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MFC Sermon

Intentional Social Debt

In late 1948, as the Peoples' Liberation Army approached the small town in South China, the one remaining expatriate prepared to evacuate. He had spent years in the small town, even remaining there when the Japanese had occupied the country. His wife had died there, his children had grown up there when not in school. Now he had been convinced that he had to leave, if only for a while until things settled down. As the members of his church hustled him to a pick up point, he talked with friends and congregants. Almost with a sense of exasperation he said. "I have lived here almost my entire adult life. I eat your food. I speak your language. However, I have never been considered one of you." After a brief pause, one of the elders replied, "But Pastor, you have no social debt."

I will briefly touch on four points:

1. The meaning of social debt
2. Traditional understanding of the role of gifts in creating relationships based on reciprocity
3. A revised understanding of the role of gifts in creating relationships based on creating moral ties between givers and receivers
4. Specific strategies for increasing social debt

The term social debt is currently used in two very different ways. The first refers to what one group of people owes another group of people for wrongs that have been committed against them. The best example of this is the "social debt" owed to black Africans who were forcefully taken from their home as slaves. The second type of social debt is what an individual owes another based on something they have received for which there is no expectation of a direct repayment. This is the type of social debt I am talking about. A person incurs social debt by receiving a gift. However we do not have to wait for someone to give us something, but have the ability to intentionally facilitate the receipt of something that incurs social debt.

Social debt is foundational to community, also call solidarity. Creating community is one of our principles as UUs but strategies for creating community are not something that have received as much attention as some of our other principles.

There is overwhelming scholarship on the role of gift giving and receiving gifts in creating and maintaining social ties. Gifts are exchanged between people having a certain type of relationship. It is the concrete gift that creates the abstract sense of community.

Much of the traditional understanding of the role of gifts in creating solidarity is based on Mauss's (not AW's) classical work *The Gift*, first published in 1923. In *The Gift*, Mauss argued that gifts are never "free." Rather, human history teaches that gifts give rise to reciprocal exchange. For Mauss there were three parts of the exchange. (1) giving, the initial step for the creation and maintenance of social relationships; (2) receiving, since to refuse to receive is to reject the social bond; and (3) reciprocating, in order to demonstrate one's own honor and wealth. The question for Mauss was: "What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?" According to Mauss, the answer is simple: the gift is imbued with "spiritual mechanisms." The giver does not merely give an object but also part of herself, for the object is tied to the giver. Because of this bond between giver and gift, the act of

giving creates an obligation to reciprocate. To not reciprocate is bad. In Polynesia, failure to reciprocate means to lose mana, one's spiritual source of authority and wealth.

The Dutch sociologist Komter provided a revised understanding of the role of gift exchanges that is especially relevant to social debt. Komter accepted as a beginning point Mauss's ideas that reciprocity is the underlying rule of gift giving. She then expanded on his ideas by arguing that the function of the gift is not just to create a reciprocal relationship, but to create a moral tie between giver and recipient. According to Komter Gifts make people feel morally bound to one another.

While almost anything can serve as a gift, certain types of gifts are more likely to create social debt. As noted by Komter, it is not so much the content of the gift but its spirit that counts. Not the object itself, but the motives and feeling of the giver determine its impact on the recipient. The material aspect of a gift is subordinate to the motives of the giver. The motives of the receiver can be even more important than the motives of the giver in creating social debt.

Gifts can be material as well as nonmaterial. Examples of non-material gifts include working as a volunteer and providing care or help to others. According to Komter the types of exchanges that are especially good at creating creating solidarity include personal items, money where there is no expectation of return, and the non-material gifts of personal care and time. The more familiar one is with the recipient of the gift, the more social bond the gift creates.

Mary Douglas provided a great summary of the role of a gift. "A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction."

A major problem with relating the strengthening of solidarity to the creation of social debt through an exchange of gifts is that American culture generally considers debt as bad. Debt has been called a substitute for the chain and whip of the slave driver. Benjamin Franklin argued it is better to go to bed supperless than rise in debt and our own Ralph Waldo Emerson argued that A man in debt is a slave.

Yet, there is one situation where we encourage people to create debt, even when there is not an immediate need for the credit. Young people are often encouraged get a credit card in their own name or to buy something on credit. The argument is that unless a person has a credit history, they will not be considered credit worth and thus will not be able to get credit when they need it. This same concept can be applied to the need to develop a habit of social debt.

According to Cathryn Bond Doyle, when we graciously receive something from someone, were giving that person the opportunity to truly express themselves. By our acceptance we are acknowledging the gift-givers value. We are expressing, with our actions and words, You matter to me.

Cathryn Bond Doyle observations about why it is so difficult for many of us to graciously receive is especially relevant to learning to incur social debt.

She noted we are taught, it is better to give than to receive. And that this phrase gives us the impression that receiving is somehow selfish and not a good thing .

If someone gives us something and we have nothing for them in return and believe we should, we may feel guilty.

Receiving can carry the connotation of neediness and/or weakness and that may trigger our pride which makes receiving from others feel like we've failed in some way.

Cathryn Bond Doyle concluded that it takes effort, energy, and attention to be a good Receiver and that receiving graciously is a skill and a social grace that may be unrecognized, unfamiliar, and therefore uncomfortable for many of us.

I argue it is time to change the slogan "it is better to give than to receive" to a new slogan "there are times when it is as important to receive as it is to give."

While being able to graciously receive is absolutely necessary for creating debt, there are two additional factors that facilitate the intentional creation of social debt. First, we must become comfortable asking for favors, especially for the care and time of others when we need it. Second, we need to recognize that there is overwhelming evidence that those who give the most, receive the most.

I would like to close with two short observations. First, after I introduced the concept of intentional social debt to a colleague, she approached me to request a favor and premised her request by stating that she had been encouraged to ask the favor because she recognized the value of creating social debt. Second, I want to return to the underlying sadness is the comment of the villager that because of the Pastor's lack of social debt the Pastor could never be one of them. The challenge seems to be to embrace both the giving and receiving of gifts as the cement of social relationships and as something within our ability to improve.