all that it was a very important time in my life, one which led me into ministry, as it happens, I don't spend much time thinking about it. I certainly don't give myself pats on the back as a hero of social conscience, because I'm able to remember what I was like during those years.

I was one of those lucky people from a relatively privileged background who would be selected to spend time in exotic places, among exotic and interesting people. An agency paid my fares, supported me, looked after my health and, after the tour of duty was up, brought me home. Some of it was a bit risky, sure. I lived once in a nine by sixteen palm board shack for a year. I had a terrifying brush with Kenyan security police, and had a motorcycle breakdown in elephant country that could have seen me off. But for the most part, I spent my time making friends, learning things I never could have known otherwise, and learning to speak what we call "foreign languages".

In other words, I was the chief beneficiary of the activity. I will never know to what extent I was any help at all to the people I lived among. What remains is a clear understanding—the gift of hindsight—that I was there for the sheer excitement of the task.

Which leads me to a fundamental question about involvement in any sort of social action: why do we do it? I mean *really* why do we do it?

Not all social action involves exciting things like living among the Masai or camel trekking with Somalian herdsmen. Most of it is tedious and messy: making meals in a soup kitchen, begging grocers for their leftovers, sorting smelly used clothes in a charity shop.

I think I have identified some ways that lead us into social action—which is another word for *service*. These are what I think of as back door motives. One is what I would call *squeamishness*. Being confronted with the sight of a terrible affliction someone else has can be terrifying. Passing a leper on the road, you drop two annas in his cup and keep walking—a bit faster—because an innate superstition overtakes you. “There but for the grace of God go I.” So my fifty pence is a kind of magic charm to ward off the horror of, say, homelessness, and keep me safe.

Television adverts of emaciated children in poor countries during a drought have the same effect. The £2 a month you sign up for is based on the expectation of an unconscious desire to keep your own children from suffering the same fate. As a gesture of social action, it’s trivial. It hardly costs more than the time needed to genuflect. But it is a gesture, however primitive. It’s probably as near as some of us get to service of humanity.

On a slightly more advanced level, we come across what I call *brownie point collection*. There is a lot of peer pressure out there, and there is always some credit thrown in the direction of those who donate. So Mark Zuckerberg got kudos by the sack full when it was announced recently that he was giving away 99% of his 45 billion dollar fortune to charity. Since the announcement, however, it seems that he is setting up a limited liability company—basically moving his billions from one pocket to another. But for a few days, we were thrilled. The PR value of the story will enhance his value in the eyes of the world. Social action for brownie points writ large.

Some people aren’t content with, or not interested in, the admiration of society for their charitable acts. They’re after bigger game; they want brownie points with God. It’s true in the pews of a fading church establishment. It’s true in Hindus and Buddhists collecting good karma, too. Even for those who have no conscious belief in heaven and hell, it’s something that springs from a hunch. If I do good, good will come to me. What goes around comes around.

There is another back door route into social action, what is known as *enlightened self-interest*. This is the argument most often used to counter calls for eliminating foreign aid.

Britain uses .7% of its GDP as “aid”. Very often, this aid is actually used as a means of getting lucrative contracts for their own companies. In recent times, it has been used to keep refugees from appearing on our doorsteps by allegedly improving the conditions in the so-called temporary camps where several million Syrians are now living.

But this is an old argument. Victorian improvements to slums in our cities had the effect—not just of making life easier for slum dwellers—but of keeping down the spread of crime and infectious disease. So the argument for doing social work is like that slur directed at the Society of Friends, known for their frugality and their innocent wealth, when they immigrated to America in the 18th century. The line went, “The Quakers went to Philadelphia to do good, and they did very, very good.”

Those three back doors, squeamishness, brownie point collection and enlightened self-interest, have one thing in common: they benefit the person or group which is doing the serving. I guess I ought to say that I have nothing against any of them. I'm sure I practise them all myself. But there is another form of service, of social action, which is not done with any hope of gain.

You don't see this kind of service very often, because those who serve aren't especially interested in being noticed. But they are there. The postman who delivers a pint of milk to an elderly woman when he does his rounds, for example. If you asked him why he did it, he wouldn't understand the question. He wouldn't understand it because his concentration would be on her, not himself. It is close to what the teacher Meher Baba calls selfless service.

In traditional Hindu thought, there are four yogas or "yokes" which lead to spiritual realisation. There is the yoga we know as hatha, which works with posture and energy within the body. There is jnana yoga, or the yoga of understanding through contemplation, reading and internalising scripture. There is bhakti yoga, which is the constant remembrance of God—or one's higher self. The fourth is called karma yoga—the practice of forgetting oneself in the service of others. Its other name is selfless service, which means having no thought of gain, or reward or even result. Of all the yogas, it is the most difficult. Meher Baba, joking one day, said that it wasn't yoga—it was "you go". Forgetting oneself in the interest of others isn't something easily done.

The root message of this practice is based upon the idea that, in the final analysis, we are all one—not many. The illusion of separateness has only one remedy, and that's love. Love, in this context, isn't an emotion, like you get slow dancing with your partner. It's a perception of the oneness between you and someone, or everyone else.

He says: *There is complete disregard of one's own convenience or welfare in selfless service; it is characterized by absolute subjugation of one's own happiness — by unalloyed joy in sacrificing everything for the well-being of others.*

Most of us can only dimly imagine that sort of love. We might get a hint of it when we hear of people leaping into flood waters in a vain attempt to save a stranger, or of giving someone else your place in the lifeboat. We have reason to believe that if there is such a thing as sainthood, it would be like that.

For most of us, that can only be a kind of fantastical goal. We are human. We have instinctive survival instincts. By living in society, we have evolved ways of calling self-interest something else. Like Adam Smith, the 18th century economist lauded as the father of capitalism, we can imagine that our own self-interest is actually an "invisible hand" that makes good come from selfishness.

We cannot expect our projects of social action to reach those spiritual heights. We will unconsciously count the benefits along with costs. A socially committed congregation might get bigger by drawing in activists. Our enjoyment of group activities in service will undoubtedly help us bond more closely, and enhance our fellowship. We might unconsciously believe that we are somehow gaining credit—brownie points—with the infinite. We may even secretly believe that good things, not scary things, will come if we serve.

But, along with being ordinary people, we are also called to be in a community dedicated to ultimate things. We are driven to be together by a hunch, and so the distant call of oneness is not quite so far-fetched. And the final goal of selflessness doesn't fall out of the sky; it is learned, like almost everything of value, through practice.

So go ahead. Roll up your sleeves. Get involved in something that speaks to you. Don't try to be comfortable. If you give, make sure it hurts a little bit. Then you'll realise something: it hurts good.