

Enough Is Enough ... Or Is It?
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April 19, 2009

A few times this year, and at other times in the past, I've heard concern about the fact that we are doing too much fundraising around here. I've heard people say we are asking almost weekly for some kind of financial offering – Homefirst, Darfur, partner church, Chalice Lighters, centennial, annual giving. The general concern is “When will it stop?” and the frustration is best summarized as “Enough is enough!”

I know how it can feel to have someone, as my father says, “always with a hand on my wallet,” because of course the hand that reaches out for your wallet in this place has its hand on my wallet, too. And I'm sympathetic to the sense that religious life should offer some haven, someplace where you can relax, regroup, recover, renew before the onslaught of the next week and the struggle to be good and centered and directed through all that it brings. Church as gas station, at least in part, and certainly *not* as a place where someone siphons off what's already in your tank while you get a quick tune-up.

The feeling, however, the grumblings that occasionally ask for a reprieve, raise an honest and legitimate question: the question of when *is* enough enough. In our religious life, when is it appropriate to ask each other to consider giving, and when not?

Of course, there are some very obvious reasons we ask and we give around here. First, and as no one probably needs reminding – generosity increases happiness. It lowers stress levels, lengthens life expectancy, is associated with (though causally we don't know in which direction for sure) a lower sense of helplessness. In one experiment, economists William Harbaugh and Daniel Burghart and psychologist Ulrich Mayr gave \$100 to each of 19 female students. In brain scans, those who gave the money away to a local food bank recorded activity in their “reward centers” – the parts of the brain that respond when you eat something sweet or *receive* money.¹ It feels good to give. And communities of faith like to support things that support your blood pressure, longevity and bliss!

More nuanced – and something we have talked about here before but which bears repeating – is that generosity, for many of us, is a kind of spiritual practice. And like any other such practice, it can be compared to a muscle that, exercised, grows strong and capable and responsive or, left alone, atrophies. The ability to be generous is something that has to be lived out in many ways, and so we, in our religious community, try to find ways to work at them all. We find ways to keep us limber at giving time and money, giving to stranger and friend, and we make a regular practice of it. So we encourage ourselves and each other to give so that we use that muscle and develop that central spiritual practice.

So we all agree that asking each other to give and to practice generosity *here* is a good thing. But again, what are the *limits* of what we ask of each other? To me, this is not a question of convenience or even a practical question; at its core it is a moral question.

I think part of why we want a reasonable limit for what should be asked of us is so that we can know what the right level of giving is in our lives – for the freedom and the power of that! Then we could say “No” without wondering if we were being hard-hearted and cheap, and say “Yes” easily, knowing it is part of a plan.

So let’s grapple with the moral question. Let’s assume we all want to know once and for all a benchmark for what is enough. I’m assuming too that we will work this out for ourselves and modify any general rule to fit our circumstances or additional moral commitments. Let’s look at how we might do that.

For a parishioner of mine in Washington who, year after year, when tax time came, found he had given far less than he thought he had, that decision about what is enough came in the form of a year-beginning, not year-end decision. Each January, he would set a generosity goal and write the number at the top of a ledger sheet. Then, like a contestant in a game show, he’d set about reaching it. He’d actively seek out opportunities to give his money away, feel the rush before year’s end to make sure the number got lowered to zero. In his newfound system, he never came up short on generosity each December 31st, and he had fun doing it.

For Princeton bioethicist Peter Singer, the concern with generosity isn’t driven by the number we arbitrarily set, but by what cries out desperately to be done with the money and time we have to give away. Singer works his way back from those cries to a number that then can be considered generous.

Singer is motivated, as the title of his book would tell us, by *The Life You Can Save*. He is motivated by the realities of world poverty and the burning question of how and why people who know what suffering goes on in the world are doing so little, by and large, to end it, especially those who could do so with no substantive compromises to the quality and happiness of their own lives.

