

# On dignity, love, and philanthropy.

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*Input presented by Graham to the panel on “Faith communities, philanthropy and social change: A giant awakes?” at the African Grant Makers Network’s “Growing African Philanthropy” event.*

## ***The burn of a 'false generosity'***

In John Steinbeck's seminal novel of the Great Depression, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), a character called Annie Littlefield says:

If a body's ever took charity, it makes a burn that don't come out. ... [I]f you ever took it, you don't forget it... I did, ... Las' winter; an' we was a starvin'—me an' Pa an' the little fellas. An' it was a-rainin'. Fella tol' us to go to the Salvation Army." Her eyes grew fierce. "We was hungry — they made us crawl for our dinner. They took our dignity. They — I hate 'em!" ... Her voice was fierce and hoarse. "I hate 'em," she said. "I ain't never seen my man beat before, but them — them Salvation Army done it to 'im.

'They took our dignity'. It is not about what they gave, but more deeply about what they took – they took our dignity. Is it about how they gave, their stipulations, their intentions, the amount, the frequency, the conditionalities? Maybe – but more profoundly, it is about what they took – they took our dignity, and my man was beat. There is no awakening giant here – just a man beaten and Annie Littlefield.

Beyond Annie Littlefield and her man does this resonate? We hear so much from the resourced giver, the subject, but what of the targeted receiver, the object? We are grateful to Paulo Freire who, once again, helps us to see this in a systemic way and provides language that captures the harshness of it:

Any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their 'generosity', the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this 'generosity', which is nourished by death, despair and poverty. (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, chapter 1.<sup>1</sup>)

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1 We are grateful to Anne Harley, of the Centre for Adult Education (UKZN), for pointing us to this reference.

This is harsh language that names this 'false generosity', but a generosity that is the common experience, a generosity that 'makes a burn that don't come out'. We have professionalised this generosity / philanthropy, and made it our business to be the subjects that set the trends, the methodologies, the indicators; and we have provided the labels for our objects (OVC's, beneficiaries) so that we / they are clear about their place in the world-as-it-is. We have become much more organised in taking people's dignity.

This cannot be the generosity, the charity, the philanthropy, that faith communities – or any community – can be aligned with. A generosity and social order which is nourished by death, despair and poverty. We cannot enact a generosity that perpetuates the injustice to which it is responding. There is no place for a philanthropy that uses the means of an unjust system and practice (a system of death, despair and poverty) to ameliorate the effects of that system, in the name of some greater end – it just leaves a lot of beaten people.

### ***The possibility of a 'true generosity'***

If this is Freire's 'false generosity', is there the possibility of a 'true generosity'? Maybe the possibility sits - not in the shifting or repackaging or remodelling of that which is given – but in the reclaiming of that which was taken. Annie Littlefield cries: “They took our dignity”. Dignity! Maybe that is our starting point. Reclaiming dignity as the basis of our generosity, our philanthropy – of our practice of freedom. Enacting a politics of dignity, now.

John Holloway provides some helpful insights into the nature of this practice of dignity in a world that strips us of our humanity:

Dignity is the immediate affirmation of negated subjectivity, the assertion, against a world that treats us as objects and denies our capacity to determine our own lives, that we are subjects capable and worthy of deciding for ourselves.

Dignity in this sense means not only the assertion of our own dignity but also implies the recognition of the dignity of others.

The 'other politics' [politics of dignity] means treating ourselves and others as doers, as subjects rather than objects, and finding appropriate forms of organisation to express this. In a world that constantly negates our dignity, this inevitably means a process of ever-renewed exploration and creation of organisational forms.”

Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, pg 39.

Within such a politics / practice, acting out of this true generosity, justice is established when the logic of dignity / egalitarianism triumphs over the logic of the state / the world-as-it-is. The logic of egalitarianism need not and should not be something we aim for – it's something we can and must **do** now, immediately, practically. Although religions have been used (again and again!) to justify injustice and inequality, it is also at least true that there is no great faith tradition that cannot justify enacting the logic of egalitarianism.

But philanthropy assumes exactly the opposite. It takes the inequality of the world-as-it-is (i.e., the logic of the state) as given, and claims that social justice will come some time in the future, after social change. And of course, it puts the power of agency in the hands of those with resources (the givers are the ones doing – the poor are reduced to objects of charity, philanthropy). That's simply never going to be the beginning of anything to do with actual justice - it simply and unavoidably reinscribes the conditions of injustice, it takes our dignity.

## ***The Love of People***

It will be useful to return to Paulo Freire, as he was the one who gave us the problem of this 'false generosity'. Freire looks to the weakness of Annie Littlefield for hope and asserts:

“only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both [the oppressed and the oppressor]. ..... True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity, false charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the 'rejects of life', to extend their trembling hands”.

*(Pedagogy of the oppressed, Ch 1.)*

This 'true generosity' takes us to the root of the word “philanthropy” - the love of people; a love that fights to destroy the causes of death, poverty, dehumanising wealth; a love that longs to make poverty impossible. You cannot have a 'love-of-the-people-philanthropy' – not a corporate philanthropy, not a socially responsible philanthropy, not a faith community philanthropy – without having dignity as the basis of our practice;

- a philanthropy of doers - subjects not objects;
- a philanthropy that explores and creates organisational forms that express and affirm our dignity;
- a philanthropy that abandons assumptions that it is the agency of the powerful that matters;
- a philanthropy that is based in the hands and minds of people who have nothing, the power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed.

Is this a giant awakening? I sincerely hope not, for any giant – and particularly a religious giant – awakening could easily be our worst nightmare. We in this country and continent have been there before.

But it may be the emerging of some cracks, some spaces and moments in which we assert a different type of doing; cracks where we walk in the opposite direction; cracks which are explorations in our politics of dignity (with thanks to Holloway).