

Guest column: Community needs to care for others (12.9.07)

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Guest column: Community needs to care for others

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Guest Commentary

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"Why do you care what happens to those people?" The people who have been fighting Green Bay City Hall over the treatment of the chronic homeless have heard this question from many sources. It has been asked by City Council and County Board members. It has come from friends, neighbors and coworkers. It appears in letters to the editor and on on-line forums. The question needs to be answered.

For many, unconditional compassion is a result of personal life experiences. These are people who have been lost, but now are found, people who have recovered from addictions, mental disease, or financial disaster through the unconditional compassion of someone else. They find that the only true form of thanksgiving for the compassion they have received is to share it with others.

Others believe that their faith traditions require them to act according to the very specific and clear directions that their founders and prophets have laid out for them. These messages of compassion were directed toward people who did not deserve compassion. People of faith are compelled to provide for the simple human needs of the helpless.

Still, the impulse of thanksgiving and the compulsion of faith do not apply to those who have never been needy and who do not accept a religious way of life. For these people, there is still a compelling reason for unconditional compassion, for caring for the helpless people that don't deserve and can't repay that compassion.

Over the past millennia, we have grown from small bands of hunter-gatherers to tribes of farmers to large and complex civilizations. This has been possible because we have learned to work together and live together in ever-growing groups. The glue that holds our mega-communities together is the same that held our clans and tribes together: "interdependence." We all need each other. In this country, we are falling into a new and dangerous mind-set, known as "radical individualism." This is the notion of "liberty" taken to such an extreme that it denies the existence of community. It is all privilege, no responsibility; all take and no give.

The corrosive effect that this attitude has on a community has been seen throughout history. Societies have tried to purify themselves by driving out the "undesirables," but find that the definition of "undesirable" expands in an ever-widening circle. The results have ranged from pathetic to tragic. In order to be healthy over the long term, a community must involve all of the gifts of all of its members, even those who appear at the moment to have no gifts. We are not intelligent enough or farsighted enough to judge anyone as worthless.

We sometimes mistake the intentions of the Founding Fathers in the Bill Of Rights. The granting to "We the People" of rights such as freedom of speech, religion, press and assembly was not a kind-hearted humanistic gesture. They realized that respect for the individual is necessary for a strong, free community. We need to restore our sense of compassion and community and outgrow the mean-spirited and fearful attitude of exclusion and separation that we have fallen into in the last couple of decades. Our community will be better for it, and our grandchildren will thank us for it.

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