I highly recommend the book. I won’t recount all its arguments here. It’s worth reading through them yourselves. Suffice it to say that Singer goes over the scale of human, avoidable, curable suffering – 1 billion people living on less than what could be purchased in the U.S. for \$1 a day; the almost 10 million young children, according to UNICEF, who die every year from avoidable, poverty-related causes. This means not enough food or basic inoculations, death from diseases born of unclean water supplies. And Singer cites all kinds of less dire suffering – the millions of people who are blind but in ways that are reversible (with an operation that costs \$50), or women living with fistulas, with all the health complications, awkwardness and social stigma of that reversible reality.

Singer opens his book with a story of coming upon a very young child drowning in a shallow pond. We are on the way to our jobs, wearing a brand new pair of expensive shoes and having no time to untie and remove them, and Singer asks whether we would go in. Would we

go in though our shoes would be ruined and our clothes made dirty, requiring us to return home to change and be late for our appointments? Of course we would. The vast majority of us would do so in a heartbeat. Why, then, asks Singer, would all the folks who would go without a second's hesitation into the pond to save a drowning child not send the money they spent on those shoes to save 100 children drowning in poverty? Why wouldn't they consider *that* their duty? Why wouldn't they take the time?

There are lots of reasons. Statistics don't motivate giving. A photo of a single child, identified, motivates us. Diffuse responsibility and overwhelming numbers both diminish giving. All of these are proven facts about human nature and decision-making tested in fancy collegiate laboratories. So what does Singer essentially say to all of this? *Get over your human nature*. Take what you believe, what your values are, and take them to their appropriate limits. If you can enhance a life with a gift from your own life, aren't you morally obligated to do so?

Moreover, Singer adds, aren't you morally obligated to give until the cost to your own life *has an equivalently sacrificial dimension to the good you can do elsewhere*, only then to say "enough"?

But I've earned the money, we say.

Others should have to do something, we say.

I do a lot. I have kids and retirement to plan for.

Singer would say to all that, *So what?* So what if others don't step up? What if instead of one kid in the pond, there are 10, and nine adults join you around that pond, and only four others step in to save a child with you. Do you let the other five kids drown to make the point to the five adults watching that they haven't done their part, or do you get right back in the muck and swim out to save another child and another and as many as you can until you have saved them all or you yourself are exhausted and in danger of drowning? And what kind of retirement are you saving for? Could it be a little less flush when there are people dying now? And you've earned the money, but we all know that, but by the grace of God, if we'd been born in Sudan, we wouldn't be quite so flush. Even Malcolm Gladwell's new book, *Outliers*, says that when we are born and into what class are more important than *any* innate gifts we have in predicting whether we will stand out.

Singer is asking people to be honest, not about what your neighbors will say about you or even your pastor, but asking us to be honest about what we say we believe and know to be true, and then asking us to push our life hard into those commitments with our generosity, our money. Just because these poor don't come knocking at our doors doesn't excuse us from the truth that they need us, now.

Singer works the numbers. He uses the U.N. millennial goals and Jeffrey Sachs' estimate of the costs of reaching those goals as a benchmark, divides that cost by the rich nations of the world and their citizens. And the number? The cost works out to only \$200 a person.

But what if we don't want to rely on others, and what of the fact that some folks even in our nation are at the edge? Singer also creates a sliding scale that asks only *America's top 10 percent* of earners to give. His request, his sense of "enough," is a financial gift to the most needy of about 5 percent of gross income for those who earn from \$100,000 to \$148,000, and 10 percent on any money earned above that for the next \$235,000, and up it goes. This sliding scale would *alone* raise the money to meet the millennial goals and lift *500 million people from extreme poverty in the next six years!*

And if you don't like his solution, or your income leaves you out of it, he offers a few other models, like Fair Share International's "5.10.5.10," which means 5 percent of your gross income to help the disadvantaged; reducing your carbon footprint by 10 percent a year until you can do no more; 5 percent of your time helping people in your community; and taking democratic action at least 10 times a year.

