Tithing Myself

written by Holly
October 25, 2003
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I was raised Christian. The religion didn't stick, but a lot of the philosophy did: I believe that my purpose in life is to leave my corner of the world a better place than I found it; that I must treat others the way I wish to be treated; that the virtues which are worthy of my aspiration are faith, hope, charity, fortitude, justice, temperance, prudence, and the greatest of the virtues, love. I believe firmly that one person can make a difference, and that the way to make that difference is to live my beliefs. I believe in the husbandry of talents – in the admonition to take what I have been given and use it to the best of my ability and for good purposes. And I believe that I have a duty to tithe.

Being human, I fail more often than I succeed. And being non-Christian, I have no obvious method by which to tithe. Tithing, for those of you not raised Christian, is giving ten percent of what you have back to God. The usual form that tithing takes is money – Christians can give ten percent of their income to their church and be done with it. I won't donate to churches, though, and distrust the way that charities use the money they get; I'm still seething about the Red Cross's misuse of the millions upon millions of dollars that it received for the families of the Sept. 11th victims, and am endlessly disgusted by the revelations of charities paying for big corporate salaries and glossy advertising out of the money they receive from people who give it to them in trust and hope that they will use it well.

I've ended up being creative about my tithe. I took the admonition I received from Mercedes Lackey to "pay forward" and created this site and the Forward Motion community,

passing on to those who have benefitted from either the request that they also pay forward. Some of my tithe was in the form of money – the money to run the site through its first years, cash donations to site members in trouble, buying new software that gave members more ways to learn and share what they had learned. Most of my tithe has been in time, though. Time is the most valuable thing any of us have, because it is irreplaceble and finite. I've used my time to write articles, teach classes, develop the community and participate in it, and offer the mistakes I've made as examples so that others can bypass those mistakes (to make brand-new, exciting mistakes of their own, which is always painful, but which is at least better than endlessly reinventing being run over by the wheel.)

I've tithed writing for a couple of reasons. Writing is what I'm best at – it's my 'talent' in the Biblical parable sense, the thing that I have been able to make grow and bear fruit. So I have faith that if I was given that talent, it is a worthwhile and honorable talent to have. And that if it is worthwhile and honorable for me, it will be the same for others. I believe that helping others learn to make the most of their writing talent is therefore a worthwhile use of my life and my time and that by doing so, I am making the corner of the world that I am most suited to affect better.

This is a hard essay to write, because it's more personal than I generally care to be. I don't talk about what I believe much, considering faith to be a private matter better off left between me and God, and not something that is to be trotted out at every turn and waved like a flag. I expect a certain amount of derision for this statement of faith, such as it is. Statements of faith are pretty unpopular right at the moment. But in a society that more and more encourages throwing money at all the world's problems instead of finding creative ways to solve them, and that does everything it can to hide the fact that money so thrown is rarely used well, it seems to me

that the non-religious tithe of one’s talent and time can become a form of quiet activism, a way of taking on a single problem and taking personal responsibilty for the process of solving it. Not all problems are huge. Not all of us have what it takes to fight the big injustices, the big crimes, the big battles. My little thing here isn’t going to save the world, and I know that, and acknowledged to myself some time back that – great dreams aside – I wasn’t designed for world-saving. I don’t have the talents or the drive to be good at that. But all of us are very good at something, and anything done well and with love and the goal of making things better is a step in the right direction.

If you are someone who has despaired at the state of the world and wondered how you might make a difference, I thought I could offer a personal tithe as a possible alternative to being a wealthy philanthropist, or a full-time crusader. Or endlessly sending off checks to places that aren’t accountable to you and don’t want to be. And I figured if I suggested it, you deserved to know where I was coming from, and what I’ve done to put my money, and my life, where **my** mouth is.

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