

Taking Poverty Personally

The professionalisation of compassion

During July of this year, the *Sunday Age* trundled out that much-loved chestnut of investigative journalism – the “children in care” exposé.ⁱ Four years ago *The Age* covered the same issue, in exactly the same way.ⁱⁱ You can’t blame them. There’s so much tasty juice dripping from their stories: sexual abuse, physical assault, loneliness, exploitation, dysfunctional adults, or better, death. A *Sunday Age* research assistant asked me whether I knew of families whose children had died while in care. Best of all, this story has a villain, cold, calculating, and impervious to slander or libel – the welfare system.

That the media repeatedly ‘exposes’ the ills of the welfare system reflects the powerlessness the community feels in response to the plight of children in care. Media investigations do little to change concrete conditions, but act as an outlet for our frustration. Faced with our inability to alter the fate of children in care, we turn to escapist modes of engagement. What could be more escapist than blaming ‘the system’?

Such a response locates the onus for social and communal transformation within the welfare system, allowing us to evade the difficult questions that this issue raises.

Compassion Inc.

What are these difficult questions? They are legion, covering the causes of family abuse and neglect, child protection policy etc. These questions will continue to vex Western culture for the foreseeable future. However, the crucial issues centre around two factors that combine to professionalise compassion.

Firstly, for a large part of the twentieth century, church-based agencies have carried the burden of caring for people in need. Organisations such as Wesley Mission, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, the Salvation Army, Anglicare and MacKillop Family Services were all rooted in Christian religious traditions, from which they drew their inspiration, and from which they are now mostly autonomous. Though active compassion for the needy and vulnerable was placed in the hands of a ‘specialist’ organisation, ordinary people were still deeply

involved. Through a spirit of volunteerism and concern for the well-being of their communities, unpaid workers contributed heavily to the work of welfare agencies.

However, the second factor obliterated this involvement. The privatising zeal of the early 1990s saw most community-based welfare organisations either fold, or become aggressively professional in their fight to retain funding. The professionalisation of the welfare sector brought forth fruits, such as increased accountability, strategic planning and workers who understood poverty at a structural level.

But the benefits are massively outstripped by the negative consequences. The development of specialist agencies (in any field) naturally marginalises non-specialists. Jargon, inside knowledge, obscure processes and disdain for non-professionals discourages ordinary people from offering their talents. This may be appropriate in fields such as medicine or science. But in the field of human relations and community, ordinary people are the experts! A welfare organisation with whom I volunteered found it extremely difficult to recruit carers for their teenage foster care program. The main objection, they discovered, was a belief that one required specialist skills, inaccessible to the ordinary mortal.

In addition, we should suspect attempts to rely on specialists to resolve social strife. After all, they have a financial interest in the current arrangement – that is, the ‘need’ for welfare specialists justifies ongoing financial support of the welfare system. That is not to suggest that welfare professionals play no meaningful role, but transformation hardly flourishes in an environment sustained by money.

Compassion by Proxy

But do the roots of this problem go deeper? It does appear that the professionalisation of compassion saps the confidence of community members to intervene for the good of others. Yet, it seems just another explanation that defers to ‘higher forces’, again allowing ordinary citizens off the hook, and disempowering them by insisting on purely structural solutions. Beyond decisions taken by politicians and bureaucrats, surely the average citizen can do something, *anything* at a personal level.

Here we touch the edge of the root of the problem: that the citizenry, as a whole, does not wish to venture into the pain of our communities. We are content to sub-contract our responsibility to others through taxation, and perhaps donate

extra monies to charities, employing professionals as our proxies. This is the real 'welfare mentality' in our culture.

Until this disease is cured, any amount of structural or institutional alterations will do little good. Surely, after decades of revelations in which the failures of the welfare system have been extensively documented, we can admit that calls for institutional reform will not give vulnerable citizens what they need.

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Recommunitising welfare will not be achieved by institutional reform. True change necessitates that we get our hands dirty, that we involve ourselves in the lives of hurting people, *personally*, not simply through subsidised proxies. This approach assumes that we will also alter our lifestyle in order to facilitate such personal involvement. In the Depression era, in New York, Dorothy Day, revered Catholic social activist, took the plight of the poor personally. She realised that our responsibility cannot be deferred onto specialists; that everyone, following the doctrine of *imago Dei*ⁱⁱⁱ, is able to act for the good of others.

How are we to do this? By making deliberate, conscious choices in the dailiness of our lives to inject divine love into that portion of history which is ours alone and no-one else's.^{iv}

However, our current pursuit of material security (and attendant longer working hours) militates against altruism. By insisting on a Darwinian view of social progress, this unholy quest blinds us to the pain of others. Recommunitising welfare involves an ideological battle against this quest.

Rebuilding human community relies on trust. Notwithstanding the motivations and capabilities of individual social workers, trust will never flourish in the current welfare economy. The welfare system will remain a stunted plant, incapable of producing the fruit that hurting people yearn for. For the church-based agencies, this is an uncomfortable reminder of their founder's words when faced with the fig tree that bore no fruit – "Cut it down!"

ⁱ *The Sunday Age*: July 4 2004, p.1,6,12; July 11 2004, p.1,2,12,13; July 25 2004, p.17

ⁱⁱ *The Age*: October 20 2000, p. 3,13

ⁱⁱⁱ *Imago Dei*: the doctrine that God created humans in the image of God.

^{iv} Holben, L. (1997) *All the Way to Heaven: A Theological Reflection on Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin and The Catholic Worker*, Rose Hill Books, South Dakota, USA.