

Danville News Column
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"Angel Trees - Rethinking Charity"
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Only 85 shopping days until Christmas! After all, it is the first week of October. Are the Malls playing Christmas tunes yet? How come Mill Street isn't decorated?

Consider this a peevish pastoral pre-emptive strike. Please plan now about how to prevent selling your soul whenever you buy into this holiday nonsense. Now is the perfect time to prepare to reduce, simplify, stay away from credit cards, and otherwise tell your kids it isn't about getting as much stuff under the tree as they can. Get your holiday game plan ready.

Next, let's stretch ourselves beyond the usual hand-wringing over the perverse commercialization of Christmas. Now also is precisely when we ought to re-examine our community give-a-ways, our Angel Trees, our Community Christmases, Toys-for-Tots, and all these lovely acts of charity which, like a choir cantata, crescendo on December 24th.

Our congregation contributes to the Angel Tree. It's nice. I'm grateful how it focuses on clothes rather than toys. Through the local schools, needy families give their permission for their children to be 'adopted' by persons who wish to shop for and wrap the requested gifts. Confidentiality is maintained. We want to keep the distance between benefactor and recipient. Sometimes gift cards or grocery cards are added as a special treat. The go-between delivers the presents. Some recipients are grateful, even sending 'thank you cards,' especially those whose circumstances (job loss, disability, sickness) have fortunately made them uncomfortable becoming objects of charity. Others have been less than appreciative. "Could you meet me someplace so we could get them to you?" she asked. "No," he demanded. "Bring them to my house." When she did, he told her to dump the stuff on the floor.

Might we re-think how we do this? We have many folks around here with kind, soft, loving hearts, but we need to

be clever too. There are perils in good-will.

The Acton Institute provides a useful sketch. There are among us the destitute, the deserving poor, and paupers. The destitute require relief, civic help for dire plight. Temporary charity supports the deserving poor to help them become self-sufficient and better themselves. Paupers depend upon charity. Paupers expect to be provided.

What I'm toying with is re-inventing our Christmas charity so that the charity is temporary rather than expected, prudent rather than harmful. Let's begin by dismantling the distance between recipient and benefactor. Confidentiality breaks the moral tie between them. Let's make it personal and unsafe.

I also lean towards never giving anything for free.

Ten years traveling to Honduras has taught us how crucial it is to avoid developing a beggar society. Our Honduran friends persistently remind us to temper the impulse to give gifts. The poor then get pushed into pauperism, expecting gifts whenever the rich gringos arrive. Giving to individuals disrupt the village. Better is when our host organization uses what items we bring (tools, medicines, school supplies) to support and empower the local teacher or nurse. They also turn church halls into flea markets with the stuff we gringos leave behind. Even if they buy shoes for a few pennies, they still are buying the shoes themselves. It's not a gift; it's something they've earned. Relief invariably demoralizes. We travel to Honduras to help provide choices and chances. Why don't we do the same here? Chances and choices.

What I'm mulling over is harder, messier, and probably less rewarding for the givers. You lose the fun of being Santa Claus. But that's okay. We should help the parents be Santa. There's more dignity in that. Can we help them build, knit, bake, or sew gifts for their children as well as for each other? How much can the parents contribute toward the gifts? If they don't have the cash, can they be given the opportunity to earn the gifts by scrubbing their children's classrooms, phoning shut-ins, attending church, picking up litter at the playgrounds, or reading stories? Can they earn 'Christmas Credits' by attaining agreed upon personal goals? Would the parents be willing to go shopping with the benefactor? Certainly, the parents

should have the fun of wrapping the gifts.

What about orphans and foster children? Can we redirect some of our charitable giving to assist those who care for them?

What if the parents are unwilling? Sorry kids. Your parents aren't poor; they're paupers. But you don't have to be. The benefactor can still support the kids by donating books to their classrooms or offering memberships at the Community Center. Choices and chances.