Be Liberal; Be Generous

This Thanksgiving I am grateful for that quintessentially liberal virtue: generosity.

I am grateful for Warren Buffett and Bill Gates and the other billionaires who have pledged half their fortunes to philanthropy.

I am grateful to the "Patriotic Millionaires" who have written an open letter to President Obama, calling for higher taxes on those, like themselves, who earn more than a million dollars a year. (You can read their letter here.)

Perhaps most of all, I am grateful for the liberal generosity of the poor and working people. As impressive as it is for Mr. Buffett and his band of billionaires, Jesus taught that the widow who gave but two coins gave more than anyone, for it was all she had.

Even as the Great Recession swept millions of Americans out of work, left 11.3 million families underwater on their mortgages and hammered the savings of nearly every American family, the Giving USA Foundation reported that charitable donations fell just 3.6 percent in 2009, and the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College projects that donations will be back up -- between 3 to 4.5 percent higher -- in 2010.

Turns out that poor people, like the widow in Christ's parable, give a larger percentage of their income to charity than the rich. As Judith Warner wrote in the New York Times Magazine in August:

A number of other studies have shown that lower-income Americans give
proportionally more of their incomes to charity than do upper-income Americans. In 2001, Independent Sector, a nonprofit organization focused on charitable giving, found that households earning less than $25,000 a year gave away an average of 4.2 percent of their incomes; those with earnings of more than $75,000 gave away 2.7 percent.

This is remarkable. And it is important to remember the liberal generosity of most Americans, especially when we are confronted with such hateful examples of the worst in us: Like the ugly image of Tea-Party activists hurling dollar bills and invective at a man with Parkinson's Disease who was calling for health-care reform. Or when Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck mocked a woman who was forced to wear her dead sister's dentures because she couldn't afford proper dental care. Or the conservative Republican Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina who compared poor people to "stray animals" who should not be fed. "You know why? Because they breed. You're facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply. They will reproduce..."

Those conservatives are the outliers. Most Americans give and give liberally. It's in our cultural and religious DNA. Those of us who are Christians worship a Savior who taught us, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Jews are commanded, in the Book of Deuteronomy: "You shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks." Muslims know that almsgiving is one of the five pillars of Islam.

And of course there are millions of generous atheists and agnostics and skeptics -- women and men who voluntarily give some of their hard-earned money to help total strangers who are less fortunate.

So this Thanksgiving, in addition to pounding down the turkey and cheering on my beloved Texas Longhorns, I'm going to take time to donate to the poor. It's the most liberal -- and, therefore the most American -- thing I can do.