



social responsibility

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I was born with a picket sign in my hand and a keen desire for justice, both for which I can assuredly thank my parents, who left Texas and the churches they were raised in because of the apathy towards—if not involvement *with*—the inexcusable treatment of blacks in the South. I grew up protesting the war in Vietnam and going hungry because my father returned his paycheck from the University of Kansas when it refused to hire people of color. He made the front page of the Kansas City papers, but the family he was supporting didn't. I was taught to speak out against injustice as I was learning my ABCs.

It's no small wonder, then, that I've found myself advocating for the poor, the marginalized, the at-risk, and the unheard since I started having my *own* children. But I have constant internal conversations, struggling with the real meaning behind "social responsibility". I've worked for non-profit organizations since the 1980s and escorted many Americans overseas to take a peek at poverty. Traveling to Guatemala, Mexico, Brazil, Russia, and Thailand with enthusiastic and well-meaning missionaries, I've witnessed the zeal of "helping" turn sour. I've also worked hard to bring attention to the Third World conditions in our *own* country, which doesn't carry the same romantic appeal as those in a foreign land. And while I'm wholeheartedly behind waking people up from the comfort of looking the other way, there are a few dangers in the zealotry with which we pursue the path of social responsibility.

One of my inner dialogues has been to wonder about the reasons we *want* to be socially responsible. Sure, we want to care for one another; almost every faith has this mandate, which appears to go unheeded by the majority. We want to "help", we want to "do for" others, "give" the less fortunate things we think they need. But these courses of action emerge out of a misconception that we *have* what they need, that we are the givers and "they" are the receivers of our generosity. We, too, often assume that our *stuff* and our academic knowledge put us in a position of superiority. But if one is genuinely interested in changing the course of social injustice in the world, the actions of social responsibility need to change from "doing for" to "listening and learning"; a little more humbling, and not nearly as conspicuous.

As a form of active contemplation, listening may do more to change the world for the better than the initial response of "let's DO something!" "Doing" keeps us busy, makes us feel good about ourselves, and often gets much needed work done. It also keeps us from knowing the people we desire to help, keeps us from having to deal with uncomfortable questions such as, "How come you Americans live in such big houses with rooms that are empty?" Doing is too often self-serving. And when we walk away from a project and the people aren't accordingly thankful to us, or overflowing with praise for how we've helped (saved?) them, we quickly assume that the poor are ungrateful.

I think the approach to real social responsibility—one which seeks the greater good of unity and

long term change—is to understand that a project alone can widen the gap between giver and receiver. No one can ever bridge a relational gap without creating understanding. Understanding doesn't happen if one party does all the doing, talking, and sharing of knowledge. We all learn from each other, and it's arrogant of us to think that privilege exempts us from the need to learn from the poor. My "white savior" complex ended the time I went to a Navajo reservation and a grandmother told me, "You people come to tell us about God's son. But, it is obvious to us that you don't know God. So, how can you know his son?" After fifteen years, I'm still working on the answer to that.

The poor have taught me the suffering caused by the things we think we need to have. They have shown me joy in appreciating what we *do* have—and sharing it *all*, even if it's the last bit of food in the house; the freedom that comes from not weighing ourselves down with *stuff*. The inexpressible thankfulness when the crops are good, or there *is* enough food for everyone, and the closeness of community. But most of all, I've learned how the world views the greed of our country and knows the harm we've done because we've never *truly* learned to share.

I've also seen wonderful change occur in communities where real relationships are forged because someone has taken the time to participate in the daily life of a community and sit and talk over chores or a hot cup of coffee (fair trade, of course). When the dedication to sit and listen to another human being—despite cultural differences—is adhered to, then a gradual change takes place. Respect is built up, dignity is restored, and trust begins to develop. In this day and age, after manifest destiny and unjustified wars, trust takes a long time to develop. But that's the *true* nature of social responsibility—taking the time to build relationships and, therefore, understanding that the solutions to real problems are beyond well projects or inoculations. Many people can be convinced to write a check to help the poor, but very few can be cajoled into actually spending time with the individuals who make up the "needy" category. Social responsibility requires time and a commitment to building and sustaining relationships—better yet, *friendships*. There's no overnight solution to the social problems in this world. It just takes laying down one's life—agendas and all.

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