

TEACH THEM TO FISH

An Oration

by
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How many of us think charity is giving a person a dime or nickel and saying, "Don't bother to pay it back?" Not many I'm sure. But in truth, charity can be as small a thing as that--or as big a thing as trust. Charity is a simple enough word, yet it is strong enough to make some flinch. It is sometimes a maligned and misunderstood concept. But it doesn't have to be that way. Charity is much broader in scope than we imagine.

We all have friends who, to us, are perfect. When we overlook their small faults and love them as they are, that is charity. Such a kindness preserves a friendship and protects it from the petty conflicts that make life unpleasant. Sometimes we practice charity when we encounter strangers. For instance, we might give up our seat on a crowded bus for someone who looks as though he or she needs it more than we do. Both acts--ignoring a friend's faults or giving up a seat to a stranger--demonstrate kindness, and leave both the giver and the receiver feeling good about themselves.

Sometimes, however, what we think is charity can hurt the very people we want to help. Such charity robs the recipient of pride, or leaves him or her feeling guilty and beholden. Usually well intentioned, this type of charity takes a wrong turn through thoughtlessness. Mistaken charity is leaving a dime, and not taking a pencil from the cup. It is handing down a jacket or dress with a careless "I didn't like it anyway." Such an act robs people of pride and tarnishes the gift of charity for those who receive it. Unfortunately, such "charity" is all too common. But take heart! True charity is not rare.

Any act that leaves all involved with a sense of wellbeing is true charity. That is not to say that charity has to be rigidly planned to be fruitful. Just uniting heart and soul will keep it from being sidetracked. Your heart may well guide you to do something charitable--but think before you speak or act so the action you take is honestly helpful without damaging a person's self esteem. A reader once wrote Miss Manners about how to dispose of her things since she was leaving on a mission trip and couldn't take them all with her. For instance, she had a sweater she was certain a friend would appreciate but she didn't want to make the friend feel that she was just giving her castoffs. Miss Manners' solution was to share the sweater with the friend by saying, "I know this will look great on you, and I know you'll treasure it as I did." Such a comment would allow the giver to do something that made her feel good while allowing the friend to enjoy the gift of the sweater.

Of course, charity is not always linked to something tangible. Trust, for instance, is a form of charity. Small children give us an incredible gift when they give us their trust. Sometimes we take advantage of that. I have a small niece who is just on the verge of learning to count. She knows that she has ten fingers, but every time I count them, she either gains one or loses one. This drives her into fits of giggles. Okay, let's not label that child abuse--I'm just using it to illustrate how adults may take advantage of the trusting nature of small children. But you can't do that forever. Even children eventually learn whom they should trust. As they grow, as we all grow, we give our trust a little less freely; but it seems to mean more when we do. Thus it is, in a way, a kind of charity.

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