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A time to grow, a time to give

Which groups need money especially from you, a member of the gay and lesbian community? Maybe someday there will be a United Gay Way, but until then don't tell me you gave at the office.

B Y C E L I A F L O R E N

OK, OK, so we're not always as kind, generous and thoughtful as we know we could be. New Year's resolutions are one way to change that. Forget the cynicism about making and breaking resolutions. The process of reviewing and refining our habits, attitudes and goals can be healthy and satisfying.

To make a resolution, you need first to take stock of yourself. As a human being, you can

options in the real world are not so blunt, so we choose to give or not to give based on other criteria.

Once we decide to nurture our compassionate natures, we are faced with an even greater dilemma: so many causes, so little time and money. There is no end to all the valid political, social and global causes to which one may contribute. This overabundance of demand on one's social conscience and checkbook can be overwhelming to the point of inducing a catatonic state.

It starts like this: if I give \$5 to Greenpeace and not to the anti-Hanford initiative, am I somehow responsible for exposing Portland to an increased likelihood of nuclear disaster? A morning spent escorting women into the abortion clinic is time not available to coordinate the "Take Back the Night" event. It goes on and on. A personal battle of mine was to overcome the semiconscious fear that once I started writing checks to good causes I'd never be able to put the pen down. This led to a self-defense technique of saying no to nearly every cause. It was my lover's admirable practice of contributing generously that shamed me out of this habit.

improve yourself in two general areas: as a human and as a being. While we were growing up, most of us were taught proper care and maintenance of our physical being. We generally know when we are healthy, how to stay that way, and how to take care of ourselves when we get sick. Not as many of us, however, grow up with good advice on the proper care and nurturance of our humanity.

What does it mean to be human? Avoiding an encyclopedic response, let me suggest that compassion — our capacity to care for someone else — is an essential part. So, one way to improve our humanness is to nurture our compassionate natures. The beauty of making a resolution like this is that everyone benefits — we become more human and the world becomes more humane.

There are a million ways to express human caring and concern. As a teenager in the '70s, I threw my enthusiastic compassion into the anti-war protests and later into the fight for gay rights. As a career woman in the '80s, I sometimes wonder where have all the protests gone and with them the compassion for righteous causes. I recognize that each of us must find a balance between working for our physical comfort and accepting our responsibility as human beings, but I don't like to think we've traded our integrity for careers and creature comfort. Let's hope that our politics are as important to us as ever, that our commitment and compassion have not changed — only our tactics are different.

Certainly, for many of us the tactics have changed with the times. You've heard of checkbook liberals — folks who'll gladly write checks to their favorite causes but value their time too dearly to spend an evening making phone calls or stuffing envelopes. Perhaps, with the increased affluence in the community, we are becoming checkbook dykes and faggots. That doesn't mean we don't all hit the streets for gay pride, nor does it detract from the value of the people who do give their time. There is a need for both money and volunteers. The important thing is that each gives in his or her own way.

It may or may not take a shift in thinking to conclude that one ought to get involved with the causes one believes in. Do we need to be reminded that we are the fortunate beneficiary of decades of hard work by everyone from the peaceniks to the radical lesbians? Here's a for-instance: if you had the choice to pay \$5 or go back into the closet, wouldn't you come up with the money? In such a situation, you could foresee a very real and extremely personal benefit from your act of giving. Of course, the

Another thing that keeps people from getting involved could be called the Great Misconception. There seems to be a belief that, in order to support a cause, you need to agree 100 percent with the "party line." Given the diversity of human beings and human nature, it should be more surprising that agreement ever occurs at all. If there is agreement in principle, the details can be worked out. To refuse to get involved because of personalities or other less-than-fundamental differences is to let the forest burn because of a few bad trees.

With your pen poised above a blank check or your hand on the phone to volunteer, pause for a moment to consider the possible beneficiaries of your generosity. There's no limit to the groups which could use your support, so think about it this way: which groups need money especially from you? You as a member of the homosexual community. The bottom line is that lesbian and gay organizations get precious little money from the straight world. Maybe there will be a United Gay Way using heart-wrenching videos and peer pressure to get you to contribute. Until then, don't tell me you gave at the office. You also may have noticed there weren't any drag queens or lesbians in leather ringing bells like Santa clones. The strength and shape of the homosexual community is in our back pockets. It's up to us.

Do you think it's a problem of visibility? The Red Cross gives me a lapel pin every time I donate blood. Perhaps we need to distribute purple crosses to everyone who contributes to a lesbian or gay organization.

Now forget for a minute all this talk about developing your humanity and consider this: contributing to the community is like giving your mother a frying pan for Christmas. You know you're going to reap some of the benefits. By supporting the community's organizations, you are directly improving the world you live in.

So why not add another resolution to your list? Set yourself a goal to give money or time to one or more worthy causes. How much? Well, in fund-raising circles there's a term "fiver" which refers to people who contribute five hours per month or 5 percent of their income. Why not start out as a "oner" and work your way up? Aren't there organizations worth an hour per month of your time, either in cash or in person? Give it some thought!

This essay is the second in a series of observations by members of the Lesbian Community Project.