

# Effective Compassion: Seven Principles from a Century Ago

## A Selection From *Transforming Welfare: The Revival of American Charity*

by Marvin Olasky

The crisis of the modern welfare state is a crisis of government, and it is more than that. Too many private charities and foundations dispense aid on the basis of what feels good rather than what works. As a result, they end up providing, instead of points of light, alternative shades of darkness. Too many act like the arrogant individuals criticized by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*: "They smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness... and let other people clean up the mess they made."

Private charities and foundations can do a better job than government but only if they follow seven principles that effective poverty fighters of the past understood. Here are the principles, with historical meaning and contemporary applications, in alphabetical order.

### 1. Affiliation

A century ago, when individuals applied for material assistance, charity volunteers tried first to "restore family ties that have been sundered" and "reabsorb in social life those who for some reason have snapped the threads that bound them to other members of the community." Instead of immediately offering help, charities asked, "Who is bound to help in this case?" Mary Richmond of the Baltimore Charity Organizing Society summed up in 1897 the wisdom of a century: "Relief given without reference to friends and neighbors is accompanied by moral loss. Poor neighborhoods are doomed to grow poorer whenever the natural ties of neighborliness are weakened by well-meant but unintelligent interference."

Today, before developing a foundation project or contributing to a private charity, we should ask: "Does it work through families, neighbors, and religious or community organizations, or does it supersede them?" For example, studies show that many homeless alcoholics have families, but they do not want to be with them. When homeless shelters provide food, clothing, and housing without asking hard questions, aren't they subsidizing disaffiliation and enabling addiction? Instead of giving aid directly to homeless men, why not work on reuniting them with brothers, sisters, parents, wives, or children?

We should ask, as well, whether other programs help or hurt. It's good to help an unmarried teenager mother, but much such aid now offers a mirage of independence. A better plan is to reunite her whenever possible with those on whom she actually depends, whether she admits it or not: her parents and the child's father. It's good to give Christmas presents to poor children, but when the sweet-minded "helper" shows up with a shiny new fire truck that outshines the second-hand items a poor single mom put together, the damage is done. A better plan is to bulwark the beleaguered mom by enabling her to provide a better present.

### 2. Bonding

When applicants for help a century ago were truly alone, volunteers worked one-on-one to become, in essence, new family members. Charity volunteers a century ago usually were not assigned to massive food-dispensing tasks but were given the narrow but deep responsibility of making a difference in one life over several years. Kindness and firmness were both essential: The magazine *American Hebrew* in 1898 told of how one man was sunk into dependency, but a volunteer "with great patience convinced him that he must earn his living"; soon he did and regained the respect of his family and community. Similarly, a woman had become demoralized, but "for months she was worked with, now through kindness, again through discipline, until finally she began to show a desire to help herself."

Today, when an unmarried pregnant teenager is dumped by her boyfriend and abandoned by angry parents who refuse to be reconciled, she needs a haven, a room in a home with a volunteer family. When a single mom at the end of her rope cannot take care of a toddler, he should be placed quickly for adoption where a new and permanent bonding can take place, rather than rotated through a succession of foster homes. Some failed programs spend a lot of money but are too stingy in what is truly important: treating people as human beings made in God's image, not as animals.

### **3. Categorization**

Charities a century ago realized that two persons in exactly the same material circumstances, but with different values, need different treatment: One might benefit most from some material help and a pat on the back, the other might need spiritual challenge and a push. Those who were orphaned, elderly, or disabled received aid; jobless adults who were "able and willing to work" received help in job-finding; "those who prefer to live on alms" and those of "confirmed intemperance" were not entitled to material assistance.

"Work tests" helped both in sorting and in providing relief with dignity. When an able-bodied man came to a homeless shelter, he often was asked to chop wood for two hours or to whitewash a building; in that way he could provide part of his own support and also help those unable to chop. A needy woman generally was given a seat in the "sewing room" (often near a child care room) and asked to work on garments that would be donated to the helpless poor or sent through the Red Cross to families suffering from the effects of hurricanes or tornadoes. The work test, along with teaching good habits and keeping away those who did not really need help, also enabled charities to teach the lesson that those who were being helped could help others.

Today, don't we need to stop talking about "the poor" in abstraction and start distinguishing once again between those who truly yearn for help and those who just want an enabler? Programs have the chance to succeed only when categories are established and firmly maintained. Work tests can help: Why shouldn't some homeless men clean up streets and parks and remove graffiti? Now, as thousands of crack babies born addicted to cocaine and often deserted by mothers who care only for the next high, languish in hospitals under bright lights and with almost no human contact, why shouldn't homeless women (some are psychotic or sick, but others are healthy and gentle) be assigned to hold a baby for an hour in exchange for food and shelter?

### **4. Discernment**

"Intelligent giving and intelligent withholding are alike true charity," the New Orleans Charity Organization Society declared in 1899. "If drink has made a man poor, money will feed not him, but his drunkenness." Poverty fighters a century ago trained volunteers to leave behind a conventional attitude toward the poor, seeing them through the comfortable haze of their own intentions. Barriers against fraud were important not only to prevent waste but to preserve morale among those who were working hard to remain independent: "Nothing is more demoralizing to the struggling poor than successes of the indolent."

