

# THE CONFLUENCE OF CHARITY AND JUSTICE

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*"And now abideth faith, hope and charity, these three;  
but the greatest of these is charity." (1 Corinthians 13:13)*

*"But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an everflowing stream." (Amos 5:25)*

The McMaster Symposium in spring 2007 was organized around the theme, "Partnering for Sustainable Communities: The Work of Charity and Justice." Careful thought and thorough discussion among faculty and students on the organizing committee led to the selection of this theme. Initially, however, I hesitated over a formulation that gave these two terms equal weight, given that the term "charity" has come to be such a vexed one in discussions of the civic engagement work of higher education (as I will discuss below). Upon further reflection, and, perhaps more significantly, after having accompanied the student-faculty team to Cambodia, I have come to believe this theme captures a balance essential to community-based work, and, even further, that to upset an equilibrium between "charity" and "justice" is to compromise interactions with communities and the civic education of students.

There are many possible ways to formulate a relationship between charity and justice, with most discussions in the higher education context subordinating charity in importance. Discussions tend either to posit the relationship as oppositional (one's work is charity **or** justice) or to structure a continuum leading in sophistication **from** charity **to** justice. While there are excellent reasons that thoughtful practitioners frame the terms in this way, it is worth recovering the term "charity" as we send students out to engage with communities and work to advance humanity.

## CHARITY ABIDETH

As always, it is important first to define terms, and in the case of “charity” to redefine what has come to be the common understanding. While its technical definition as “benevolence, goodwill, and generosity” does not necessarily have pejorative connotations, for several hundred years charity has been associated with an attitude of condescension and disdain for its recipients. The relationship between those who provide charity and those forced to receive it is always one of differential power, but more than that, the exchange of goods and services can enact or re-enact social hierarchies by validating the virtue of those who give and underscoring the inadequacies of those who need. In this context, it is clear why many are suspicious of charity, particularly if it is divorced from justice.

There is, however, a much more positive and humane meaning to charity, particularly if we go back to the original Latin term “caritas.” In the passage from St. Paul quoted in the epigraph above, the word now almost universally translated as “love” was originally “charity” or “caritas.” It is unfortunate that “charity” has become so compromised as a word in English because there needs to be a term that refers to deep care for human beings separate from “love” which is so often and so easily defined as romance. It is ironic that the First Corinthians verse is ubiquitous at weddings when it does not in fact refer to romantic love. Or perhaps the passage needs to be read, but with the original term “charity” inserted; couples embarking on a life together might do well to remember the power of being charitable toward one another. In any case, it is certainly worth emphasizing the power in human relations of passionate care for others.

A more comprehensive understanding of “charity” not only makes it compatible with a commitment to justice but gives that commitment additional force. While my examples of this dynamic came from Cambodia, the point pertains to engagement in any community context. In our efforts to investigate the “root causes” of human suffering in order to advance humanity, seeing the effects of injustice first hand is a powerful corrective to the detachment and complacency that come too easily to those living in relative economic and political stability.

## “BUT LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN”

It would be almost impossible for a person of conscience to visit Cambodia and not feel the imperative of justice. Seeing the horrors of the Tuol Sleng torture prison and Choeung Ek (the Killing Fields) fuels a passion to see justice done and a profound frustration that for so long the crimes have gone unpunished and that the current Tribunal (officially the Extraordinary

Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia) will almost certainly be too little too late.<sup>1</sup> However, working with individuals who themselves suffered under the Khmer Rouge or who to this day do not know what happened to loved ones and walk through the Tuol Sleng museum looking (or afraid to look) for photographs they recognize is an entirely different order of experience, one that transforms the abstraction of “crimes against humanity” into the concrete reality of a lost father or cousin.

