

Selfish giving: Charity's dark side

December 24, 2009

Sandro Contenta

A long time ago, when I was about 14 years old, I answered the door to find one of my teachers delivering a Christmas basket of food. He was full of Christmas cheer. My mother was thankful; I was speechless.

Life for single mothers on welfare is full of hard work and struggle. But we were always well dressed and fed, lacking nothing essential. The basket suggested otherwise. And the message came from someone I had to face every day in school.

My reaction was to head for the nearest bus stop. I rode around Montreal for the afternoon, staying away from home as long as possible.

It is common this time of year to talk of the importance of giving, and how good it feels to give. But little is said about how it feels to receive charity. It's assumed those in need will be grateful, and many are.

But psychologists and charity officials caution that the giving/receiving relationship can leave people with a sense of shame. With 156,500 people in Toronto receiving Ontario Works assistance in October – 23,300 more than in October 2008 – getting the relationship right is all the more important.

Rarely noted is that the poor give a larger proportion of their income to help others – often people they know – than the middle class, says Jay Brandenberger, associate professor of psychology at the University of Notre Dame's Center for Social Concerns.

For the poor, sharing is a survival strategy. For the middle class – Christmas giving aside – advancement is based more on saving and paying off debt.

Still, studies in psychology, particularly the work of Elizabeth Dunn and Lara Aknin at the University of British Columbia, indicate everyone reports feeling happier when spending money on others instead of themselves.

Dunn, an assistant professor of psychology, and Aknin, a PhD student, will soon publish a study noting people who make donations are happiest when they hand the money to the recipient. "The face-to-face interaction is important," Aknin says. "We find that when people

make an anonymous donation or an anonymous gift, they don't see the same happiness benefits.

"There's an evolutionary argument that we are hard-wired to do things that benefit others and to feel good about it, perhaps because people might return the favour in the future or because we live up to the positive views we have of ourselves," she adds.

The motives, in other words, may be more selfish than altruistic. Charity officials see it regularly.

"Sometimes, people give not because they're concerned about somebody else's needs, but because they want to feel good about themselves," says Maj. Doug Hammond, pastor at the Salvation Army church on Dovercourt Rd.

That attitude subverts what should be the main message – that everyone "is in this together, and we're just sharing," he says. "To give a guy a bowl of soup and make him feel like a beggar undermines everything that we do because the ultimate poverty is a loss of dignity."

There are, of course, many like Fiona Kay, manager of student financial services at York University. She recently made a quilt for a student in need, and had her husband deliver it anonymously. "I don't want the student to feel indebted to me," Kay says. "I focus on the result – that she gets what she needs – rather than where it comes from."

But Louise Coutu, executive director of the Toronto branch of St. Vincent de Paul, says the charity must often disappoint food basket donors who want to deliver the gifts themselves. "We try to make people understand that getting the gifts to the person is more important than making you feel good by delivering it," Coutu says. "But it's hard. People take that personally. People want to go and ring the doorbell. They want to feel good. They want that response from the recipient."

Besides, the reaction is not always as expected.

"You just never know what you're going to get when you open that door. Some people are thrilled to have you there and others are very begrudging," Coutu says.

Trained volunteers, such as Giovanna Di-Serio, deliver St. Vincent de Paul's donations. When Di-Serio, 58, recently brought bags of donated gifts to a single mother with two children in Scarborough, she was greeted like an old friend.

Daynor, the recipient, said she hesitated before turning to St. Vincent de Paul for help years ago.

"I was scared," says Daynor, 33, who asked that her last name not be used. "I didn't know what they would think. People in general are very judgmental: `Oh, that person is on social assistance, that person is in social housing, they're lazy, they're up to no good.'"

Di-Serio is nothing like that. Not only does she deliver donations once a year, she takes Daynor's 6-year-old son to hospital when he's ill, she invites the family to her home, and she helped Daynor go back to school and become a part-time educational assistant at the Toronto Catholic school board.

"You meet people like Giovanna and you start saying, `Wow, there's actually good people out there,'" Daynor says. "It gives you a little push. You want to go the extra step to help yourself."

Giving obviously makes a difference. But how one gives is perhaps more important, especially when children are involved.

"Children can feel stigmatized when they're the recipients of charity or the clients of social work services," says Laura Curran, associate professor at Rutgers University School of Social Work. "A lot has to do with how the adults around them frame it."

When children hear that everyone at times can use a hand, they're more comfortable with the help they get than when it's suggested they're lucky others are generous, Curran says.

Brandenberger says teenagers are particularly susceptible to feelings of anger or shame. They recognize they're less advantaged than those doing the giving. They can also detect messages suggesting the charity is due to a deficit in themselves.

"If you come to save the other person, it implies they can't save themselves, which is a pretty big critique.

"No one wants to discourage giving at Christmas time. But giving could be complex for the receiver, and a knowledge of that would be a good thing to add to the situation.

"We should come at it with the idea that we're all in this together."