

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Peter Schwartzman

Are we giving?

This past New Year's Day, I titled a column, "2009: The Year for Giving." Now, twelve months later, it is time to look back and assess.

Clearly, the economic challenges we faced in 2009 made it difficult to give our money charitably, but one wouldn't necessarily expect people to offer less of their time. In fact, given that many people are aware of the hardship faced by members of our community, one might expect there to be more volunteerism. What does the evidence tell us?

On a national front, we were pretty generous. When it comes to bailing out banks, financial firms, and automobile companies—remember our taxes pay for these "awards"—we give and give and expect very little in return. We once again paid top dollar, via subsidies, to Big Ag (i.e., Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Monsanto, and Cargill) for their generation of insufficiently-tested, genetically-modified corn and soy. We happily pour these products (generally, in processed or meat form) down our gullets while our hearts disease and our cholesterol levels rise. With all this giving, it is a wonder that we have anything left for ourselves. And, truly, millions don't. (Just for the record, these massive "give aways" reached unprecedented levels during the last presidential administration (i.e., G.W. Bush's), so the current administration has just continued the trend—and why shouldn't it when you consider how multinational corporations and their well-compensated lobbyists manipulate Congress so effectively.)

Paradoxically, with all this giving, Congress couldn't seem to find it in its heart to give everyone affordable health care. Sure, if a health care bill passes in 2010, more people will be covered but there was so much more we, the people, asked for and so many who will still find themselves forced to choose selectively among various human needs (i.e., health care, housing, food, nutrition, warmth, etc.). Also, both President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton went to Copenhagen and delivered not much more than a smile and a wave to those in need. While most developing countries and tens of thousands of representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) clamored for major reductions in greenhouse gas emissions (something very much within reach if we weren't so wasteful and short-sighted—for ideas, check out the latest issue of YES! magazine, www.yesmagazine.org), the most powerful countries of the world colluded (and were caught) to the tune of minor reductions without specific goals or accountability. I guess we just aren't ready to "give" back and reduce our most gluttonous of ways (such as, supersized TVs, behemoth gas-guzzlers, and coal-fired electricity), so that others can merely live without the impacts of the impending climate catastrophe. Sadly, we will pay. It is just a matter of time.

On a local front, things were more fruitful. Despite being strapped economically and having unemployment levels above 11 percent in Galesburg, people are still finding ways to give. Alec Lester, a 12-year old boy from Knoxville is a prime example. He decided to turn his birthday party into a food donation effort and he used over \$300 in birthday cash to buy food for a local food pantry. Students at Carl Sandburg College and Knox College once again provided



hundreds of hours of volunteering in neighborhood schools, community centers, and retirement communities. In October, Jack Larson led Project Shoes for the fourth year in a row, resulting in the provision of new shoes for over 300 local school children. Thanks to the generous efforts of Christmas in Action of Galesburg and the local Habitat for Humanity chapter, many dilapidated dwellings were repaired or new ones built for those less fortunate. Since these efforts represent just a short list of volunteer-driven efforts, we can be very proud of the generosity that pervades our community.

On a personal front, this past year was a grand success. Fortunately, last spring, one of my students, Abby, remained adamant about continuing to hold "Action Nights" at The Center, despite rather pitiful attendance over a stretch. Well, one of those meetings in May resulted in the creation of The People in Galesburg, the organization that has now hosted the popular Town Hall Meetings and open forums (on food and city codes), as well as led to the formation of two active Action Groups—Hunger and Nurturing Neighborhoods. These community groups, composed on people from many strata of Galesburg and surrounding areas, are dedicated to the betterment of Galesburg and the region. Through intentional, dedicated, and focussed efforts, they sincerely believe that we, the people who live here, are agents of change and improvement. It will be through our efforts that we: (1) make sure everyone is fed, housed, and cared for; (2) eliminate criminal activity and its related social costs; (3) create an environment that has clean air, clean water, healthy food, and a thriving ecosystem; and, (4) nurture and build neighborhoods where people feel welcome, enriched, and safe. It will take a team to make all this happen but we believe a team is being assembled and people from all walks of life are joining in the effort and upping their commitments.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this team building manifest last week at the Holiday Dinner held at the Galesburg Community Center. Over two-hundred people came to the function. Nearly all of them ate the amazing food, collected, cooked, and served by volunteers, while others just stopped by to drop off cans and other non-perishables. In all, over 325 cans were collected as well as ~40 pounds of other food items. The bulk of these offerings were brought to the FISH pantry and Safe Harbor while some were given directly to people who are struggling right now. The thirty or so volunteers that put on this function were not only in the holiday spirit but they also were expressing a sincere love for their neighbors and humanity. From what I hear, this was just the first of such meals.

So, 2010 seems to be bright despite all the menacing, fear-inducing stories that keep broadcasting from the oversized boxes that fill our living quarters. Maybe it is better to turn off those electronic devices and become active in your neighborhood/community, wherever that may be. Giving is fun, very rewarding, and can literally be "yummy" as well.