The extensive photographic record of Khmer Rouge victims at Tuol Sleng is at one and the same time the most powerful indictments of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge and a distracting mimicry of portraiture. The Khmer Rouge (like the Nazis) were impelled to document their crimes against humanity and every prisoner in Tuol Sleng was photographed upon arrival and almost every one was tortured for weeks or months and then brutally executed. The room upon room of the photographs of doomed prisoners on display can have the numbing effect of numbers; there are so many victims it is hard – indeed impossible – to focus on every one as a unique human tragedy.

There is no effective way to manage the experience of seeing these faces; almost everyone ends up photographing the photographs as if somehow one additional record will produce an image that will fix the magnitude of the tragedy. The journalist and photographer Nic Dunlop (2005), who tracked down “Comrade Duch,” the commandant of Tuol Sleng who is now standing trial before the ECCC, articulates well the moral challenge of the Tuol Sleng photographs.

Looking at the photographs on the walls was a dizzying experience. As the prisoners looked at you they created a false intimacy and yet the repetition of so many faces stripped the prisoners of their individuality. . . . There were so many of them. Not until you walk through the empty corridors of Tuol Sleng does Stalin’s idiom that one death is a tragedy – a million a statistic, take on a terrifying potency. (p. 21)

The photographic evidence is, on first viewing, a simple and straightforward documentation of mass murder by the killers. There are mothers with babies, the young girl with terror in her eyes, the old woman who appears resigned to her fate. (p. 164)

The feeling of helplessness when confronted with the photographs is almost suffocating. We want to do something, they demand action and yet we know that there is nothing that we can do. They continue to repel, engage, shock, outrage and, worst of all, exclude. (p. 165)

These photographs fuel a tremendous desire to see justice done, yet they are paralyzing as well. On the most literal level nothing can be done because the victims are so long dead, and on a deeper level the sheer magnitude of the atrocity makes the pursuit of justice seem almost naïve. If, however, we are committed to advancing humanity and to educating students to be leaders and global citizens, there must be some recourse beyond a sense of resigned horror.

The small interventions that can be made in Cambodia may not seem to make much difference against the weight of human suffering, yet it is important to make them. One of the projects summarized in this *Journal* involves using photography to benefit a rural community, to give individuals and families the power of their own images. The intent of the project was to use photography to create community memory in places where if there ever were photographic images, they were destroyed during the long period of social upheaval. The impetus was the lack of access to photography among rural Cambodians, but at the same time I believe that the student's insistence on finding a way to use photography in a way that empowers rather than appropriates is a small gesture of defiance against the sense of futility and helplessness so easily engendered by the horrors of Cambodian history and the Toul Sleng images.

The photographs of the children and adults residing in a small village in Kompong Cham province show both the ubiquity of poverty in Cambodia and the uniqueness of that particular



place. The degree of human need is no greater in that community than in thousands of others in Cambodia and elsewhere, and yet the claim on us is more imperative once we know those individuals. If this particularity is “charity,” it does not therefore detract from a concern for “justice” in this region.

Indeed, the history of Cambodia gives these people a particularly strong claim on justice. Much injustice has rolled along the waters of the Mekong River, and not only during the era of the Khmer Rouge. During the period 1969-1973 two million explosives rolled out of U.S. aircraft over people who to this day have neither electricity nor running water. One million Cambodians were wounded or killed by U.S. bombardment before the Khmer Rouge killed up to two million more (Dunlop, 2005, pp. 74-75). Civil war raged for well over a decade after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge and what precarious stability exists today is not much older than the many children in the villages. Even now, political corruption and the enduring aftermath of a regime that slaughtered the educated leaves rural Cambodia with a childhood mortality rate of greater than 14% and almost half of its children with stunted growth from malnutrition, according to UNICEF (2008). It seems self evident that promoting education and health awareness to benefit the children of rural Cambodia is an imperative equally of human care and justice.



