

'Tis better to give than to receive'
Don't just give alms to the poor, give them your political support,
by Dorothy O'Connell

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Some years ago, I remember talking to a man who had been an alderman, and who was wondering why some of his constituents had not voted for him the next time he ran.

"I gave that family a turkey at Christmas," he said about one low-income family.

"But maybe they wanted you to make changes so that they could afford to buy their own turkey," I said. He did not get it.

At Christmas, everyone is ready to help the poor. Buy a kid a snowsuit. Pin a star on a tree so some poor kid gets a present. Take a poor family a basket of food.

Doesn't it make you feel good? Not if you're poor.

The people who feel good are the givers, not the receivers. And they are going to get mad if they do not end up feeling good.

I belonged to a women's organization that wanted to give away a basket one year. They asked me to find someone to whom they could give it.

I knew a woman who had recently been widowed and had six children. I phoned her and asked if she would feel okay about having a food basket delivered. She said sure, and when we arrived she invited us in and gave us coffee.

The next year when Christmas was coming around, one of the organizers hissed at me that the woman the year before had never sent a thank-you note.

When I was poor and pregnant with one of my children, another person said she could get me a new layette, but I would have to promise to write and thank the people who sent it, as they were tired of ungrateful recipients.

As if, when you are poor and pregnant and worn out, you have nothing to do but compose gracious letters thanking strangers for their charity. I declined, as I was lucky enough to have some of my other children's clothes, and I had neighbours who contributed without expecting thank-you notes.

I spoke at a women's meeting about women and poverty and I mentioned a few other examples, of people stuck with three washing machines in their basement, none of which worked, which had been "donated" to them, clothing from which all the zippers were missing, and so on. I finished with a ringing cry, "Don't give us your old clothes, give us your support!" I meant politically, of course.

After my speech, a woman came up to me and said she had some perfectly good enema equipment which she did not want to throw away and could I give her the name of someone who would appreciate it.

I just replied "I'm afraid not."

I am not advocating that you do not give to the snowsuit fund, or not put food in the food bank basket, or not drop money in the Salvation Army kettle. If that is the only way that poor children in this country can be warm and fed, then that is what we have to do. But nobody should expect to be crowned with a halo for doing that.

Every time they put something in the food basket they should be thinking, "Isn't there a better way to make sure that all families can afford to buy their own food?"

"Shouldn't the poor be able to choose for themselves what they want to eat? Shouldn't a mother be able to count on enough money to buy her children the snowsuits and boots they need? Shouldn't the poor be able to count on the dignity of earned income and not the indignity of charity?"

What we wish for ourselves, we should wish for others.

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