

# Tales of a Bleeding Heart

*How much change will my money buy?*

FOR NEARLY TWO DECADES, I HAVE been living with a delicate coronary condition, which editorial writers in the sixties diagnosed as a "Bleeding Heart." The primary symptom, an unstoppable craving for compassion, prompts sufferers to lobby, organize, campaign—even to "whine," as the nonafflicted often call our repeated entreaties for money. Years ago we Bleeding Hearts had the ear of Congress, but no more. Today we are damned for "fiscal irresponsibility" and the "national debt." Congress is now listening to the complaints of another group of whiners who think exclusively with their heads—the "Bleeding Ulcers," we might call them.

Since the political climate has become so hostile to my group, I take precautions: I exercise daily, take lots of aspirin, and resolve to read the newspaper without dwelling too long on the meaning of life. But once a month I deliberately aggravate my condition, when I empty the basket of mail on my desk and attempt to pay my bills.

Last month, amid the usual notices from the gas and telephone companies, I received: a pledge card from the Cathryn

Adamsky Women in Need Fund; an invitation to a \$250-a-plate dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria for a girls' scholarship fund; a solicitation from Greenwich Hospital; a request from Planned Parenthood; catalogs from New Society Publishers and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF); and a letter from a longtime acquaintance addressed in familiar fundraiseresque: "Dear Friend..."

I would prefer to face complex social problems collectively, through my taxes, as part of a nation of Bleeding Hearts. Solving them individually, through a private donation here or a volunteer hour there, is a long and lonely business. With the equivalent of Virginia Woolf's Three Guineas to prevent war, stop poverty, and solve discrimination, I must commit triage on the passionate cases arriving in my mailbox. I try to proceed logically, coolly, because when objectivity fails—as mine did last month—it can be publicly embarrassing.

After paying the "Fixed Expenses" of rent, food, and clothing—my defense budget, so to speak—my checkbook reflected a balance pitifully short of one plate dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria. Set-

ting aside two expenses for my son's birthday gift and my own badly needed haircut, I turned to the "Unfixed Expenses," the issues not remotely under control yet. Change takes time, as the cultural cliché suggests, but even more pointedly, change takes money. How much social change will my guineas buy?

In light of that question, the Women in Need Fund was a poor candidate for a donation. The fund began when a group of Bleeding Hearts in Indiana passed the hat at a Happy Hour one afternoon, after one of them read a newspaper story about an old woman whose heat had been shut off. Temperatures were still freezing the following month and the 70-year-old woman, who had worked as a domestic without benefits all her life, was still poor. The Women in Need Happy Hours, like prolonged Irish wakes, became a monthly tradition.

Sending a guinea to Indiana would surely lead to another request next month, as the "feminization of poverty" claims more victims. Logically, it made more sense to donate toward a young girl's scholarship—buying the education and accrued benefits that would spare her the fate of a poor domestic. But logic lost the first debate.

Four years ago, when I was in the hospital battling a serious illness, I received an unsolicited check from the Women in Need Fund. The organizers believed that women do not survive by bread alone, nor heat nor clothes nor shelter—they need "a long rest" periodically, and I was instructed to buy a month's worth. The right to "rest," a revolutionary welfare concept, is the kind of vigilante compassion I admire. I sent a guinea to Indiana, and my regrets to the Waldorf-Astoria.

For the next three hours, I practiced the "tough love" advocated for these mean times. The request from Planned Parenthood had to be weighed against Greenwich Hospital's, which boasted the tremendous success of its premie unit. "Today an infant born at Greenwich Hospital, weighing two pounds, has a 95 percent chance of survival and the outlook for leading a normal, healthy life is excellent."

My son, whose thirteenth birthday was



imminent, had been a premature infant. In 1975, it cost almost \$7,000 to save his life. But while there is a broad base of support for beautiful, tiny babies, Planned Parenthood and abortion have far less. We call ourselves "pro-choice," but in fact the choices are limited. The Women in Need Fund has paid for many abortions, but it has never had the money for a poor woman's \$7,000 baby. Nevertheless, one choice is better than none, so I sent the second guinea to Planned Parenthood. It would provide a fraction of the education I couldn't afford through the scholarship fund; a young girl has a better chance of getting to college if she doesn't have to become a mother at age 14.

With only one guinea left, the triage became more brutal. I had to choose either my son's birthday gift, my haircut, or the request from my longtime acquaintance, whose children used to attend the same school as mine. Several months ago, he'd collected funds for materials to build a clinic in Nicaragua for women and children. Those acquired, he now asked for transportation and living expenses for himself and his oldest son, whose volunteer labor would help build the clinic.

I will probably never see the women and children of Nicaragua, their faces not being as directly in my line of vision as my son's. He is a boy who has enjoyed 12 years of material gifts for his birthdays, a pattern he has no wish to change. But he is also a boy who has "a 95 percent chance of leading a normal, healthy life," a statistic not remotely true of the children of Nicaragua.

For his thirteenth birthday, I composed a letter describing the share I bought him in the clinic his former schoolmate will help build. Then, because "deficit spending" doesn't affect me as perversely as it does the Bleeding Ulcers, I used my Visa card to buy him a manual for organizing antinuke rallies from New Society Publishers and a sweatshirt with Picasso's dove from the WILPF catalog. Essentially, I gave my son the accoutrements of a bleeding heart for his birthday.

The haircut issue I solved myself, discovering in the process why there are such things as Schools of Cosmetology. I got what I paid for.

"You've gone punk!" a friend said, failing to disguise her chagrin at my lopsided appearance that night. "What happened to your hair?"

"I sent it to Nicaragua," I replied.

"What?" she asked.

"Never mind," I said, avoiding the long explanation of triage of my bills. It was a deeply humbling month, but hair does grow back. A clinic, on the other hand, has never built itself. ♦

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No address

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