

Humanity Today

The generosity shown to the poor countries hit by the tsunamis of December 2004 is the giving of the powerful to the weak. By Allan Abraham



Phillip Collier

“We’re helping” shouts the cover of an Austrian periodical. The British press tells about the homeless man emptying his pockets in his bid to help the victims. CNN shows footage of the US military bringing relief supplies to survivors of the disaster. And governments finely calibrate their aid commitments according to public expectations. In the aftermath of the devastation brought by the tsunamis of December 2004, people and organizations responded generously to the needs of the battered regions. But, somehow, this reaching out does not have the “central-relatedness” that Erich Fromm pointed out is the defining characteristic of brotherly love.

What did Fromm mean? “Brotherly love is based on the experience that we are all one,” Fromm wrote in his *Art of Loving* of 1957. “The differences in talents, intelligence, knowledge are negligible in comparison with the identity of the human core common to all men. In order to experience this identity it is necessary to penetrate from the periphery to the core. If I perceive in another person mainly the surface, I perceive mainly the differences, that which separates us. If I penetrate to the core, I perceive our identity, the fact of our brotherhood.”

In the acts of generosity seen after news of the tsunamis became known, the central-relatedness is missing because these acts of giving are one-time acts of solidarity, brought on by an extreme catastrophe that became very visible. (That high visibility was probably due to the large number of Western tourists affected, and to the resultant media interest in the home countries of these tourists.) There are worse catastrophes happening right now that the compassionate people of the world do not see.

In Iraq, it is estimated that more than 100,000 people have lost their lives, many of these through violence; and civil society there has been destroyed, laying the foundation for untold suffering for Iraqis for years to come. What does the world do? Not only does it wash its hands of Iraq and not prosecute the perpetrators for their crimes; Americans reward George Bush with a second presidential term, and the British look set to give Tony Blair another term as prime minister when elections are held in May 2005. Where’s the solidarity with the suffering of Iraqis? Afghanistan was reduced to lawlessness 20 years ago, and continues to be lawless four years after its “liberation” by US forces and the advent of “democracy”. In Africa, Asia, South America, and many other parts of the world, millions suffer every day from poverty, hunger, a lack of clean water, and the other basic amenities of life.

But all these catastrophes have long passed out of the field of view of people in the “civilized” world. The suffering of the poor has become invisible. So, “we’re helping” might seem like brotherly love and generosity of spirit to some givers. To the recipients of the charity, it is another indication of their difference, their relative incompleteness vis-a-vis people in the richer countries. If they feel grateful, it is as supplicants who have been granted a request, not as equals, who may one day be able to repay the help.

There are several ways one can approach a discussion of how this situation has come about. Whatever the approach, the following two factors are important.

1. Some 30 years ago, a massive political

and ideological reaction against Marxism and socialism began and has since established itself as orthodoxy. This reaction effectively destroyed many valuable Marxist ideas, such as the belief that human societies could be organized on the basis of knowledge obtained through historical analysis. Today, not many people think in terms of a historical evolution towards a better world for all. This has led to worldviews in which one has no responsibility to the stranger. One now lives in a consumerist bubble, oblivious of the suffering of others.

2. For all the rhetoric of free trade, democracy, and freedom, the reality is very different. For example, on the trade front, the argument of free trade is used to open domestic markets in poor countries to the products of the rich countries. At the same time, tariffs in the rich countries keep out the produce of the poorer countries. Oxfam estimates that, in 2003, developing countries lost \$40 billion in income because of tariffs in the US and EU. On the political front, the invasion and destruction of civil life in Iraq—and the disregard for international law and humanity that it embodies—is a prime example of the neocolonial structures that underlie the way the world's political and economic systems are organized. The poorer countries are now reduced to playing supplemental economic roles to the economies of the rich countries.

What is to be done? Two things: (i) Point out the unfairness, inhumanity, and futility of the current international economic and political order to those who do not see it; (ii) Promote alternatives to the current system.

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Love Thy Neighbour

The most fundamental kind of love, which underlies all types of love, is *brotherly love*. By this I mean the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further his life... Brotherly love is love for all human beings.

– *Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving (1957)*

Love between Equals

Brotherly love is love between equals: but, indeed, even as equals we are not always 'equal'; inasmuch as we are human, we are all in need of help. Today I, tomorrow you. But this need of help does not mean that the one is helpless, the other powerful. Helplessness is a transitory condition; the ability to stand on one's own feet is the permanent and common one.

– *Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving (1957)*

Learning to Love

I think that more of our children would grow up happier and more stable if they were acquiring a conviction, all through childhood, that the most important thing that human beings can do is serve humanity in some function and to live by their ideals.

– *Benjamin Spock, Baby and Child Care (1946, rev 1968)*

The Invisible Millions

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That the poor are invisible is one of the most important things about them. They are not simply neglected and forgotten as in the old rhetoric of reform; what is much worse, they are not seen.

– *Michael Harrington, The Other America (1962)*

Help in the Long Term

The world must not let the spotlight shift away from the devastation caused by the tsunami until rich countries have done all that they can to help victims for the long term. So far they haven't made the tough choices needed to bring fundamental change.

– *Bernice Romero, Oxfam, in January 2005.*

Generous Delay

It's all very well that a freeze on debt repayments has been agreed, but countries will be hit by repayments as soon as the moratorium ends.

– *World Bank official, in January 2005.*

Per Capita Donations for Tsunami Victims

Norway: £7.06 Sweden: £6.44
 Netherlands: £4.90 Australia: £2.80
 Germany: £2.77 Saudi Arabia: £2.14
 Canada: £1.99 Austria: £1.67
 Britain: £1.65 Greece: £1.11 United States: 58p France: 43p

– *Compiled by Reuters and UN*

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agencies, from private donations in first 15 days after disaster.