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Communications with a human touch

Charity and Compassion Fatigue is Wearing Down Fundraising

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by David Porter

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They say that ‘charity begins at home’, but people give generously all over the world and always have done. In times of hardship, will they stop giving?

According to *Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project*, caregivers experience high levels of compassion fatigue. They meet daily ‘heart wrenching, emotional challenges,’ with chronic stress tolls taken on all carers, from full time employees to part time volunteers. “Eventually, negative attitudes prevail.”

These people have a strong identification with helpless, suffering/traumatized people or animals or some aspect of the environment. In the extreme, carers can exhibit symptoms from neglect to abuse of their charges, simply because they’ve become worn out with caring and emoting. With the economic

difficulties of the early 21st century, some people may find their compassion fatigue extended to weariness with charities.

As some people are numbed yet influenced by screen violence, those used to battles, injuries, accidents, death, violence can become immune, yet still traumatised. Emergency and health staff, military personnel, police, teachers and social workers can condition their caring responses to cope. People's shock can also become neutralized by seeing endless tragedy/disaster on TV.

Psychology of Giving to Others

In a 2009 article in *Newsweek*, Peter Singer said UNICEF reported 10 million children under five die annually (27,000 daily) from preventable diseases, lack of safe drinking water, sanitation or adequate diet. He said that people feeling financially 'tapped out' was no excuse: 'we are vastly better off than those so poor they struggle to meet basic needs'.

People are more willing to help individuals than masses, as shown in fundraising campaigns. Psychologists call a diffusion of responsibility attitude 'the bystander effect': others will deal with the problem. There is also an element of 'futility thinking', where people feel charity giving is but a 'drop in the ocean', so what's the point?

A further reluctance in the 'psychological barriers to giving' is the money itself: there is a perception that excess slices of donations evaporate in administrative costs; if the aid is to a 'foreign' and/or unstable country, too 'much vanishes through local corruption or wars; and a feeling that 'governments' should deal with these matters.

Tara Parker-Pope in the *New York Times* in 2007 said: 'Giving is the gift that gives back. The ritual of showing how much we care also makes us feel good'. Whether famous philanthropists in the past enabled schools, hospitals, old people's homes, libraries,

concert halls because it 'made them feel good' is debatable. If they did it through Christian or other faith-based conviction, that may be more accurate.

Warren Buffett and Bill & Melinda Gates are modern-day benefactors, appealing directly to equally wealthy business people. They said in June 2010: 'America's richest people should commit at least 50 percent of their net worth to charity'. Buffett committed 99% of his fortune; the Gates gave \$28 billion to their foundation to be funneled into good causes.

Law of Diminishing Returns

There are individuals and organizations looking for help across the world. Some call it 'moral blackmail'. In the UK, for example, trips to supermarkets find charity collectors at the doors; walks down high streets see profusions of 'chuggers' (charity 'muggers' paid to persuade people to sign up to support a charity with their bank details).

Sellers of *The Big Issue* are spread around town centers, but they at least are part of a business designed to help homeless people help themselves. Big 'flag' days are held by many charities, licensed to collect in the street and door-to-door, covering almost every cause under the sun from Christian Aid to cancer research, from animal welfare to protecting children.

Television hosts 'telethons' to promote major causes for hours at a time, using footage of good works done with previous appeals and appearances by celebrities, and artistes, current and retro-revival. The UK's annual *Children in Need* has raised over £500 million since 1980; the biannual *Red Nose Day*, part of *Comic Relief's* charity work, has taken over £600 million.

The annual *Poppy Appeal* raises around £30m a year for the Royal British Legion, the main charity caring for war injured. Performers in huge open air galas were developed in events like *Live Aid*, *Live Earth*, *Live 8* while *Sport Relief* generated the

same sort of charity/cash hype with sports participation.

This in addition to countless people asking for sponsorship for hikes, walks, fasts, bike rides, parachute jumps from their friends and neighbors and those unable to think of excuses to aid scouts, buy hospital equipment, give operations to individuals with rare diseases. Can financial support for so many causes grow forever? Are people resistant? Isn't disposable income finite?

Charities Always Need Funds

Charities have to be inventive to get money. Without it, they cannot achieve anything. The failure of crops, earthquakes, droughts, volcanoes and civil wars continue all the year round. People get sick, have diseases, are injured, hurt, tormented, damaged. People always need help. The poor are always on earth.

The internet has heralded the terminal decline of the Christmas card; that main charity revenue stream could dry. The lottery is a painless way for indirect giving to charities and good causes, but even that could shrink as taxes squeeze peoples' budgets.

Charities must modernize, find new approaches. Many are big business, and with health and safety laws they presumably have to be fussy about goods donated for resale. Sending out 'on spec' thousands of cards painted by *Foot and Mouth Artists* works; pens and notebooks sent out in hope from the *Red Cross* in 2010 was mocked.

Charities expect criticism and resistance as well as giftings.

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