

Divine Compost

This article is by Jonathan Farnhill and is an extract from his book *The Porcupine Principle*.

Being a part-time and very amateur theologian tends to mean that you see things in a slightly different and often dangerous way. There is a theology of divine compost that, once understood, could revolutionise the way you ask for money (especially when you are asking for legacies). Think for a moment about how you try and persuade people to give your organisation money. How much time do you spend trying to understand your cause, and how much time do you spend trying to understand your donor? Why would anyone want to hand over their hard-earned cash to you? If you think it is because of your stunning powers of communication, I am afraid I must bring you some bad news. It isn't. It is probably much more likely that they give to your charity because of some connection in their own life, either current or past, or because your charity embodies some of the values with which they agree.

I know this is a fairly big question and I imagine you may need time to think about it, but what exactly do you think your life is for? Why do you exist (if you believe that you do), or do you think there is no reason? Is it just chance? Even if you can't answer that, what should we be doing now that we are here? How do we measure success? (If we think success is important, of course.) Does it depend on how much money we have, how many friends, how many children, lovers or pets? I would argue that there is a fairly dominant way of thinking in our society that can be broadly summed up as selfish. Life is about getting what you can, about desiring and acquiring, and about experiencing more than your peers. Divine compost is a marvellous antidote to that because, by focusing on our mortality, we are given a different perspective on our present lives.

Memento mori used to do the same thing. In the eighteenth century, people would have a pleasing still-life painting hanging on the wall – of flowers, books, a musical instrument perhaps or a basket of fruit. And there, in the middle of this charming scene, would be a human skull. The purpose of such a painting was to remind people that time is fleeting (images of clocks used to denote the same), that our worldly possessions will rot and decay as indeed will we as well. Therefore, because this is an unarguable truth, we should use this perspective to guide our lives now. Frankly who cares what we own? It all counts for nought. So what does not rot or decay? Well, in a strange way, we don't. Stay with me here, I am not trying to convert you to anything, except perhaps to looking at the world from a slightly different angle. It can probably be best explained by a quick dip into my own life history.

I adored my Granddad and was incredibly sad when he died at the fabulous age of 92. Staying with my grandparents was a highlight of my childhood. I loved everything about it: playing dominoes, watching Dewsbury rugby league club lose or practising my golf putting on the back lawn. I do not play dominoes, watch Dewsbury lose at rugby or play golf any more. However, I do try to be like him. He used to let me win at dominoes in a very clever way, so that I really thought I had beaten him fair and square. I have learnt to do the same thing when playing table football with my daughters. I learnt from him to be self-deprecating, to be stoical and brave (better on the former than the latter), to avoid histrionics, to accept who I am and to be comfortable in my skin. I think I can start to see some of these traits emerging in my own children. These traits did not just appear as if by magic; they were inherited. My Granddad is divine compost because he has grown

these good things in his children and grandchildren. It is because we teach these things to our children that they will in turn teach them to theirs; the impact is eternal.

What has this to do with fundraising? Everything. What we do does not just affect us, it affects everyone. When we are selfish, we show our children how to be selfish, and they will in turn show their children. When we are generous and kind, we affect generation after generation. What we do matters. Giving money is not some pointless exercise to assuage comfortable, middle-class guilt. It makes a difference and will continue to make a difference in perpetuity.

How do you incorporate this within your fundraising message? By making sure that you show how generosity ripples outwards. Do not stop at saying a donation will take a homeless person off the streets. Talk about what they will do when they are off the streets. Who will they meet and what will they do? What acts of goodness will they now be able to do? Much charity work is made up of mechanisms, and mechanisms are pretty dull to explain. But what happens because of those mechanisms? That is when the message gets interesting.

I used to work at St Luke's Hospice in Plymouth, and I know there is not much easier fundraising than fundraising for a hospice, but it still had its moments. One of the frustrations was how reluctant we were to talk about our patients as people, rather than disease carriers. For me, one of the big things about improving a patient's quality of life was the ripple effect it had on their family and friends. Just think of those conversations that could only take place because the pain had been controlled. Think about the birthdays, weddings and christenings that they would not have been able to attend if the hospice had not been good at what it did. It gave the patients a chance to enjoy so many things and it also gave their families and friends a greater opportunity to enjoy them.

I do not know why, I have never really understood it, but charities are often incredibly reluctant to acknowledge the human dimension in their work. It really does not matter what the charity does, it will still affect people. Someone said to me recently that all of my fundraising was for people, but how on earth would I raise money for art? This sums up our fundraising problems perfectly. Art is about people too, everything is about people, and charities and charitable giving are about people as well. Understanding divine compost will enable you to remember that.

I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.

George Matheson

The *Porcupine Principle* is published by DSC. For further details click here:
<http://www.dsc.org.uk/Publications/@2795>