

The Moral Test by Dan Jacoby

"The moral test of a government is how it treats those who are at the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those who are in the shadow of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped."

– Hubert H. Humphrey

As people finish their holiday shopping, and the commercial rush to the deadline fast approaches, some among us will pause for a moment to remember those who don't have the means, or the ability, to shop for gifts, and those who have nobody to shop for. We'll make some gesture, donating old clothes, or toys, or some food, or dropping a couple of coins in a bucket. A few of us will spend time during the rest of the year as well, trying to make life a little less desperate for the downtrodden.

Recently (and this may seem unrelated at first, but trust me, there is a connection), the New York state legislature released a list of "member items", the money individual legislators get to spend on almost anything they like. My own state Assembly member's list contains money for youth services, family support groups, senior centers, neighborhood cleanup, and the like. At first, one would think that these are the types of things for which member items were created. But this begs the question as to why these service groups have to go, hat in hand, to their elected representative every year begging for scraps.

Just like the homeless people who get the clothes and food we donate.

We are clearly failing the "moral test". With all the talk of "welfare reform" and "market economy", we are not even trying, as a society, to find ways to help people who weren't lucky enough to be born into the opportunities so many of us enjoy without even thinking about it. Instead, we act as though we are somehow entitled to these opportunities, whether we take advantage of them or not.

There are groups, such as churches and small nonprofit organizations, who try to make a difference. These groups are constantly scrounging for the meager resources they can get. Meanwhile, a governmental system that spends hundreds of billions of dollars every year on methods of killing (including "weapons of mass destruction") can't seem to find more than a tiny percentage of that money to "promote the general welfare".

If we shifted even one-fourth of our defense appropriation to helping people instead of killing them, we could double foreign aid, building alliances and making friends, and rendering most of those weapons unnecessary. We could use the rest of the savings to help people here gain those opportunities they either never had, or lost.

The federal government cannot spend these billions directly. The money must be funneled through the states to local governments and local groups. With modern technology, we have the means to determine where the help is needed, and for what. We also have the means to funnel the help directly to those who need it. What we lack is the moral courage to make it happen.

The next question is, where should the money go? There are a lot of areas that need funding, and that can make a huge difference. The following is only a partial list; feel free to add your own ideas:

- Youth services, both after-school and summertime, providing activities for kids who don't have parks and playgrounds readily available, such as organized athletics and arts education.
- Universal pre-kindergarten.
- Universal school breakfast and lunch programs.
- Library programs to teach research and study skills, including resources to enable them to reach out and bring people of all ages in.
- Activity centers for seniors, including two-way transportation and meal preparation for those who cannot get around on their own.
- Homeless centers that provide some privacy, as well as meals, clothing, mental health services as necessary, and connections to jobs and job training for those who are capable of working.
- Better facilities for all of the above, replacing dank, depressing, unadorned cinder-block buildings with tile floors and fluorescent lighting.

In addition to those general groups, we must provide universal, single-payer healthcare coverage. By expanding Medicare to cover all Americans and eliminating the enormous administrative costs of the current mishmash that masquerades as a "system", we can free up the resources to cover the estimated 47 million uninsured and provide better medical services. On top of that, states would be freed from spending hundreds of billions of dollars on Medicaid, opening up more money for the services listed above.

Now to answer those Scrooges who only ask, "What's in it for me?"

A comprehensive plan to help those in need is indeed casting bread upon the waters. By helping children stay active and involved, we give them the skills they need to become productive adults, increasing jobs and opportunities while cutting crime. By integrating adults into society, we expand our social and economic base. By helping our oldest members enjoy their "golden years", we set the stage for our future as we grow older.

In short, by helping others we are truly helping ourselves.

For now, give to the sidewalk Santa and donate old clothes. But let us resolve now to refocus our community's resources, at all levels. Let us come together as a national community to enhance our nation's communities.

Let us finally pass the moral test.

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