Are we giving?

This past New Year’s Day, I titled a column, “2007: The Year of Giving.” Now, having months later, it is time to look back and assess.

Clearly, the economic challenges we faced in 2006 have not magically disappeared. But, we have a choice. We can either continue to complain that people are not charitable, or we can do something about it ourselves. We can be the change we wish to see in the world. We can help others, even if it means sacrificing our own comfort. Together, we can make a difference.

On a national front, we were pretty generous. When it comes to balloting our banks, financial firms, and automobile companies, we are pretty good. We are proud of our contributions to charity, and we should be. But, let’s face it, we still have a long way to go.

The reasons are many. Some of us are not in a position to give what we’d like. Others are simply not aware of the many opportunities to do so. But, at the heart of it all, we must ask ourselves: Are we truly giving of ourselves? Are we truly giving of our time?

The answers are simple. We must give more, and we must give with our hearts. We must give with compassion, with empathy, with love. We must give with a sense of purpose, a sense of mission. We must give with a sense of urgency.

The Old Scout

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 a shirt-and-tie and eat your dinner at a café under protective roofs and in safety and in the protections of the U.S. Constitution, which is a wonderful, wonderful thing. Paradise, indeed.

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 the moment. 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 it’s no good to you. And the people around you are all in the throes of relaxation. As we know, people are at their best when they chase 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 the wildebeest and devour its hindquarters, we suddenly stop hunting.

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 stem of a big expensive boat as it chugs 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 decays an hour ago and the cheese dip has gone bad and the jouncing of the waves is making you very grumpy. 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 boatpeople. Geezer gents and their geezerettes looking 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 bubbling of the hot tub. The grandmas sip their Camu Camu and look at the view, the kids back wallrus-like, digesting their seaweed and kill, 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 treading 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 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’s significance is 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, sloshing 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 “?? Love Sanning,” published by Common Good Books.)

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