

## Philanthropy as Thanksgiving

These remarks will discuss three points:

The first point is that *philanthropy is a tradition*.

The second point is that *you and I are stewards of that tradition*.

The third point is that *the philanthropic tradition is in jeopardy -- we are failing in our stewardship*.

A tradition is a teaching that is passed from one generation to succeeding generations over extended periods of time. In that sense, democracy is a tradition, the rule of law is a tradition, freedom of religion is a tradition.

All teaching is problematic: that is, human knowledge and human understanding grow and develop over time. Some traditions are rejected as false: slavery was such a tradition, discrimination on the basis of race or religion or gender or national origin was found to be incompatible with traditions of democracy and the rule of law. What we now believe and attempt to pass on to succeeding generations will not be accepted whole and will not even be understood in the same way that we understand. The so-called "dead hand of the past" may be a heavy hand but it can and will be brushed aside eventually.

Because knowledge changes and expands so rapidly, traditions of knowledge are very unstable and their half-life is very short. The traditions I have in mind are based less on knowledge than on values. In that sense, the philanthropic tradition passes along - *attempts* to pass along - a set or cluster of values. The core values of philanthropy are based on *interventions in the lives of others for their benefit - with no public mandate*. The notions of *voluntary action* and *unforced agreement* are core values of philanthropy, as are voluntary giving and voluntary service. Intervening in the lives of others for their benefit is a moral act. It is a claim that we can sometimes subordinate our self-interest to the interest of others.

Such values are the important substance of what we would pass on to our children and grandchildren and to the unknown others who will share the world with them. My own shorthand for what I have enjoyed that I most want to pass on to my grandson is that he live and work in a *free, open, and democratic society*. Whether his world should include tax exemption for his church or tax deduction for charitable contributions seems less apparent to me. Whether universities are under public or private control or whether philanthropic foundations continue *in perpetuity* are also less critical. Free, open, and democratic societies constantly change their minds about such things. They have to be more constant in their commitment to values if they are to remain open and free.

Philanthropy as a tradition claims that we have some responsibility for others, even strangers. In a world that is increasingly caught up in ethnic, nationalist, racial, and religious controversy and conflict, the philanthropic concern for others - strangers, even

enemies - is a strong claim. The former Yugoslavia is a textbook example of a society in which philanthropic traditions have all but disappeared. The dominant values imposed on the people of what are now called Bosnia and Serbia and Croatia are *misanthropic*; they are traditions of fear, hatred, and revenge.

In my travels in the former Yugoslavia over the past several years I have been struck by how similar the modern cities of Belgrade and Zagreb are to Indianapolis and Dallas. In those cities I have met many people who would be morally and socially comfortable in this room with us, who share our values and ideals and many of our traditions. The people I know are actively engaged in trying to revive and build a philanthropic tradition. They have seen the consequences of government that is too controlling and paternalistic. They want to move toward a society that is free, open, and democratic. But their *traditions* - the moral teachings that have been passed on - are corrupted by the past rather than uplifted by it.