

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

August 14, 2022 Talk

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**Opening Words: Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr:**

**“Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice, which make philanthropy necessary.”**

**Hymn #121 We’ll Build A Land**

**Meditation (John Gaines) –**

**Please get as comfortable as you can in your seats with your feet on the floor**

**Please close your eyes, if you are comfortable in so doing**

**From UU Minister, Rev. Dr. Jonpipher Kwong’s Meditation “From Ally to Advocate”**

**Thought I was so smart**

**Till I didn’t know the answer**

**To why evil exists in the world**

**Thought I was so enlightened**

**Till I discovered comfort**

**In darkness for a while**

**Thought I was so liberal**

**Till my good intentions**

**Produced the opposite results**

**Thought I was colorblind**

**Till my eyes began to see**

**Differences that should be honored**

**Thought I was an ally**

**When what was called for**

**Was an advocate instead**

**Reading: From Dorian O. Burton and Brian C.B. Barnes’ article, Shifting Philanthropy from Charity to Justice, in the January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017 Stanford Social Innovation review:**

**Historical injustices—perpetuated by racial and cultural conflicts, and exacerbated by a lack of empathy—are at the heart of America’s growing economic, social, and political inequalities.**

**Nowhere is this gap of authentic empathy and justice more pronounced than in the American**

philanthropic sector, where often well-intentioned people make decisions for communities they do not come from, may not understand, rarely interact with, and almost never step foot into.

“Philanthropy is commendable,” said Martin Luther King, “but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice, which make philanthropy necessary.”

Philanthropists and philanthropic advisors who champion equality must work to shift from a framework that grounds giving in “charity” to one that grounds giving in “justice.” A framework rooted in charity alone ignores past realities that forced communities into oppressive situations, and risks reinforcing givers’ lack of understanding with rewards that recognize their benevolence. This sort of charity might relieve guilt and help some people sleep better, but it produces no reflection on either the genesis or perpetuation of inequality. In proposing this fundamental shift, we are not suggesting that giving is not admirable. Instead, we believe the field should seek to reclaim charitable giving by supporting practices that liberate—and that change the attitudes, beliefs, and policies of—society as a whole. It should seek to break down longstanding, intentional, institutional policies that have shaped social divides in the United States and that continue to promote inequality today.

### **The Do-Gooders Dilemma: Charity Work vs Justice Work**

Many of you know that pre-Covid our Tuesday Evening Small Group had been doing community service work at Second Wind Cottages, but the pandemic curtailed our ability to do what we typically did with Second Wind – deep clean cottages between residents. As we were casting about for a new community service project, Judy Jones brought a new idea to us. She knew that the Village at Ithaca was facing a staffing/volunteer crisis.

Village at Ithaca was founded to foster educational equity and excellence among the under-served communities in Tompkins County. As Cal Walker said last week at the Village’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary party, “Village at Ithaca was founded on a three-legged stool – children, families, and systems.”

In 2020 the Covid pandemic brought up new needs for its client families – basic food necessities and lack of purchasing power for household supplies such as toilet paper and cleaning products. Village staff set about meeting those needs with a weekly food distribution system, but some of the teen volunteers were about to head off to college and would not be available continue making the deliveries. That was the problem that Judy brought to our Small Group. As we discussed what we might do a recent Summer Services talk by Jens Wennberg resonated with us. Jens described how he and Nancy Miller had approached their AIDS work in Africa. They went to villages and asked, “How can we help?” Our Small Group followed that model and asked Village at Ithaca, “What can we do to help?”

Village staff responded, if you take over the deliveries, it will free our staff to do the work to help fulfill our educational mission. Judy Jones became the volunteer driver dispatcher and Fred Balfour created a system to solicit and pack household supplies. Many of you contributed to those efforts. Temple Beth El has now taken over the household supply portion of the program, but Judy’s drivers continue to show up each Friday to get the donated food and supplies out to 12+ Village at Ithaca families.

Early on in our work with Village at Ithaca Sophie Sparrow, Village’s social worker, spoke with us about how we were approaching our work. She wanted to make sure that we were in synch with the basic Village philosophy that the work that they were doing, and that we were doing in their name, was justice work, not charity work. For most of us this was a new concept. What was the difference between charity work and justice work? How did that impact on the way we went about our work? Sophie gave us the Stanford article that is part of our reading this morning and it gave me pause. Charity vs justice – does it make a difference?

I have been involved in a variety of social justice and non-profit programs through most of my adult life. As a graduate student in Burlington, Vermont in late 1960's I was a volunteer waiter in a church-run coffee house. Many of us were trained as draft counselors to help both local young men and young men passing through on their way to Canada, make better choices about their draft status. Later Pat and I worked in residential treatment for emotionally disturbed children and then for 28 years I was the CEO for a non-profit providing residential care for juvenile justice children. During all of those decades I never stopped to think about whether the work that I was doing was rooted in charity or justice. Now Sophie got me thinking about it all.

In their Stanford article Drs. Burton and Barnes wrote, **“Philanthropists and philanthropic advisors who champion equality must work to shift from a framework that grounds giving in “charity” to one that grounds giving in “justice.”**

The first questions that arise are, “What is the philanthropy that they are talking about?” and “How does this apply to me?”