I think these are all exciting ways to think about our lives and the practice of generosity, and like my friend in D.C. with his number and the challenge of spending it down, they give us clear benchmarks for whether we are living a reasonable vision of our values – for what is enough for us. Moreover, Singer and others are asking us not only to live these ideals, but to talk about them so we change the whole culture around giving – around what we have, and what we feel called to do with it and why.

In this whole question of what is enough, one scene from a movie sticks with me as deeply relevant. It is a scene that has stuck with me since the first time I saw it. For the record, I am a person who forgets much of what I see in the theater shortly after I see it – but not this.

The scene is from the movie "Schindler's List," a movie about a man, Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who makes money during World War II, actively serving the war effort with industries that provide materials for the war effort and make Schindler rich. Schindler, played by the young Liam Neeson, is a member of the Nazi Party, an incorrigible playboy and one who hires Jewish workers in the Krakow ghetto to begin his wartime industrial efforts because they can be paid less than non-Jewish Poles. In other words, he doesn't begin the movie as a man of high principles or virtue.

Over time, however, his sympathies for the Jewish workers he hires grow, as does his disgust for the Nazi Party, and this has him taking risks and incurring expenses to keep his group of workers protected under his care. By the end of the war, Schindler has relocated his factory from ever-more-murderous Krakow to Moravia, bribing officials to have his people specifically relocate with him. In that factory, Schindler is producing intentionally defective munitions and spending down his wealth to keep up appearances and feed and shelter the 1,100 Jews under his care.

Finally, one day the factory gets word that the war is over. It is a scene that I have never forgotten. It is midnight of the end of the war. At midnight the Jews are free and Schindler, now a war criminal, must go on the run. His car waits for him as he bids them goodbye with last wishes and some provisions to see them through and he prepares to leave.

The workers have melted down three teeth taken from a bridge in one of their mouths to make a parting gift for Schindler, a ring that has etched in Hebrew words from the Talmud that say, “Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.” And they have written a letter explaining what good Oskar Schindler has done in case he is caught – and all 1,100 people in the factory have signed it.

At this point in the movie, Oskar Schindler, playboy wheeler-dealer, a man who has shunned all thank-you’s and never lost his cool – even as he played against time to recall a train of his women and girls sent falsely to Auschwitz – *this* Oskar Schindler starts to lose his composure. It’s as if you watch the magnitude of what his life was about cross his face and ripple through his body. And what is surprising and painful is that he seems to feel *not* joy at all he saved and did and risked, *but heart-rending remorse and shame at what he did not do.*

“I could have done more,” he tells the Jewish factory manager who helped engineer with him this salvation of life. “I could have earned more money and not thrown away so much. You have no idea how much I threw away. I didn’t do enough,” says Oskar Schindler in this moment. “This car,” he says, pointing to his automobile. “Why did I keep it? It could have saved 10 people. This pin,” he says, ripping a gold pin from his lapel, weeping with shame and remorse. “It could have saved two people, at least one. I could have got one more person and I didn’t.” And at that point, he dissolves, bent over in sobs.

That this could be his response at the end of it all bowled me over. And absolutely made sense. If we take seriously what is out there to be saved and what little, what little of consequence it would cost us to save it, it makes sense.

We are a generous community and I want us to be a church that pushes us against the utmost standards of generosity and duty. I want us to be a high-expectation community. I want that for me. I want that for us. I want us to decide what it means to push the limits of what we believe and challenge each other to live it. No one is looking over our shoulders; this is not about control or oppression. I don’t want to see your tax returns and I don’t want you looking over my shoulder at mine. This is not the church you are afraid of. I know what that church looks like and I don’t want to be that church either. This is not the church of your nightmares. This is the church of your dreams. This is about mutual invitation to lives of greater meaning and impact.

Our job at its base is in part to take seriously one another’s opportunities to change the world and, in fact, as David Bumbaugh once charged us, to save it.

Think of all that pleasure going off in our brains when we do so. How much fun to release so much good! Think of how long we’ll live, and how many people in theory could sign a letter testifying to how we had served life and love while we had a chance.

So for now, don’t expect the regular requests at church to cease. Why in the world would they?

ⁱ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009), p. 172.