

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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Issue #23
January 9, 2009

Revised April 28, 2009

The Paradox of Protection

You want to help others, don't you? The problem is how to do it without inviting dependence.

By GLENN CAMPBELL

Once you give someone protection or security of any kind, they tend to adjust to it and become less inclined to help themselves. Give someone a crutch, even a gentle and well-meaning one, and they may come to lean on it instead of on their own resources—especially when the going gets tough.

I call this the Paradox of Protection. It is an inherent risk in everything you try to do for others, from raising children to solving world hunger to curing disease to falling in love.

All forms of charity run the same risk: dependency. If you give someone a gift with no strings attached, they may come to expect this privilege in the future—from you or someone else—and this expectation can sometimes be more dangerous than the original threat.

For example, if you feed the pigeons in the park, they will quickly come to rely on your largess. Their numbers will grow, and they will fail to develop other food sources. If you then stop feeding them, they may face worse starvation than if you had never intervened.

The same applies to any kind of good work, especially where the need is open-ended. Eventually, your contribution is expected and you become imprisoned in it. The person or system you are trying to help may lose its motivation to change, and the total net improvement to the world may be zero.

So the question arises: Why give anything to anybody?

Because that's just what you do. Life is made for giving, for doing something

to improve the world you live in. There isn't a lot of meaning to life otherwise. You just have to be crafty about how you go about it.

Obviously, there are cases where protection is necessary. You can't expect someone with a serious disability to climb a flight of stairs, and you can't tell a young child, "Fend for yourself," but there is always going to be a fine line between "protecting" and "enabling."

Look at how children work the system. Their helplessness increases when they know they can get something for it. They'll say, "I can't do that!" when they know you have provided for them in the past and will probably protect them now. Without pushback from you, they will always remain in a state of childish dependence.

Everyone claims to want independence, but each step in that direction is also frightening—for both the "child" and the "parent". Always, there is danger, both real and perceived, and protection usually feels more comfortable than responsibility.

No matter what the circumstances are or how powerful you may be, you cannot provide protection forever. All charity must end, and you are as responsible for the ending as you are for the beginning. You can't enter into any good work without an exit strategy. You must understand where it will ultimately lead and how you are going to get away.

If you feed a stray cat, where will its next meal come from? If you join the Peace Corp or some other noble sounding mission, what will happen to your clients when your mission ends?

Perhaps education is the solution: "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day, but if you teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." Ah, but what about the depletion of local fisheries when you teach too many people to fish? There is no system that is

immune to the potentially disastrous effects of good intentions.

The only lasting solution lies in local control. You can provide temporary protection for a specific purpose, but ultimately each person, family and nation must be responsible for its own economy. Only he can design the survival mechanism that is best for him.

It may not be a survival mechanism we approve of. If someone chooses prostitution, drug dealing or a religion we don't agree with, it is not our place to criticize it unless we are prepared to provide an entire replacement system. The most we can usually do is provide tools and boundaries.

A "tool" is an alternate survival mechanism that someone can use if they choose to. A public library is a tool. A job training program is a tool, and so is simple information provided at the right time. You can't force someone to use a tool, but sometimes its availability at the right time can make a huge difference.

A "boundary" is a limitation on another person's behavior enforced by what you yourself do. You may withdraw a privilege or exercise a right based on what the other person does, depending on what you think is wise for both your future and theirs.

Always, there must be strings attached. Even young children must not be given anything unless they pay for it. The form of payment can be tailored to their ability, but every act of charity must be paid for or it will lose its value and be taken for granted.

Charity is part of a system, like everything else in the world, and there are no isolated acts. You make it work only by understanding the system as a whole—not just what happens now, but what will happen years in the future.

—G.C.

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