

EPISODE 03

# THE BILLIONAIRE IS IN NEED

Need and Serve move.  
The labels don't hold.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT — A SUSTAINABILITY SERIES**

Clay Coleman | Community Mountain

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# THE BILLIONAIRE IS IN NEED

*Wealth can change the Needs a person experiences. It cannot eliminate the human condition of Need.*

## That May Seem Obvious

Yet much of the way we organize community life suggests otherwise.

We have people who need. And people who serve. Recipients and providers. Clients and professionals. Poor and wealthy. Beneficiaries and donors. Volunteers and those being helped.

These categories can be useful. Sometimes they are necessary. But what happens when a useful category becomes the way we see the person?

**Perhaps we stop seeing the person at all.**

## The Billionaire Is in Need

Imagine someone possessing extraordinary wealth. Housing is secure. Transportation is available. Food is abundant. Healthcare is accessible. Education can be purchased. Professional expertise is a phone call away.

By many conventional measures, this person has few Needs and enormous capacity to Serve.

**BUT MONEY CANNOT GUARANTEE**

**Friendship • Trust • Reconciliation  
Meaning • Belonging • Wisdom  
Freedom from grief • Another day of life**

**The billionaire is in Need.**

Not necessarily financial Need. Not necessarily the Needs our service systems were designed to address. But human Need.

## The Person Experiencing Homelessness Can Serve

Now look in the opposite direction. Imagine someone without stable housing. Transportation may be unreliable. Food may be uncertain. Employment may be inconsistent. Health Needs may be unresolved. Documentation may have been lost. Relationships may have fractured.

The immediate Needs may be enormous. A service system understandably sees them: housing, food, transportation, employment, healthcare, case management.

**And gradually something subtle can happen: the Needs become the person.**

Homeless Person. Client. Recipient. Needy.

But suppose that same person knows exactly where another person can safely sleep tonight. Suppose she knows which bus arrives on time. Suppose he recognizes an overdose before anyone else does. Suppose she encourages someone who has given up. Suppose he knows how to repair an engine. Suppose she watches another mother's child while that mother goes to an appointment. Suppose he receives food assistance and shares some of that food with another hungry person.

**Has the person stopped being in Need? No. Has the person begun to Serve? Perhaps the person never stopped.**

## **Need and Serve Can Exist at the Same Time**

This is the idea we want to examine: Need and Serve are fluid, non-exclusive roles rather than permanent classifications.

A person can Need and Serve simultaneously. That changes something fundamental.

**INSTEAD OF A FIXED CATEGORY**

**NEEDY PERSON → SERVICE PROVIDER**  
**see the PERSON**  
**with NEEDS ↔ CAPACITY TO SERVE**

Neither side completely describes the person. And both can change.

## **Categories Are Useful - Until They Aren't**

Human beings categorize things naturally. Categories help us understand complexity. Doctors use diagnoses. Schools identify learning Needs. Governments establish eligibility requirements. Nonprofits classify services. Researchers group data. Databases require structure.

There is nothing inherently wrong with categories. The problem begins when we confuse a condition with an identity.

**A category can tell us something important about a person. It can never tell us everything.**

Someone experiencing homelessness is not homelessness. Someone experiencing addiction is not addiction. Someone who has committed a crime is more than a criminal record. Someone who cannot read proficiently is more than a reading score. Someone receiving public assistance is more than a beneficiary. Someone with great wealth is more than a donor.

## **What Happens When the Label Sticks?**

Consider two people walking into the same room. One arrives seeking assistance. The other arrives carrying a checkbook. Before either says much, we may unconsciously assign roles: Need. Serve.

Now imagine that the person carrying the checkbook is deeply lonely, and the person seeking assistance possesses an extraordinary ability to listen.

## **Who Needs? Who Serves? Both.**

Something remarkable becomes possible when we allow ourselves to see that. The relationship no longer has to flow in only one direction.

## **Reciprocity**

Human relationships are healthiest when people are allowed to contribute. That contribution does not have to be equal. It does not have to happen immediately. It does not have to be financial. And it should never become a condition placed upon someone before we help them.

But the capacity to contribute matters.

A person may receive food and offer gratitude. Receive transportation and offer knowledge. Receive tutoring and encourage another student. Receive housing assistance and later welcome a neighbor. Receive mentoring and eventually become a mentor. Receive forgiveness and extend forgiveness. Receive LOVE and offer LOVE.

**Serve is not repayment. Reciprocity recognizes that healthy relationships need not permanently divide people into giver and receiver.**

# The Greatest of These Is LOVE

LOVE behaves strangely in an economic model. When I give you a dollar, I have one fewer dollar. But when I offer encouragement, compassion, friendship, patience or LOVE, the exchange can increase rather than diminish what exists between us.

