

Charity or Solidarity?

David Charles

June 24, 2015

On my first day here, an Afghan bluntly asked, "Who pays your wages?" I replied that I was not being paid at all. He stared at me in disbelief. "Why are you here, then?"

A tall, thin man spots us and veers towards my companion, his fingers pressed together in supplication. "Madame – ticket, ticket, ticket!"

"I don't have any tickets with me today. No tickets, no tickets!"

The man turns away, not so much disappointed as empty.

"Why are they asking you for tickets?" I ask my companion, who volunteers for a wonderful French charity.

"I am the one who holds the tickets," she replies. "They can exchange tickets for shoes, jackets, such things."

The incident, although brief, shook me. This man had treated her like a vending machine, not a fellow human. It made me wonder at the difference between charity and solidarity, and how those differences inevitably affect the way we behave toward one another.

During my stay at the migrant camp in Calais, I have been treated with great respect, kindness and generosity. My home for the week was a small hut, built from wooden pallets and sheets of plastic, recycled from advertising banners. The migrants call this hovel a "hotel". It might sound like a humble kind of a shelter, but if hotels were classified by the gentleness of their neighbours, this one would be awarded five stars out of five.

I have been teaching English in the camp, mostly to Sudanese who have escaped the genocide in Darfur. On my first day here, an Afghan somewhat bluntly asked me, "Who pays your wages?" I replied that I was not being paid at all. He stared at me in disbelief. "Why are you here, then?"

It's a reasonable question. I am here motivated by a desire to show solidarity with the migrants, to show that not everyone in Europe sees them as animals and to share what I can with them as they transition from bleak past to hopeful future. I am certainly not motivated by wages, but neither am I motivated by ideas of charity.

Charity is something you dispense to those less fortunate than yourself. It is founded on a fundamental assumption that there are those who are above and those who are below. Charity can even be used as a weapon, to prise people apart. Think how you would feel if someone you considered a peer tucked a twenty pound note into your pocket, saying, "I can see things are hard for you, go and buy yourself a nice clean shirt."

I bet you'd throw their money back in their face and never speak to them again! How quickly a gift can turn into something patronising and divisive.

I am not, absolutely not, questioning the motives of the humble and hard-working charity volunteers in Calais. They do great work and have achieved some notable victories against the French government for migrant welfare.

But charity as a concept is difficult to love and, in my experience, promotes inhumane treatment in both directions. Charities may treat the communities they serve as "clients", while those "clients" may treat charities as vending machines.

So what is the distinction between solidarity and charity? How can you tell one from the other? Is there such a distinction?

To be honest, I'm not sure. There are no black and white answers to these questions. But there are two aspects of my stay here that I feel are significant.

Firstly, by living and sleeping in the camp, I am a part of the group – albeit a temporary and highly privileged part. In contrast, all the charity workers in Calais live off-site, forcing a separation between the volunteers and the group they hope to serve.

That separation encourages a “them” and “us” mentality, no matter how well-meaning the volunteer. This separation is further riven by the branded tabards that the charity workers wear, marking themselves out in uniform as “not one of you”. I come to Calais as an individual, not as part of an organisation.

Secondly, the nature of teaching is itself one of solidarity. There is no well of English that I can scoop out in buckets and hand out like water. The English language can never be passed down like charity; it must be shared in solidarity. As a teacher, my job must be to share my knowledge, not give hand outs.

The distinction comes down to how you behave and what you offer. I feel like these two differences alone affect the way that I am treated in the camp. As I walk around, going nowhere, I am greeted with happy shouts of “Teacher, teacher!”, not “Ticket, ticket!”.

The Ted K Archive

David Charles
Charity or Solidarity?
June 24, 2015

David Charles

www.thetedkarchive.com