Bad charity also created uncertainty among givers as to how their contributions would be used, and led to less giving over the long term: It was important to "reform those mild, well-meaning, tender-hearted, sweet-voiced criminals who insist upon indulging in indiscriminate charity." Compassion was greatest when givers could "work with safety, confidence, and liberty." Today, lack of discernment in helping poor individuals is rapidly producing an anticompensation backlash, as the better-off—unable to distinguish between the truly needy and the grubby-grabby—give to neither.

### **5. Employment**

New York charity leader Josephine Lowell wrote that "the problem before those who would be charitable, is not how to deal with a given number of the poor; it is how to help those who are poor, without adding to their numbers and constantly increasing the evils they seek to cure." If people were paid for not working, the number of nonworkers would increase, and children would grow up without seeing work as a natural and essential part of life. Individuals had to accept responsibility: Governmental programs operating without the discipline of the marketplace were inherently flawed, because their payout comes "from what is regarded as

a practically inexhaustible source, and people who once receive it are likely to regard it as a right, as a permanent pension, implying no obligation on their part."

Today, programs that stress employment, sometimes in creative ways, need new emphasis. For example, more of the able-bodied might receive not housing but the opportunity to work for a home through "sweat equity" arrangements in which labor constitutes most of the down payment. Some who start in vigorous programs of this sort drop out with complaints that too much sweat is required. They find champions who would prefer to see a Department of Housing and Animal Development passing out free cages, but one person who stayed in a program said at the end, "We are poor, but we have something that is ours. When you use your own blood, sweat, and tears, it's part of your soul. You stand and say, 'I did it.'"

## 6. Freedom

Charity workers a century ago did not press for governmental programs but instead showed poor people how to move up while resisting enslavement to governmental masters. Job freedom was the opportunity to drive a wagon without paying bribes, to cut hair without having to go to barbers' college, and to get a foot on the lowest rung of the ladder, even if the wages there were low. Freedom was the opportunity for a family to escape dire poverty by having a father work long hours and a mother sew garments at home. Life was hard, but static, multigenerational poverty of the kind we now have was rare; those who persevered could star in a motion picture of upward mobility.

Today, in our desire to make the bottom rung of the ladder higher, we have cut off the lowest rungs and left many on the ground. Those who are pounding the pavements looking for work, and those who have fallen between the cracks, are hindered by what is supposed to help them. Mother Teresa's plan to open a homeless shelter in New York was stopped by a building code that required an elevator; nuns in her order said that their code forbade such mechanical helps and that they would carry upstairs anyone who could not walk, but the city stuck to its guns and the shelter never opened. In Texas and New Mexico, a Bible-based antidrug program run by Victory Fellowship has a 60 percent success rate in beating addiction, yet the Texas Drug and Alcohol Commission instructed the program to stop calling itself one of "drug rehabilitation" because it did not conform to the usual standards. Unfortunately, such examples of the lack of freedom are all too commonplace.

## 7. God

"True philanthropy must take into account spiritual as well as physical needs," poverty fighters a century ago noted, and both Christians and Jews did. Christians worshipped a God who came to earth and showed in life and death the literal meaning of compassion—suffering with. Jewish teaching stressed the pursuit of righteousness through the doing of good deeds. Groups such as the Industrial Christian Alliance noted that they used "religious methods"—reminding the poor that God made them and had high expectations for them—to "restore the fallen and helpless to self-respect and self-support."

Challenge that goes beyond the material is still essential to poverty fighting. In Washington, D.C., multimillion dollar programs have failed, but a mile from the U.S. Capitol success stories are developing: Spiritually-based programs such as Clean and Sober Streets, where ex-alcoholics and ex-addicts help those still in captivity; the Gospel Mission, which fights homelessness by offering true hope; and the Capitol Hill Crisis Pregnancy Center, where teenage moms and their children, born and unborn, are cared for, are all saving lives. In Dallas, Texas, a half-mile from the Dallas Housing Authority's failed projects, a neighborhood group called Voice of Hope invites teenagers to learn about God through Bible studies and to work at renovating deteriorated homes in their neighborhood. During the past decade, crime rates among the boys involved with Voice of Hope and pregnancy rates among the girls have been much lower than those in the surrounding community.

Giving by itself, we need to remember, is morally neutral. We need to give rightly so as not to impede the development of values that enable people to get out of poverty and stay out. When the preceding seven principles of effective compassion are widely understood and practiced, antipoverty work can be effective. In 1995, as in 1895, the best programs offer challenge, not just enabling, and deal with spiritual questions as well as material needs. In 1995, as in 1895, there is no effective substitute for the hard process of one person helping another. A century-old question—Does any given "scheme of help... make great demands on men to give themselves to their brethren?"—is still the right one to ask.

# TRANSFORMING WELFARE

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