



The Value of Others

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Canton, Ohio was bleak in 1933

Ted Gup, the grandson of B. Virdot, and author of his story in *A Secret Gift* writes

True “Hard Times,” the ones severe enough to be capitalized, meant more than declining wealth or monetary setbacks. The B. Virdot letters were a portal into a Dantean landscape. Here, there was no bottom, no cushion to the fall, just an abyss threatening to swallow loved ones whole. These letters were the entrance to that netherworld.

The letters tell tale

-Monnot and Margo.

“Christmas will not mean much to our family this year as my business, bank, real estate, Insurance policies are all swept away.”

“During the depression our business failed and we lost our home. Three months ago my husband had a stroke. His right arm and leg is paralyzed. His mind is also affected and he cannot talk. We are wondering will this be the last Christmas our little family will all be together. We have two adopted daughters . . . frequently I visit two orphan children at Fairmount Children’s home.

-Gave \$ to families who could not afford shoes for their children

- Money to families who had children die (one had 4 children die one who died of inanition – failure to thrive due to lack of nutrition)
- Money to woman with husband in jail (one desperate man in jail for stealing a car). Others had committed crimes as well.

“There is no romanticizing the wreckage it [the Depression] wrought. But it also rid us of our sense of entitlement and made us take inventory of our intangible wealth”

Rich, middle class, and poor came crashing to the ground, and those already poor crashed the hardest (girls Margo adopted)

150 families received \$5
\$5 in 1933 = \$85 in 2011

Who was B. Virdot? And why did he give the gift of hope? In 1933 the fictitious name B. Virdot was created by Sam Stone, a prosperous merchant living in Canton, OH with his wife and two young girls. But Sam Stone was also a fictitious name, created by Sam Finkelstein, Jew born in Romania who intense persecution and discrimination. Romanians began to persecute their Jews with a vengeance during the turn of the century so that Sam and his community could not sell sugar, could not vote, could not own land.

Somehow his large family survived the wandering trip across Europe, away from Romania. During this time they survived deprivation and hunger. In 1902 he arrived in America with his father, a very determined man. So determined, that he made his family remain in their Pittsburgh home and roll cigars all day. It was a family owned and run sweatshop. The children were forbidden to go to school. Sam's shoes were hidden so he would not attend, but sometimes he snuck out, barefoot even in the snow and ice, to attend school. Sam Finkelstein knew all about not having shoes.

Sam fled his home as soon as he could and learned to speak English rather than Yiddish. He learned how to dress and act in the New World. He took jobs, and finally in 1918, moved to Canton with a new name, Sam Stone. He was so fearful of forced return to Romania and discrimination that he lied on various American documents (a felony) and said he was born in America. He also knew what it was like to act like a criminal and hide a secret.

The money B. Virdot gave to 150 families in 1933 was not just charity. It was personal. In doing so he engaged in two principles from his Orthodox Jewish past

Tikkun olam – repair the world

Tzedakah – justice and caring for the poor – not just charity but the debt we owe one another and ourselves as human beings. One scholar wrote “tzedaka may not save us but it makes us worth saving.”

Tzedakah recognizes the values of others as equal to our own – it is our Unitarian Universalist 7th principle, the interdependent web of life. Anyone can fail. Anyone can succeed and we are connected throughout. Sam Stone had failed and succeeded, and would fail and succeed again (declaring bankruptcy in 1937 but persevering on)

The Great Depression stripped the entitlement that did and does make us think we are better if we have central heating, a college education, a job. The Depression laid this illusion bare. And with it, offered the gift of humanity. Our humanity, and that of others. We are all special, all worthy, like the tiny Jewish baby we are told was born in a stable on this evening so many years ago. We save ourselves by saving humanity.

Ted Gup published an article on the story of B. Virdot as an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* in December 2008. In a day it was the most emailed story for the *New York Times* and responses came pouring in from around the world – China, Brazil, England, Israel, Saudi Arabia. Why this story, why this response, why is this the essential Christmas tale?

Gup writes “It was precisely its puniness and purity which gave it its transformative power, then and now.” This story is the message of the birth of Jesus, that all are special, worthy of compassion and consideration, and that no one is too small or insignificant to make a positive difference. The poor remind us of who we really are, human.

Our salvation is created in our connection and care. And in the absence of connection and care, we are much less than we could be, and in utter denial of our shared and personal humanity. The gift of B. Virdot is a story of awakening, awakening to the power and purpose of oneself through compassion for others, and ultimately our own vulnerability. We need one another, now and always.

If you could write a letter today to Mr. Virdot, have hope. You are special and worthy. And there are those who hear and care. For those of us with resources, it is our obligation to share for our own sake, if nothing else. For those of us with resources it is our obligation to remember we are most likely here due to the gifts given to us by others, whether gifts of birth, money, relationship, and education. No one, no one, makes it alone. Look back, and you will find someone, perhaps several someones, opened the door, no matter how talented you may or may not be.

We are here together, you and I, neither of us more worthy than another. None of us fully self-made. All of us humanity making. May our charity recognize the debt we owe one another and ourselves. And may it open the window for justice, the star on the horizon.