The dictionary definition of philanthropy is pretty sterile. From Merriam-Webster: “an act or gift done or made for humanitarian purposes.” But the practical implications are far wider. From the Minnesota Council on Foundations: “The word Charity comes from the Greek, meaning "love for humanity." Modern definitions include the concept of voluntary giving by an individual or group to promote the common good and improve the quality of life.” In other words: “Giving of time, talent, and treasure for the greater good.”

Believe it or not there are two internet sites that help distinguish between words – [differencebetween.net](http://differencebetween.net) and [differencebetween.com](http://differencebetween.com).

Where do we start trying to get a handle on charity? One place is the King James version of 1 Corinthians 13. These selected verses may be familiar to some of you:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

In a more modern translation “Charity” has been replaced by “Love” so that the final verse of Chapter 13 might now say, “Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.” UUs proclaim, “Side With Love,” but we might alternatively proclaim, “Side with Charity.” After all, the Greeks defined charity as “love for humanity.”

Charity, as we most often think of it, is based on love and is defined as helping those in need, particularly individuals in need. Charity responds to immediate needs of people in crisis. Many of us support a variety of organizations that provide assistance to individuals in need. Giving to the American Red Cross for Kentucky flood relief is an example of charity.

That all seems pretty straight-forward. So how does justice or social justice come into the picture?

Let’s start with the familiar, but awful parable of the babies in the river. Most of you have heard this one:

Once upon a time, there was a small village on the edge of a river. Life in the village was busy. There were people growing food and people teaching the children to make blankets and people making meals.

One day a villager took a break from harvesting food and noticed a baby floating down the river toward the village. She couldn't believe her eyes! She heard crying in the distance and looked downstream to see that two babies had already floated by the village. She looked around at the other villagers working nearby. "Does anyone else see that baby?" she asked.

"Oh, this is terrible!" A woman who had been building a campfire shouted, "Look, there are even more upstream!" Indeed, there were three more babies coming around the bend.

"How long have these babies been floating by?" asked another villager. No one knew for sure, but some people thought they might have seen something in the river earlier. They were busy at the time and did not have time to investigate.

The villagers quickly organized themselves to rescue the babies. But no matter what they did the babies kept coming downstream and only seemed to increase.

Then one day, a villager asked, "But where are all these babies coming from?"

"No one knows," said another villager. "But I say we organize a team to go upstream and find how who's throwing these babies in the river."

The story goes on a bit more, but I will stop there. It is clear that the people engaged in pulling the babies out of the river were engaged in charity work. They rescued as many babies as they could, clothed and fed them, and cared for them. That is charity work.

But what about the people who wanted to go upstream and put a stop to whatever or whomever was putting the babies in the river in the first place? Those people wanted to engage in justice work.

Justice work, according to [differencebetween.com](http://differencebetween.com), seeks moral rightness by digging deeper to address the root cause of the problem. Justice work seeks to promote justice in society. Justice work is most often structurally focused by eradicating the inequalities that lie at the heart of society. Social justice aims to create a society where there is equality, solidarity, and human rights. It pays attention to the structural difference that creates inequality and social stratification in the society. In our story the people who went upstream to stop the babies from getting into the river were social justice workers.

In summary,

While Charity is social service, typically direct service to individuals, Justice is social change, promoting change in institutions or political structures;

While Charity responds to immediate needs, Justice responds to long-term needs;

While Charity is directed at the effects of injustice and ameliorating its symptoms, Justice is directed at the root causes of social problems;

While Charity addresses problems that already exist, Justice addresses underlying structures or causes of these problems. Justice tries to make sure that the mess isn't made to begin with;

Charity includes homeless shelters, food pantries, clothing drives, and emergency services;

Justice includes legislative advocacy, changing policies and practices, and political action.

Do we need both charity work and social justice work? Absolutely! We need people to pull the babies out of the river and care for them and we need people to go upstream and address the root problem.

Are there local organizations that do both charity and justice work? One that comes immediately to mind is Planned Parenthood of Greater New York. Planned Parenthood

provides personal care and health services for clients (charity), but also has a very strong advocacy program (justice). Another that you might not have thought of is the Foodbank of the Southern Tier. You probably know that they support all manner of food pantries and feeding programs to address food insecurity (charity), but did you know that under our friend Natasha Thompson they also have a strong local, state, and national advocacy presence and train clients to be advocates for social change? It takes both charity work and justice work.

So let's go back to the beginning – Village at Ithaca. Our Small Group's role is delivering food and household supplies directly to clients. That sounds like charity and it is, but even we volunteers are part of the organization that also sees educational advocacy and system change as part of its mission. When we took Jens' question, "How can we help?" to Village at Ithaca they saw the opportunity to have volunteers pick up a piece of the work staff had been doing to free staff to do more advocacy (justice).

If we are going to build a land where we bind up the broken and let the captives go free, where sisters and brothers can create peace, and where justice shall roll down like waters, it will take both charity work and justice work, and it will take all of us.

I will be very interested in your comments. Thank you.

**Closing Words: From Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 Birmingham Manifesto**

**"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."**