

To give or Not to Give

The note taped to the wall in the rest stop by the freeway said, "Please help. We had to buy a new engine for our van on vacation & now we don't have money to get home to a new job. Give us your name and address, and we will send your money back to you when we can. We are in the white van in the parking area."

I walked out of the brick building into the warm sunshine. A boy about four played with toy cars on the sidewalk close in front of a white van. A man sat behind the steering wheel, and a woman sat in the passenger's seat. The windows were down, and the sliding door in the side of the vehicle stood open. Another child slept on the back seat.

Several questions came into my mind, as they always do when the possibility of helping other people comes up. Most people in this country own more than I do. Why should I help people who are financially better off than I am?

That's a trick question, one among many designed to get me off the hook and take moral responsibility away from me.

I've never found a permanent answer to that question, so I have to think it through every time it comes up. Did the Samaritan of the good Samaritan story in the Bible ask the injured man beside the road, "Do you own more than I do?" Not as I understand the story. He just asked himself, "What can I do to help this man?" What he was able to do, he did.

Years ago, when we lived in Santa Fe, Carolyn and Patrick went with us to the laundromat. An older man came in, walked up to Carolyn and said, "I haven't eaten today. If I could get two dollars, I could buy a sandwich. I'm hungry." Carolyn reached into her purse and got two dollars and handed it to him, though she obviously hadn't much to spare.

After the man left, Patrick said, "You don't know what he's going to do with that money. He might spend it on alcohol."

Carolyn said, "Trusting people to act sensibly is helping them as much as giving them the money in the first place."

Her answer startled me and resonates with truth every time I think of it in the years since then, every time I face the question, am I going to give money in an attempt to help someone?

I can never give enough money to anyone to make a

significant difference. Most people in dire circumstances need hundreds, perhaps thousands of dollars to turn their lives around and leave poverty behind.

Again, I know the idea that I can't meet all their needs, so why give them anything is moral equivocation. Buying someone a cup of hot chocolate can make a difference. Giving someone enough money for one sandwich can deal with hunger in this moment, and it can be a gesture that says, "I care about you. Accept this token of money as an expression of love, to feed your physical hunger, to feed your hunger to know that people still care about each other."

Out on the plain, a few miles east of the Rocky Mountains, trucks roared and cars whizzed past the rest stop where I stood thinking in sunshine. The people in the white van probably owned much more than I did, but that wasn't the question. They needed help. Could I help?

I walked to the passenger side of the van and handed the woman a ten dollar bill. She said, "Thank you." Ten dollars wouldn't buy much gas. It wouldn't take them many miles east, but some. Every journey is made up of small parts. I could help with a small part of their journey.

I said, "You're welcome," and I walked away, got into my pickup and drove away.

I didn't leave my name and address, because I didn't think of it as a business transaction, a loan for future repayment. I wanted to keep our brief meeting on the level of, "You need help, and I can help a little bit, for a few miles of your journey, and that's what we need to deal with today."

I trimmed ten dollars from my spending plans for the day as I drove toward Denver in sunshine. I had room in my budget for that. My brief contact with the people in the white van meant all our journeys were a little closer to each other, built a little more on trust and on helping each other along the way.