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FAST FACTS

June 5, 2008

THE GIFT OF LIFE

On April 22, I attended a Canadian Blood Services Awards Presentation honouring 50th, 75th, 100th and 150th level blood donors. At this year's event I received a certificate for achieving the 100 donation level.

Prior to the event, donors were asked to reply to two questions: why did we decide to start giving blood; and why did we keep on giving?

To the first question, I answered that we learned about donating blood from our father, who told us stories about donating blood while he was working as an attendant at the Brandon General Hospital in the 1930s. Amongst other things, he told us that the wonderful thing about blood is that: first, we all have it in us to gift to other individuals; and second, anyone with the same blood type is eligible to receive and benefit from the gift. In his case, the recipients included a person from Lebanon, who was mayor of a small town south of Brandon, a young woman, who experienced problems in the birthing process, and an Aboriginal man from Sioux Valley, who needed his blood level topped up during surgery. As a child, I got the sense from listening to these stories that the reason you give blood is because it's the right thing to do, and because it represents the ways in which we are all connected to each other.

The answer to the second question, why I keep coming back, comes out of my own experiences. The thing that keeps me coming back is that the way the blood system works in Canada demonstrates that human beings don't need to be rewarded with payments for everything that they do. We give our blood as a gift and the transfer of donations from donor to recipient through Canadian Blood Services is done anonymously. Once gifted it's available to anyone who needs it regardless of race, ethnic origin, religion or any other variable that may be the source of friction and divisiveness in society. It is a system that promotes altruistic as opposed to self-interested behaviour, and it is a system that nurtures solidarity and community.

Our answers were read out by the Master of Ceremonies as we walked to the front to collect our certificate. The views I expressed were echoed in the answers given by most others who received certificates. Virtually every recipient expressed gratitude that they have this opportunity to help sustain the health and life of other individuals in society.

The other observation that most recipients made is that they simply enjoy the ritual of giving once every 56 days. They enjoy all the people involved in the process - the receptionist, the aides, the nurses, the volunteers who dish out the



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FAST FACTS continued ...

doughnuts and beverages before you leave - and the many people you meet from different places and different walks of life.

Interestingly enough, a couple of days after this event, I picked up a copy of the March-April issue of *Challenge: The Magazine of Economic Affairs* in the Brandon University Library. One of the featured articles in this number is an interview with Harvard University economist Stephen Marglin, titled, "Why Thinking Like an Economist Can be Harmful to the Community" (which is based on Marglin's latest book, *The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community*).

Marglin shares many useful insights into the limitations of contemporary economics in his answers to the questions posed by the interviewer. His key point is that many economists' belief that superior results are achieved through market transactions is not necessarily the case. To make his point he cites the Amish community as a case where decisions about "what kinds of markets to allow to operate in their communities [are] based on how a particular market will affect their community relationships". Using the example of insurance, Marglin observes that in mainstream society when the "barn burns down" we go through a series of market transactions to replace it. The Amish, in contrast, get the barn replaced through a community-building transaction. "They rely on their neighbours, and the economic necessity of relying on one's neighbours reinforces the community."

The story told by Marglin is familiar to most prairie people (and people in other parts of the country) who grew up in rural areas or working class neighbourhoods in towns and cities. When individuals and families were faced with a crisis - a farmer was prevented from taking off the crop by illness, a worker lost his income because of an injury, a barn or house burnt down - neighbours and others pitched in to help them. It still happens,

and will continue to happen, because, as Marglin puts it: "Community is important to a meaningful life. Community is about human connections; we need community to foster and maintain these connections. And we are diminished as our human connections are diminished." (Is there anyone on the prairies who didn't recognize just how imbecilic was Margaret Thatcher's assertion that "there is no society; there is only individuals.")

In Canada, we provide blood, the "Gift of Life," through community-building transactions administered (since 1998) by Canadian Blood Services, a national, non-profit charitable organization (established in the wake of the tainted blood scandal) that is regulated by Health Canada. Canadian Blood Services collects gifts of blood from voluntary donors and gets them to people in crisis who need blood products to sustain their health and their lives. All participants contribute through their involvement in the system, to the building of solidarity and community in Canada.

*Errol Black is a CCPA Board Member and a
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