Why Give?

Empathy, gratitude and the desire to make a difference drive philanthropy.

By Paul Schervish

When planners help clients manage their wealth, it is important to help them recognize the deep emotional sources of philanthropy. Hundreds of interviews over the years with philanthropists have led me to the notion of empathy and identifying with others as the key motives behind giving. Ask donors about an important gift and you will hear that the people they help are like themselves, their children, parents or other loved ones. We care for others as extensions of ourselves.

A day usually comes in your clients’ lives when acquiring more wealth ceases to be so important. They then face the question of how to live next and impart to their children a moral biography. Most will want to give because giving is a natural source of happiness.

People always tell us they “want to give back.” They speak about how they were helped in life and often remember teachers and others who formed them. We have all received gifts. People who give back recognize twists in their life stories as grace or luck. They notice unmerited, unearned and unpredictable interventions in their life.

The wealthy often worry about how a large inheritance will affect their kids. Our research found they’re giving larger percentages to charity, often through a family foundation or involving heirs in philanthropy. Some want to keep businesses or real estate in the family, but more of the wealthy feel the best use of their money is to give less to their kids and more to people who can benefit.

We all seek to shape the world, even if only our small part. We want to make a difference. We see ourselves as agents — thinking, feeling and acting in ways that move ourselves and our world from one situation to the next. The wealthy can make history, establishing or altering the conditions under which others work and live. I see the very wealthy as “hyper-agents” who can achieve changes that would otherwise require a social or political movement. Less wealthy people magnify their actions by forming giving circles or organizing big groups for charity.

Choosing to care for others is a way of meeting our own needs. Long before we had charitable gifts and nonprofit groups, people gave to others, Aristotle noted that “philia,” the Greek root of the English word philanthropy, is a relationship of mutual nourishment. In commercial relations, demand is met by supply, but only if the buyer can pay. Helping people because they are in need, beginning with our family and circling outward in time, is not always easy. Yet once tasted, the fulfillment that accrues to ourselves and others is the honey we come to relish.

In his 1930 essay, “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” John Maynard Keynes wrote that there will be ever larger classes and groups of people from whom problems of economic necessity have been practically removed. The consequence of lifting economic necessity will be that, “for the first time since his creation, man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem — how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well.”

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