The person receiving LOVE may become more capable of giving it. The person giving LOVE may also be changed by receiving relationship in return.

**The transaction becomes something more than a transfer. It becomes generative.**

This may be one reason human sustainability cannot be understood solely through material resources. People require resources. But people also require people.

## What If Serve Is Already There?

When we encounter someone experiencing significant Need, our first instinct is understandably: What can we do for this person? That is a good question.

But perhaps it should eventually be accompanied by another: What can this person do?

Not: What can we make them do in exchange for assistance? Not: How can they prove they deserve help? Something much more human: What gifts are already here?

### QUESTIONS THAT RESTORE DIMENSION

**What does this person know?  
What has this person survived?  
Whom does this person know?  
What can this person teach?  
What does this person love?  
What gives this person purpose?  
What can this person contribute?**

Those questions do not diminish Need. They restore dimension to the person experiencing it.

## A Different Way to See Progress

Suppose a person has ten significant Needs. We connect one of them to someone who can Serve. The Need does not disappear immediately. Perhaps life remains extremely difficult.

By a traditional measure, the person might still look essentially unchanged. But then something happens. The person begins helping somebody else.

## **Serve capacity has emerged - or become visible - before Need has disappeared.**

That may be a significant indicator of trajectory. Not because every recipient must become a volunteer. Not because assistance should require repayment. And certainly not because people should be judged according to their usefulness to others. Rather, because human beings possess dignity and capacity even in circumstances of profound Need.

### **TRAJECTORY MAY LOOK LIKE**

**HIGH NEED / LOW VISIBLE SERVE**  
**HIGH NEED / EMERGING SERVE**  
**MODERATE NEED / GROWING SERVE**  
**LOWER NEED / SIGNIFICANT SERVE**  
**and sometimes, after a setback: HIGH NEED / HIGH SERVE**

A crisis does not erase everything a person has become. Yet categorical systems can effectively do exactly that. Their actual human trajectory may tell a much richer story.

## **The Tree and the Forest**

In the previous Episode, we zoomed outward. Sustainability has many faces. People, families, organizations, institutions, resources and relationships interact within a larger community ecosystem. That forest matters.

### **The forest becomes real at the tree.**

Yet people are not trees. They move. They choose. They trust and distrust. They learn. They fail. They recover. They form relationships. They Need. They Serve. They influence other people's trajectories.

Systems thinking becomes dangerous if the human being disappears inside the system. Statistics matter. Patterns matter. Institutions matter. But somewhere underneath every percentage is a person waking up tomorrow morning and living another day.

## **Start With the Person**

What if we begin with the individual? Not because community conditions do not matter. Precisely because they do.

The person exists within family, neighborhood, education, employment, healthcare, culture, recreation, faith, government, economics and countless relationships. Every dimension affects trajectory. But the individual remains the point where those dimensions become lived reality.

#### THE FOREST BECOMES LIVED REALITY

**A transportation policy → a missed appointment**

**A housing shortage → a child changing schools**

**A food shortage → difficulty concentrating**

**A tutor → confidence**

**A coach → belonging**

**A job → stability**

**A stranger → a friend**

**The forest becomes real at the tree.**

## What About the Billionaire?

Now return to where we began. The billionaire Needs. The person experiencing homelessness Serves. Neither statement diminishes the enormous difference their circumstances can make. It simply refuses to reduce either person to those circumstances.

And something else happens. We no longer have two kinds of humanity. We have people. People with different resources, circumstances, histories, opportunities, Needs and capacities. But everyone moves through Need and Serve.

**What do you Need? How can you Serve?**

Perhaps both questions belong in every human profile.

# Food for Thought

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- What if wealth tells us very little about the totality of human Need?
- What if poverty tells us very little about the totality of human capacity?
- What if our labels make service easier to administer while making people harder to see?
- What if some people we identify primarily by their Needs possess capacities our communities desperately Need?
- What if someone does not have to stop Needing before they can begin Serving?
- What if receiving and contributing are not opposite conditions?
- What if one measure of progress is the emergence of previously unseen capacity?
- What if we stopped asking only “What is wrong?” and also asked “What is strong?”

**You have Needs worthy of our attention. You have something of value to offer.**

## THE NEXT QUESTION

# What changed when someone in Need turned toward someone else?

If someone in profound Need begins to Serve while their own Needs remain, something has happened. But what? Was capacity created? Was it already present and simply discovered? Was it transferred? Was it unlocked through relationship?

And what happens when that Serve reaches another person? The story begins moving beyond an individual transaction. Something starts circulating. Something starts growing.

**Perhaps that is where sustainability becomes especially interesting.**

## NEXT EPISODE

# EPISODE 04 - THE PERSON WHO NEEDED FOOD BROUGHT SOME BACK

*A person receives help - and then turns toward someone else. What changed?*

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