

Feeling Good or Doing Good

Rev. Lisa Doege

Mar. 6, 2011

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Putting cans or boxes into the Food Shelf bin at Cashwise makes me feel good. It's easy and convenient and familiar. I've just filled my grocery bags with similar items, and I can imagine someone preparing and eating the macaroni and cheese, tuna fish or creamed corn I drop into the bin on my way out the door. Lily gave clothing to the Paper Man because she knew the feeling of being cold and damp. Likewise, I tend to think of feeding the hungry in the ways I feed myself. And it feels good to do so.

I know, I've known for a long time, that however good it might make me feel, putting boxes and cans and packages into food shelf bins is a hopelessly ineffective approach to addressing a hunger problem of global proportion. Cash donations allow food shelves to buy in bulk and thus provide more nutrition, dollar for dollar, than individual donations of food items. Creating and sustaining employment opportunities, ensuring abundant, healthful food supplies near population areas, and supporting small scale gardening/farming initiatives aimed at producing local food on an on-going basis are an entire level of effective action over and above cash donations to food shelves and pantries. I know this to be true. But I continue, week after week, to redeem my coupon for three cans of veggies or a bag of flour or a box of spaghetti that I deposit into the bin after bagging my own groceries. And I do it because it feels good.

There is a difference, however, sometimes fine, sometimes broad, between feeling good and doing good. And as a person of faith I am called to do good. So I'm glad to be part of a congregation, such as Nora, that once a month collects cash for Food for All and once a year collects cash for the food shelf. Cash that is combined with donations from other sources and used by those organizations to buy in bulk and at discounted rates those food items that are most needed by their clients. I'm glad to be part of a congregation that does good in its tiny way.

We can't, any one of us, cloth or house each homeless person we encounter throughout our lives. We can't, any one of us, have a hungry guest at our table every noon and night, each time we serve ourselves and our families a meal. We can't any one of us turn off enough lights, unplug enough unused appliances, use enough cloth grocery bags, to reduce our nation's dependence on foreign oil or stem the flow of trash to overflowing land-fills. But *together--that is another possibility, waiting.*

Not always, but often, feeling good is a matter of individual action: donating canned goods to the food shelf, giving a handful of change to the homeless person on the train station steps, cleaning out the closets and filling a box with “gently worn treasures” for Goodwill. This sort of action is seldom harmful and many times does do good, as well as feeling good. But typically the primary beneficiary of a feel-good action is the actor, not the perceived recipient.

Not always, but often, doing good is a matter of collective action: boycotts, labor unions, collective bargaining, the United Way, Red Cross blood drives, telethons, petitions, letter-writing campaigns, mass demonstrations, divestitures. Such actions might feel good, but they are just as likely to be inconvenient, to require sacrifice or risk, to feel uncomfortable. And unlike feel-good actions, do-good actions primarily benefit someone other than the actor.

Doing good and feeling good can over-lap. My high school held a canned food drive each autumn just before Thanksgiving. The classes competed against each other to collect the most food items and the local food bank and its clients benefited from the competition. The students felt good about the drive. We knocked on neighborhood doors and haggled with grocery store managers and spent class treasuries and cleaned out our families’ pantries. We filled the gym floor with displays of our bounty and cheered as the totals were announced. And that bounty went into many meals for families and individuals unable to purchase sufficient food on their own. We did good, November after November.

But we never once considered how food bank organizers would equitably distribute the odd assortment of black olives, Campbell’s soup, Ramen noodles, applesauce, and green beans we had collected. Or what they would give their hungry clients once our donations were gone. And we never once pondered who those hungry folks were, though they were in fact our neighbors and probably some of our classmates. And we certainly never talked about how they got to be hungry in the first place. And lacking that discussion, we couldn’t possibly talk about how to prevent hunger.

Those are questions that often get lost or overlooked, even among individuals and groups genuinely committed to healing the world. The symptoms of poverty and injustice--hunger, lack of shelter, inadequate water supplies, dangerous working conditions--the symptoms of poverty and injustice are so stark, so disturbing we are compelled to fling our money and our attention at alleviating them, without first doing the hard, slow work of addressing the systems and root causes of poverty and injustice. Alleviating the symptoms feels good. Addressing the systems and roots causes is much more likely to do good, lasting good.

It's not impossible for any of us to investigate those systems and root causes, to study and question and discuss and develop plans of action. We've got public libraries and universities and the internet at our disposal. We're bright and caring and justice-loving. We're also busy and lacking in certain areas of expertise or comfort. And mostly we are overwhelmed by the scale of the injustices. We know that systems and root causes need attention for any lasting, large scale change to occur, but we don't know where to start and we can't see how our small effort will make any difference. So we retreat from that knowledge, most of us, to focus only on the symptoms immediately visible to us. And we do what feels good now.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee understands this disconnect between our desire to do good and our tendency to do what feels good. The UUSC exists to do good in a quite ingenuous way. It does good on our behalf--bring our Unitarian Universalist name to its good works--but more than that it provides us with ways of doing good that also feel good.

The Guest At Your Table campaign, which we kick off this morning, is just one small part of the UUSC's work. Guest At Your Table encourages individual Unitarian Universalists to imagine hosting a guest at each meal for a period of weeks and to donate the money that would go toward feeding that guest. The concept incorporates the familiar, good feeling, of hosting, while multiplying the do good effectiveness. Congregations pool the individual donations and send them off to the UUSC, which adds all the donations from all the congregations together and funnels them to projects such as the ones we heard about a few moments ago. The UUSC staff and volunteers have done the work of research and investigation, uncovering root causes and faulty or unjust systems. They have identified partner organizations around the world whose good works further multiply the ripples our dollars can make.

The UUSC also provides tools and opportunities for individual Unitarian Universalists to affect public policy through letter writing campaigns and shareholder actions. UUSC programs called JustJourney and JustWorks, offer travel and work opportunities respectively that both feel good and do good, combining education and action and relationship building. In each case the staff and volunteers lay ground work that most individuals UUs or congregations find too challenging or time consuming or overwhelming and then invite interested UUs into engagement with the issues at a more meaningful level than simply alleviating symptoms.

The UUSC partnership model broadens the perspective of its work as well as multiplying the effectiveness of its dollars and volunteer hours. Currently the Service

Committee works with nearly fifty partner organizations, in places such as Haiti, Kenya, Ecuador, Tanzania, the United States, Thailand and Pakistan, across four areas of concentration: Rights in Humanitarian Crises, Environmental Justice, Civil Liberties, and Economic Justice.

I'm not going to stop putting food into the food shelf bin on a regular basis. Families right here in Brown County are hungry, and donating to the food shelf reminds me of that fact, as well as going a small way toward feeding that hunger. But I'm grateful beyond words for the existence of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Grateful it's out there doing our work in the world and inviting us to share in it. It won't be middle-class guilt or a desire to feel good that prompts me to feed the Guest At My Table daily from now until Easter on April 24. It will be gratitude, pure and simple. Amen.