



---

## A Personal View of Charitable Giving

Posted: 08/09/2012 2:53 pm

In 1964, as a field officer for CARE in India, I helped arrange for a shipment of food to a Punjabi village that had been devastated by floods. As I went about my duties, seeing that the food was properly stored and provided to all comers, a woman in a ragged sari, carrying a baby, broke away from the queue where the villagers waited their turn for the only meal they would have that day. Moving urgently, she came up to me, knelt, bowed and touched her forehead to my shoes. I was appalled. That this woman who had no doubt struggled all her life -- bearing and raising her children, fighting against the odds just to keep her family alive -- should express this form of gratitude to a middle class foreigner who'd always had plenty of everything, struck me as terribly wrong.

Expressions of gratitude for charitable gifts, then and now, seem wrong to me. There are several reasons.

First, any beneficence that cannot be repaid sets up an unequal relationship that causes problems. Professor A.S. Hynam of the [University of Alberta](#) [called this](#) the "dysfunctionality of unrequited giving." "An outright [charitable] gift without any question of repayment is a... violation of the norm of reciprocity," Hynam says. "[G]iving in a situation where the receiver cannot repay creates reciprocal imbalance. ... [Thus], unwittingly, a form of exploitation can result from giving with the purest of motives."

If that seems a bit academic, think of the relationship between a panhandler and his benefactor. Those who give to beggars maintain that they are just trying to help, but the exchange sets up just the sort of reciprocal imbalance that Hynam describes. The giver is superior, the beggar lowly. There is no possibility of repayment. The giver has a moment of power. Is that a subtle form of exploitation? I believe it is. And even the briefest reflection reveals that this is not an effective way to help the poor.

Have a look at that old saw, "Lend money to a friend, lose a friend." There is truth in that saying because a [loan by](#) one friend to another sets up an unequal relationship. If the loan is promptly repaid there may be no lasting harm. But if it is not, and in many cases even if it is, both the lender and the borrower are inclined to resent the change in their relationship. Before the loan they were equals and friendship seemed easy. Now, one of the two has assumed a dominant position and friendship is much harder. The beneficiary can probably not repay the largesse on an equal footing with the lender. There's that "reciprocal imbalance" again. Resentments will likely grow.

Another example comes from a story about payments for kidneys in Iran, where it is legal to buy and sell those organs. [Medical](#) ethicist Sigrid Fry-Revere recently reported that many recipients prefer to pay the going price for kidneys even if it means financial sacrifice. Why? One kidney recipient said, in effect, *Even if I have to sell something valuable to buy the kidney, it's all paid for, it's even. If I accept the organ donation as a gift I must be grateful and under obligation indefinitely. It is better not to have that hanging over my head.* Once more, there's that anxiety that comes with unrequited giving.

What does this mean for our charitable lives? For me, it has meant finding ways of helping the poor that do not set up those unequal relationships. This has come naturally to me because I am very uncomfortable with such relationships, just as I was with that woman in India. Those situations give me the creeps.

So what did I do? In 1989 I created an organization called DKT International. DKT provides contraceptives to low-income couples in the developing world -- Asia, Africa, Latin America -- through a system called social marketing. The contraceptives are attractively packaged and sold at subsidized prices through regular commercial networks -- shops, pharmacies, kiosks -- just like tea and Coca-Cola. Those low, subsidized prices mean that everyone can afford to buy them.

The people we serve do not know who we are and are not concerned about "charity." They have nothing to be grateful for on our account, and that is a very good thing. They are merely buying affordable contraceptives and using them. I believe their lives are substantially improved as a result, but it would distress me considerably if any of those who benefit from our programs saw any reason to be grateful. Our clients are consumers: they part with a certain amount of their hard-earned money in exchange for something they find of benefit. That's it. We will never meet any of them personally and gratitude is just not part of the picture.

It seems to work. In 2011, DKT served 22 million couples through its social marketing programs.

My suggestions for others:

- Don't seek or expect gratitude from those you want to serve. Those unequal relationships are bad for people, giver included.
- If you want to help the less fortunate, think it through. Don't go with what feels good emotionally. What will the outcome be? Will your efforts actually help solve a real social problem or just "help out"?
- Think of your charitable donation as an investment. Does the charity you favor deliver measurable outputs at a reasonable cost? Can these costs be compared to those of other organizations? Does the charity make a difference on a significant scale?
- It can be argued that this approach is too hard-boiled, too unemotional. I don't believe it. Our emotional lives should be focused on people we know. Our charitable contributions should go to organizations that appeal to our heads and not our hearts.