

Today we hear much about “making a difference.” It drives many people, especially college youth, to come to the Dominican Republic and volunteer for a week or so. Tourists often write to me and ask how they can help.

After nearly 20 years of working among the poor, the traumatized, the neglected, and homeless I have come to see four stages in this process of “making a difference.”

First there is the Santa Claus stage. People come with books, toys, bats and balls and dump them on the poor. I do not doubt the good intentions of the people giving but they do more harm than good. It creates a sense of materialistic envy in the receiver of the gift. It harms the giver into thinking that they are making a difference when in fact they make create an even worse situation. Churches, schools, clinics stand empty in this country because people came to do good and left people with burdens they can not take care of. Clinics have not funds to operate, schools have no chairs and desks, and churches have no way to pay the electric bill. I cannot tell you how many places I have been to that have unused books stacked to the ceiling, computers that sit idle, and wells that do not operate. Why? Because there are no teachers trained to effective use the books, computers have no one to maintain them or pay for monthly service, and water wells are contaminated by the virtue of being dug in the wrong locations. Victims of human trafficking are released but often return to conditions worse than what they left behind. Good intentions, bad results!

The second stage is what I call the helper stage. After a few trips to poor regions of the world, these volunteers realize that comprehensive and broad strategies are needed. When a school is built it must also have teachers who have access to training, nutrition for children who come to school hungry, and funding to maintain and operate the school. The whole person must be addressed by wholistic programs that think of the

the body, soul, and spirit all at once and in an integrated fashion that respects the person rather than treating them as objects of charity. Sex workers who are enslaved by pimps and bar owners often despise the “Good Samaritans” who would “rescue” them because they recognize the arrogance and judgement in the helper. The helper stage perceives a wall between the giver and the receiver. It is a state of being that is arrogant and demeans people because they do not see each other as equal in worth. It is a one-sided and one way relationship.

The third stage is the servant stage. This stage seeks to provide service to one in need but often there are strings attached or conditions imposed. It is a reciprocal relationship where the receiver is allowed input into the process and contributes to the overall plan and process. The servant sees the problem and attempts to address the sources of poverty, exploitation, and neglect. This is a compassionate but conditional stage. Victims of human trafficking often run away from good care and safety often because they still sense this subtle control over their lives. The servant is still the one in charge and the ultimate judge of the situation. He has the power of veto.

The fourth stage is the friendship stage. This is the stage closest to love. I did not really understand this stage fully until I saw the movie *The Soloist* with Robert Downey Jr. based on a book by LA Times journalist Steve Lopez. Lopez befriended a homeless man who had once been a student at Juilliard School of Music. Mental illness took its toll on the man and yet there was genius and art peering through the dirt and filth of his street existence. Steve Lopez saw this talent and tried to help this man. First he gave him a gift of a cello (Santa Claus stage). Then he got him music lessons and an apartment (helping stage). Then he arranged a recital for this man in the hopes that it would repair his illness with self confidence and dignity (servant stage). It only drove his friend deeper into his illness. Finally he just became his friend with no expectation of “fixing him” or “helping” him as if he, the reporter, was somehow better

or less sick. He finally resigned himself to simply “being there” for his friend without expectations or demands or conditions.

All of us should arrive at this last stage but not all of us do. There is still a voice within us that wants to fix things, change things, or worst of all “make a difference.” We can only make a difference when we stop trying to make a difference, when we stop trying to be a hero and we learn to love by practicing the power of witness. The power of witness is true wisdom when we learn to simply be there. When that happens sometimes change for the better occurs. Sometimes not!.A domestic child slave needs a friend sometimes more than a backpack and school supplies. We are not responsible for the outcomes of service and work in the noble calling of walking among the poor, the downtrodden, the victimized, and the lonely. We are only responsible for being there.

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