## THE “CHARITY VERSUS JUSTICE” DEBATE

When “charity” and “justice” are discussed in the literature grounding the civic engagement work of colleges and universities, they are seldom formulated as mutually reinforcing. The definition of “charity” outlined above (caring about human suffering and for the humans who suffer) is not the accepted one; instead, “charity” is often invoked as a shorthand way of dismissing certain kinds of community engagement as unreflective, unconcerned with questions of causation, and unable to facilitate social change. “Charity” and “justice” are set out as terms in necessary opposition.

Frequently the term “charity” is not defined, but simply invoked as a marker of poor practice. Two examples from a recent volume on service learning (Butin 2005) show this default assumption. Pompa posits that: “Different from charity, service-learning involves a critique of social systems, challenging participants to analyze what they experience, while inspiring them to take action and make change (p. 189).” The assumption is that “charity” by its very nature cannot motivate effective action or prompt analysis or critique. Other commentators echo this dismissal: “In short, an emphasis on charity situates students as providing service *to* those in need ... and feeling good about ‘helping’ others. By contrast, an approach grounded in social change places students in relationship *with* those with whom they are serving and emphasizes the connections between student service and the larger social issues around which the community service sites are organized (p. 5).” The definition of “charity” assumed here is one of fundamental insincerity. By putting the word “helping” in quotation marks the authors suggest that students should not feel good about their work because it is not in fact helpful; further, there seems to be disdain for the idea that students would be “feeling” any particular way about the work.

This vilification of the term “charity” is not only, or even primarily, a question of semantics, but mirrors a bias in higher education more generally toward the theoretical and systemic and away from the individual and affective. It is ironic that proponents of community engagement would replicate this dynamic when the movement emerged within higher education as an alternative pedagogy of integration, active intervention in social issues, and transformative experiential learning. “Charity” is suspect because it focuses on individuals on both sides of the service equation and their respective emotions: the suffering of particular members of specific communities, and, on the part of those doing service, the sense of distress at conditions, confusion about how to intervene in a problem, or, indeed, “feeling good about helping” at the conclusion of a project.

An essay aptly titled "From Charity to Justice" (2000) articulates at length this assumption within higher education that "charity" is a fundamentally different and inferior approach to addressing social problems:

We contrast . . . social justice with the concept of charity, which is the more common way to consider universities' activities such as community service and educational outreach. Charity refers to the provision of help or relief to those in need. . . . When charitable work is well organized, run efficiently, performed lovingly and with integrity, and delivered to those who are truly needy, it can literally save lives, prevent misery, and maintain the dignity of the recipients. Social justice, on the other hand, refers to the state of institutional or structural arrangements . . . . When one's goal is social justice, one attempts to alter the structural or institutional practices that produce excessive or unjustified inequalities among individuals or that treat people unfairly . . . . For community service and educational outreach to solve our social problems rather than simply ameliorate their negative consequences for poor or needy individuals and eventually "burn out" those who provide services, it must adopt a social justice approach rather than rely on a charity approach." (Marullo and Edwards, p. 899)

According to this formulation, one works **either** to ameliorate the negative consequences of social inequity on individual lives, which is limited and ultimately futile (even if "performed lovingly") **or** to alter the structural conditions producing injustice. I would argue that this is a false and ultimately destructive dichotomy.

### **TOWARD AN ETHICS AND PEDAGOGY OF INTEGRATION**

The work of McMaster faculty Fellows and student Scholars suggests that to work effectively and with integrity in communities involves both helping individuals in ways as direct as possible, while at the same time attempting to alter the structures undergirding their oppression. It is interesting that Marullo and Edwards assert that focus on amelioration alone will "burn out" those committed to the work; focus only on a systems approach, given the difficulties always inherent in making lasting and successful structural change in any society, seems destined to leave practitioners equally if not more demoralized, which will not accrue benefits to the community, or contribute to educating students for effective and responsible citizenship. There are a number of examples from the work summarized elsewhere in this *Journal* of the balance between improving conditions which immediately impact particular individuals and examining the larger issues that impede human progress. In Guatemala, for instance, advancing literacy is a



national need, one exacerbated by years of political upheaval and distrust of directives from the government. Working with a school to build a library in Chiquimulilla meets a need identified over several years by individuals in one small community, and, simultaneously, is responsive to a larger imperative.