THE OLD SCOUT

Garrison Keillor

Keep chasing the Wildebeest

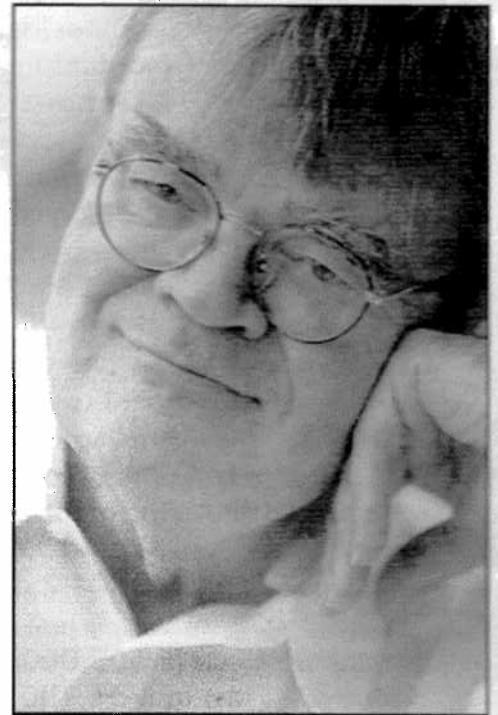
It is possible in this day and age to fly south in December and three hours later land in a city where you can sit comfortably in your T-shirt and linen jacket and eat your dinner at a café under palm trees and still enjoy the protections of the U.S. Constitution, which is a wonderful, wonderful thing. Paradise, in fact.

The problem with paradise is that it's temporary: You don't belong here and the neighbors are nobody you care to know, so it's only blissful for a week or so. You're in a city built on sandy marsh in a boom period, and when you look around at the freeway, the office parks, the malls, the curvy streets of houses, your hotel, you see nothing that predates 1980, nothing that distinguishes this city from Scottsdale or Fort Lauderdale or any other suburb in America, which is exhilarating to some people but not to you. And the people around you are all in the throes of relaxation. As we know, people are at their best when engaged in the endless heroic quest for whatever—truth, love, literary excellence, supremacy in tennis, a royal flush, the perfect salad—and relaxation makes them dull. It's true. We're hunters. Once we chase down that wildebeest and devour its hindquarters, we get suddenly stupider.

I'm sitting with wife and child at a café at a marina, and the big motor yachts parked in the water bring back the memory of long boring afternoons aboard boats. There is no boredom like that boredom, sitting in the stern of a big expensive boat as it churns through the coastal waters, watching your host, the wheel in one hairy hand and a bowlful of Scotch in the other, woofing at you about how much he loves this, meanwhile the sun is beating down, turning your brain to tomato aspic. The conversation deceased an hour ago and the cheese dip has gone bad and the jouncing of the waves is making you very queasy.

And yet—you yourself have gazed at million-dollar cruisers in boatyards, imagining the euphoria that could be yours. It's a beautiful dream and God forbid it should come true and you become just one more drunk driving a boat.

Some of the people around us at the café under the palms look like boat people. Geezer gents and their geezerettes looking a little exhausted in the company of grandchildren, tired of their incessant questions—e.g. What do we do tomorrow? Why can't we go back to Reptile World? Can I watch a movie now on my iPhone?—longing for a quiet deck chair and the muffled rumbling of the generator and the burbling of the hot tub. The grandmas sip their Campari and sodas, the grandpas sit back walrus-like, digesting their seaweed and krill, and I know I'm not going to walk over and strike up a conversation with them.



I wouldn't know how.

What we talk about up north in December is the existence of God, but I don't sense much theology here in paradise, just a large sense of entitlement. Up north, you talk about God because life is brutal when the wind blows hard on the borderline. You need a reason to keep trudging forward across the frozen tundra.


The fundamental religion of most of mankind is the faith that God has revealed Himself to us and not to the barbarians. Our tribe is the one God chose and so if we vanquish the other tribes and rain fire and destruction on them, we're only carrying out God's Will.

There is a countervailing faith that says that God is in and of the world and has bestowed vast gifts to be shared with others, and that our understanding of God is faint and incomplete and so we should walk softly and not assume too much.

When I'm up north, I naturally tend toward the warrior view, believing myself to be one of the Chosen, the select few to whom The Great Giver of Truth has vouchsafed the sacred secrets, but now, in the suburban tropics, eating blackened grouper under the Southern moon, I am sliding into hedonistic pantheism, slouching down the coast of Florida toward Key West, on a quest to make my wife and daughter happy until the money runs out and we regain our senses and head home. More certitude next week. Meanwhile, Happy 2010, dear reader. I lift a glass of sparkling water to you.

(Garrison Keillor is the author of "77 Love Sonnets," published by Common Good Books.)

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*Integrating therapeutic massage
with wellness and
nutritional programs*

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