



**WELCOME**

What is a  
welcome Worth?

Reflect on your experiences with people in need,  
where do you see charity or love operating?

This is a reflection from a book called Thrift Store Saints by Jane Knuth in which she reflects on her experiences volunteering for the Society in the USA.

My good friend Bess and I are discussing charitable giving over cups of tea at her kitchen table. Her small congregation of Mennonites has decided to donate thirty brand new box fans to the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

"Box fans?" I am puzzled.

"Yes," she nods. "We wanted to do something this summer to prevent child abuse."

I sip my tea and ponder for a while. Eventually I say, "I'm not really following your thinking on this."

She waves her hand through the muggy Michigan air. "Hot nights, crying babies, sleepless parents—and we didn't have a lot of money so—box fans."

"Ah."

This is not just a sign of Mennonite practicality; it also shows their faith in St. Vincent de Paul's ability to reach the people who need help the most. Bess and her husband, Will, have contributed in countless ways to the Society's work since I have been volunteering there. Why not box fans?

Bess has been good for my spiritual growing pains. She listens sympathetically when I describe the frustration of my attempts to better organize the St. Vincent de Paul group. She nods, laughs, pats my hand and gives generously to the cause. Due to support from friends like her, and from my family, I have continued volunteering despite many frustrations.

Another reason I keep going is that we have been strangely successful in recruiting new volunteers. The store is now open five days a week all year round with a different crew working each day. In addition, we visit the local Catholic high school a couple of times a year to tell our stories of battling poverty. The teenagers have become a regular source of muscles and enthusiasm. This influx of new blood has been inspiring for all of us.

Yet, invariably, new volunteers take one look around and offer to help get us organized. They have no idea how much I have laboured to get the place looking and running like an efficient organization that deserves the title "organization." Most of our newcomers voice serious doubts about trying to run a charity with nothing but constantly rotating volunteers, one phone line, fluctuating hours of operation, a leaky roof, and prayer.

I wonder about all that too.

It's not only that we've been known to sell the same couch to three different people, or that we forget to pay the sales tax to the government, or schedule too many clients for the same interview slots. All of that happens pretty regularly. The main reason I have my doubts about our competence to be running a charity is that we are so obviously flawed.

Some of us, for instance, don't like dealing with poor people.  
Some of us don't like to be addressed in any language but English.  
Some of us want nothing to do with alcoholics and drug addicts.  
Most of us are wary of recently released prisoners.  
Some of us are prejudiced.  
Some of us become openly irritable with donors who give us junk.

We have been known to argue with each other in front of the clients and to argue with the clients as well.

The cash register doesn't always balance, and neither does the chequebook.

The store shelves are in a state of perpetual flux between too much stuff crammed onto them and "throw everything into the dumpster!"

The volunteers who know how to change the light fuses, and the ones who know how to change the cash-register tape, are never the people on duty when the store goes dark and the paper receipts turn pink.

Most days it seems as if we are going about helping the poor in the most inefficient way possible, and yet it works. Every week we are paying utility shut-off notices, preventing evictions, chipping in for prescription meds, helping pay for funerals, clothing people, delivering furniture and appliances, and attempting to reintegrate former prisoners into the community.

Pondering all this over our cups of tea, I ask my friend Bess, "What does it mean to be charitable? Sometimes, in the middle of the stress of running the store and helping people with overdue bills, it feels like we are just bumbling along without a clear goal."

Bess is an organized thinker. It doesn't take long before she gives me three categories into which she splits this intrinsic Christian virtue.

"Well, first," she says, "there is the 'recycling' type of charitable work. This is when I give away something I don't want or need. For instance, when I give my old clothes to St. Vincent de Paul, it is because I don't want them anymore. I feel better giving them away than throwing them out, and there is the chance that someone else can use them."

I think about that definition and decide that a lot of what we do at St. Vinnie's is actually recycling.

"The second type of giving is what we could characterize as 'sharing,'" she continues. "For instance, we have extra money so we give thirty box fans to help people who can't buy one for themselves. When we donate money to the church, or any other charity for that matter, we've shared our resources, but we haven't impoverished ourselves to the point of suffering."

Okay . . . Sharing accounts for the rest of what we do at St. Vincent de Paul.

"And the third type of charity is like this; all I have is one box fan for myself on a very hot day, but—here, take it—it's yours."

"But," I protest, "that's like Jesus' poor woman who gave her last two pennies, or like what he said about 'the greatest love is to give up one's life for another.' We don't even come close to that at St. Vinnie's."

"Yes," she agrees, "I think true charity is very rare. And it can appear in the least likely people."

I realize that she is absolutely right about this.

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