Likewise, the teacher training work now in its fourth year in Cambodia involves putting written curricula (in Khmer) into the hands of fifty or so teachers each year and giving them the tools to better reach the specific children we meet on the playgrounds of Phnom Penh and the rural towns in Kompong Cham province. The larger aim, however, is structural, through introducing new pedagogical approaches and keeping the importance of education on everyone's radar screen from pre-service teachers at Defiance College, to our own faculty, to community partners on the ground, even to Education Ministry contacts who are very cautiously supportive of this ongoing project.

McMaster School teams in Belize work with farmers living on the periphery of an ecologically significant conservation district. Working one-on-one with individual farmers, faculty and students have listened to their needs, gained



their trust, and helped them to evaluate fertilizer use and vastly reduce usage amounts that were bankrupting the farm families and degrading the watershed. Individual decisions about how much to fertilize papaya plants makes a tremendous difference to the well being of particular families, but also matters to the larger project of protecting a fragile ecosystem. The goal of environmental preservation coexists with a commitment to helping individual farmers, and is advanced through it.

A final example shows how the interplay of “charity” and “justice” promotes deep learning for students and provides tangible benefits to communities. When students Elizabeth Grafing and Renee Steffen began studying women and labor in Cambodia, they were focused on macroeconomic questions pertaining to the international role of the Cambodian garment industry and its potential to advance the country’s economy. As their research revealed the degree to which economic development was fueled by a factory system controlled by foreigners and built upon the exploitation of young female workers, the project morphed into an effort to raise funds to purchase treadle sewing machines to give a relatively small number of women economic independence, taking them out of sweatshops and vastly improving their quality of life. This project was not conceived in counter-distinction to a larger study of the economic development of Cambodia, but alongside it. While the immediate result of this project was more to ameliorate the impact of injustice on Cambodian women than to effect structural change, both students who carried out the project have been inspired to work for change as a result of this experience. Elizabeth Grafing has spoken publicly around the country on the conditions of female garment workers in Cambodia and is committed to returning to continue her work. Renee Steffen currently serves as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer at Marietta College, working to promote civic engagement among college students.

Allowing “charity” to peacefully coexist in the community-engagement equation does not minimize the importance of a consistent emphasis on social justice; the terms need not be held in opposition. The critics of “charity” are certainly correct in emphasizing the importance of underlying values and intent.

Gandhi taught that it is not enough to do the right thing for the wrong reasons. Many pragmatically minded readers might question this position, as do some of our community service-engaged students and colleagues. Their argument would be that one’s motives for doing service do not matter as long as the hungry person is being fed or the homeless person is being sheltered. . . . Quite apart from the insensitivity, disrespect, or indignity that might

be imposed on those in need by volunteers operating on faulty motives, charity work that is not guided by social justice values will reproduce unjust structures and fail in the long run to stem the tide of injustice. If the service activity is not empowering the recipients, it further alienates those in need, separating them from their just place in society. (Murullo and Edwards, p. 910)

It is unquestionably true that the larger intellectual and community-development goals behind service activities must be explicit and shared both among those performing the work and between the higher-education institution and the community. It is likewise important to empower the recipients of service, or, put differently, to respect the self-determination of community partners. Such an emphasis is not, however, incompatible with “charity” but is in fact constitutive of a real ethics of care.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The tribunal has delimited its scope so that only the highest leaders are subject to prosecution and only crimes committed during the period from the 17th of April 1975 to the official overthrow of the regime on January 7, 1979 may be considered. As of this writing in early 2008, it has been almost five years since the UN and the Cambodian government agreed to the ground rules to balance Cambodian autonomy with international judicial standards. Arrests were finally made in fall of 2007, and the trials may begin in the summer of 2008.

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