

## Beyond Good Intentions

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Helping<sup>1</sup> can hurt. Structured, repeated, institutionalised acts of helping can bring great harm, as can one off acts of poorly considered 'kindness'. They can belittle and reduce autonomy, dignity and power, they can fracture relationships and increase dependency.

I used to think compassion was the only incorruptible virtue; compassion being the kind, generous movement outwards in any direction. All the other virtues can be twisted. Love can be turned into addiction and abuse; truth can be turned into an instrument of revenge; loyalty can lead people to mindless acts of violent servitude and 'courage'. Of them all, compassion remained incorruptible. But this changed the first time Radford went to Timor. The experience and stories opened my eyes to compassionate acts that led to dependency, loss of dignity and even death. Either these acts are not compassionate, or a reworking of its definition is required, for compassion needs intelligence and not simply mindless acts of kindness.

I did not think much about poverty and its causes. And if I did I thought in the manner I was taught. Poverty is a lack, a lack of food, shelter, water, health, work. But it is not. Valerie Browning states it simply, *poverty is the lack of power to change one's own situation*. Thomas, a student who returned from Timor-Leste said it simply, "if you had a family with no food or shelter and you could do something about it, don't you think you would?" Thus, anything we do in proximity to poverty, no matter how compassionate, must be conscious of the exchange of power. Even the presence of one culture in the midst of another introduces a shift in power. Poverty is not a lack of something that can be corrected by a simple, albeit generous, donation. Poverty is not 'fixed' or even addressed with transactions. It is about partnerships and working together. In this relationship acts of service should never be to, nor for, but with.

The effectiveness of compassion should not be self-referenced, as if the donor's good intentions are all that matters. No 'good intention' should ever be above examination and critique. It must be acknowledge that many an honourable and good intention has led to the denuding and destruction of others<sup>2</sup>. Thus, compassion is not simply about moving out *from ones heart*, it is about moving *towards* the other. And the other is where the worth of our actions should be measured. And the movement towards the other begins in careful attention, a purposeful listening.

So, a reimagined understanding of compassion necessitates the giving of careful attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Helping may be called altruism, compassion, empathy, kindness, service etc.

*A distinction must be made between being and doing. On being: a person who is disposed to kindness, generosity, hospitality, goodness, warmth of spirit and love is to be encouraged and embraced. On doing: a person doing good acts separate from the heart and soul of those 'being served' requires careful examination.*

<sup>2</sup> Examples are endless. A therapist helps a person walk by 'working for them like a crutch'. The result is the patient can only walk when the therapist is present. A community is 'given free food' by a mining company. The people quickly forget how to catch and prepare their own and become utterly dependent upon hand outs. An NGO facilitates the adoption of individual children who are cared for with great attention. That child is disliked, ostracized and persecuted by the community in which that child lives. Children are taken away from their family in order to give them better care and education, and unwittingly the stolen generation begins.

*Compassion is a movement outwards, through listening, towards the other, nonjudgmentally, in generosity and kindness; working for their wellbeing<sup>3</sup>.*

If that act of compassion were to be tested, how would it be measured? A suggestion:

*The measure of the worth of a work of service  
should not be our own good intentions,  
but the increase in those we serve.*

Basic rules for service:

1. Build healthy relationships (relationships are about body heart mind soul and include relationships with one's self, others, life and God)
2. Give power
3. NEVER do for another what they can do for themselves

Premises:

- being is relational
- poverty is first the absence of power and affects the whole person and their network of relationships.

References:

"When helping hurts"<sup>4</sup> Christian authors Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert, 2012

"Dead Aid"<sup>5</sup> by Dambisa Moyo

"Toxic Charity: how churches and charities hurt those they help", by Robert Lupton, 2012

"Development as Freedom" by Amartya Sen<sup>6</sup>, 2000

"Shut up and listen", TED talk by Ernesto Sirotli<sup>7</sup>

Valerie Browning in conversation and interview<sup>8</sup>

Radford College's response:

1. We affirm Radford's guidelines On Aid; its basic rules, underlying premises and understanding of service. We respond with an 'intelligent' compassion.
2. Radford College seeks to increase our engagement in service and our learning through it; we seek to increase our work for justice, being sustainable, embracing diversity, building community; we seek to move beyond good intentions and transform our acts of kindness and compassion into the effective engagement in the wellbeing of others. We seek generosity and goodness to stir in our being, providing patterns for others to copy.

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<sup>3</sup> Wellbeing might be described as flourishing, prosperity, dignity, wholeness.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.whenhelpinghurts.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.dambisamoyo.com/books-and-publications/book/dead-aid>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/economics/laureates/1998/sen-autobio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economics/laureates/1998/sen-autobio.html)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/ernesto\\_sirotli\\_want\\_to\\_help\\_someone\\_shut\\_up\\_and\\_listen.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/ernesto_sirotli_want_to_help_someone_shut_up_and_listen.html)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IWH0ktsZxl>

### Comments:

Over a million people go on short term missions (STM) in North America each year. This increasing trend is coming under much scrutiny, hence some of the books referenced above. The dominant metaphor for a short term mission is that participants do not go to 'work', but go as students to learn. They must pay for much or all of their own expenses and follow the three rules as well as our values in action, which is to listen, to respect and take care to see widely and carefully (imagine). Short term trips should occur in the context of the school making long term commitments to relationships. With these bonds will come responsibilities and costs as well as great rewards. Students should be assisted to reflect and make meaning from their experience. For those participating in overseas expeditions, this reflection should continue for twelve months.

It is not enough to respond with kindness and generosity. Our goodness can do much more than make us feel powerful. It can help others be restored in their community and their relationships, and grow in them greater autonomy, dignity, power. This should be the intention behind our desire to 'help'. Thus **the measure of the worth of a work of service must not be our own good intentions, but the increase in those we serve.**

### A story to illustrate and conclude

Mzungu – a story by Brian Fikkurt p21fl in "When helping hurts"

*Brian was a missionary. He went for a short four week mission to a slum in Uganda. The slum was beyond horrendous. There he led Grace the witchdoctor to faith in Jesus. A little while later he found Grace writhing in filth on the floor of her shack. She had paid a neighbour to cut out her infected tonsils. Now her whole mouth and jaw was infected. Penicillin was needed urgently. Brian readily gave the necessary \$8 to the local minister who got the magic medicine. Grace lived and returned to the church fellowship. Flying home the Brian felt . . .*

- . . . really awful. If he could have the time again, he would not have given the \$8. He felt it was totally the wrong thing to do.
- The white missionary has come and gone. He is miraculous, but now the miraculous one is not among them.
- The local minister is seen as less, less powerful, less caring, less capable, less involved in the wellbeing of the community.
- The witchdoctor is healed but she has not yet been restored to the wider community who was (and probably still is) regarded with fear and love in equal amounts.
- The local community has missed out on an opportunity to be community.

*What could Brian have done that was more intelligent? As he flew home, this is what he thought. "I should have returned to the church meeting with the minister. I should have facilitated the conversation among the community of the plight of Grace. I should have demonstrated my trust in the community, my belief in their minister, my faith in God. The community is very poor, but \$8 exists among them. It would have required great trust in each other. They could do it, and the results of which would be deeply enriched relationships amongst all in that community and lasted far beyond the length of my short stay."*