

When Helping Doesn't Help

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The words "storage room" were much too generous a term. It was a dust-piled, dirt-shrouded mass of shelves and rodent-attacked cardboard boxes and bins.

Our job was to sort the hundreds of bottles in those boxes...to cull the pills and liquids and organize them into manageable stacks that the workers in this small Guatemalan building could use.

There were pills for dogs. Tinctures from veterinary offices. Large, chalky tablets that would choke a full-grown adult.

But this was a malnutrition center for babies.

To add insult to the already-overflowing pile of useless items, the great majority of the medicines were completely expired, vastly outdated. Something a U.S. parent would never, ever risk giving to her infant or young, sick child.

Yet that's how people helped: In ways that didn't actually help.

In another village nearby, teams of generous volunteers donated water filters in places where children's bodies were so wracked by waterborne illnesses that they were vomiting and defecating worms from their tiny frames. These filters would, quite literally, save lives. Yet in the rush to disperse the gifts, no instructions were given on how to use those filters and so, months later, when other teams visited the village, life-saving filtration systems had been turned into upside-down storage vessels to hold dry goods. Or planters to grow some herbs.



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In the closets and classrooms of a local Guatemalan church building, volunteers spent hours hand-sorting tangled masses of clothing, pieces donated to the poor of our town. Nearly two-thirds of these stained, unwashed, often-disintegrating items were ones you or I would never consider wearing. They would have been cast aside or cut into rags to wipe down our toilets.

They should have been. Sending them was, instead of useful, another burden. Now precious volunteer time and building space were wasted on what was no better than trash.

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There were gifts of livestock to families who had no means of feeding and caring for such animals. There were stacks of children's DVDs. In English. To children who spoke two other languages fluently. And while the intent was love, the receivers felt only burdened with a new problem.

As citizens of a generous nation, we can often skew toward a particular mindset: Across our nation's history, we have a tradition of being the fixers, the doers, the pioneers who fearlessly blast through geographical boundaries, who are among the first lining up to give our time and our aid to the least of these.

But sometimes our helping does not help. In recent days, as immigrants and refugees have faced shattering blow upon blow, we have rushed to help. And we should. It is not a time to sit. It is not a time for inaction. Yet as we move forward, let us ask ourselves these questions: What do our refugee friends and neighbors really need? Have we bothered to ask them? Have we decided we know best for them? Have we looked for the organizations within their own communities? Have we, instead of choosing what we in our great United States ingenuity decide is best, asked the frightened ones what they really need?

Recently, many are pointing our eyes back in history, reminding us of the ways we can learn from past horrors. In our little efforts in the villages in Guatemala, during our short years there, we slowly and often awkwardly, and with the great patience of our local friends and citizens, had to learn as well. We had to learn to be humble, to be listeners more than Master Plan Writers, to slow down and hear our needy friends instead of blasting down their fragile doors with our oh-so-privileged ideas of what they needed. And as we listened, the children began to receive the life-saving medicines crafted just for their sizes. The water filtration teams learned to spend hours with the communities, to teach each person exactly how to use the system that could bring a family back to health. The volunteers learned what kind of clothing was needed or, better yet, took the mother of the family shopping in the local markets for what her family required. Because the mamas always know best. Start with the mamas.

Let's be unafraid in these days of fear: Unafraid to admit what we don't know. Unafraid to be learners. Unafraid to be listeners. Unafraid to fall into step behind those already leading their marginalized, hurting communities so well. Because we don't know. But we can learn and, in that learning, truly, beautifully help.

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