

DOING GOOD THAT IS GOOD!

The following is a summary and excerpts of a book written by Dr. Robert Lupton entitled *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt those They Help (And How to Reverse it)*

Many who have written about dependency issues have focused outside North America. However, Dr. Robert Lupton, author of *Toxic Charity*¹ and *Charity Detox*² (as well as numerous other books on unhealthy dependency), is an exception. He has picked up three words from the Hippocratic Oath and applied them to effective work among the poor: Do No Harm!

Dr. Lupton is among the few on the American scene who have grappled with the best ways to transform inner city neighborhoods. This he did by immersing himself and his family into the culture of an Atlanta, Georgia neighborhood. Because he lived among those he was trying to help, it helped diminish the usual “us” and “them” mentality that is often characteristic of our attempts to help alleviate poverty. Becoming insiders helped him and his family to see firsthand the effects of “outside charity” on a local community. This led to many pivotal experiences for him. In one incident described in *Toxic Charity*, Dr. Lupton tells about an incident of sitting with a family in their freshly cleaned living room, decorated for Christmas, as the children waited excitedly for “Santa’s helpers” to arrive. These are his words:

“When the knock finally came on their front door, their mom greeted the visitors - a well-dressed family with young children - and invited them to step inside. A nervous smile concealed her embarrassment as she graciously accepted armfuls

of neatly wrapped gifts. In the commotion, no one noticed that the father had quietly slipped out of the room [leaving] no one but their mom.

Not until the guests were gone and the children had torn through the wrappings to the treasures inside did one of the little ones ask where their father was. No one questioned the mother’s response that he had gone to the store. But after organizing these kinds of Christmas charity events for years, I was witnessing a side I had never noticed before: how a father is emasculated in his own home in front of his wife and children for not being able to provide presents for his family, his wife is forced to shield her children from their father’s embarrassment, how children get the message that the ‘good stuff’ comes from rich people out there and it is free.”³

From this time onward, Dr. Lupton decided that there was something wrong with that kind of charity! Over the years, he worked to transition food pantries into food co-ops where local people had ownership of the operation and could buy \$30 worth of food for \$3. Church clothing rooms became thrift stores where local people could not only buy clothing and other necessities at bargain prices, but these stores actually employed people from the neighborhood. As would-be helpers in surrounding churches learned how to listen, they began to discover that these “downtrodden” neighborhoods had some of their own resources that needed to be located and mobilized: an entrepreneurial

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spirit, wisdom, churches that ministered at the local level and educators who cared. Several questions came out of this:

1. How does one build on what is already there in the community?
2. How does one bring hope where there has been hopelessness?
3. Are there ways that outside resources, carefully used, could help build up the dignity of a local community rather than strip away what little that was left?

Some of the principles Dr. Lupton discovered are good for inner-city ministry in the USA, as well as rural and urban development (or church planting) in overseas settings. Each of these are designed to protect everyone's dignity, foster a local community's spirit and productivity, and replace hopelessness with hope for the future. Quoting from *Toxic Charity*.⁴

- *Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves.*
- *Limit one-way giving to emergency situations. (Allow the receivers the dignity of giving something from their own resources.)*
- *Strive to empower the poor through employment, lending and investing, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements.*
- *Subordinate self-interests to the ends of those being served. (Beware of short-term mission trips that concentrate on the fulfillment of those who go while no one examines what happens to the receivers of "charity.")*
- ***Listen closely** to those you seek to help, even to what is not being said - unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective care.*

- *Above all, **do no harm.***

Being generous definitely blesses the one who gives, but sometimes our one-way giving prevents the receiving community from realizing this blessing for themselves. Each time this happens, the sparks of dignity, creativity and community spirit - that God wants all of His children to experience - are slowly extinguished. Without realizing it, this can begin to form the slippery slope to dependency. Dr. Lupton spells these out clearly this downward slope: *Give once and you elicit appreciation. Give twice and you create anticipation. Give three times and you create expectation. Give four times and it becomes entitlement. Give five times and you establish dependency.*⁵

Bringing transformation to hurting people in needy communities is best accomplished by concentrated effort at the local level over an extended period of time. It is best to do this one community at a time, not spreading ourselves too thin. The pride and joy shining forth in such transformed communities makes it all worthwhile!

Books by Dr. Lupton are highly recommended for those interested in learning about the mobilization of local resources.

This summary was prepared by Verna O. Schwartz, former Administrative Secretary, World Mission Associates



⁴ Harper One, 2015, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)*

⁵ Harper One, 2011, *Charity Detox: What Charity Would Look Like If We Cared About Results*

⁶ *Toxic Charity*, p. 32-33

⁷ p. 128-129

⁸ P. 130