

Voluntarism: Learning How to "Pass It On"

by Robert L. Payton

The notion of serial reciprocity is at the heart of the philanthropic tradition. It is the principle that says we should repay the good works done for us by the good works we, in turn, do for others. When we do someone a favor, we deflect their words of appreciation by saying, in effect, "Pass it on."

Learning to pass it on is a simple and powerful principle we can teach our children at a tender age. Instilling the habit of good works--modest, mundane, repeated--builds in young children a sense of self-esteem and self-worth.

It is a habit that will result in lifelong service to others- and in acts of courtesy and consideration that subtly enhance and enrich the quality of life in a community. There may be no more important gift that we can pass on to our children--a gift handed down to us in a chain of tradition that reaches as far back as our civilization can be traced.

Stewardship, like serial reciprocity, is a powerful concept, deeply moral in its concern for the well-being of others and rooted in ancient and enduring religious and social values. An essential economic aspect also underlies stewardship: We must invest and manage our resources in addition to nurturing and developing our values.

We hold the principles of serial reciprocity and stewardship in trust. We are temporary stewards with an obligation to manage the inheritance in such a way that it can be passed along even better and stronger than it was when we received it.

Although there appears to be a growing recognition of the importance of voluntary action in American life, there are, at the same time, some portents that tell us the traditions of voluntary action, stewardship and serial reciprocity could be in serious danger of fading away within a generation.

For example, the principal vehicles for transmitting the philanthropic tradition in the past have been the family and the church. To the extent that the influence of each of these is weakened, the habits of good works will not be passed on. We should also be aware that the tradition of voluntary action is largely the product of a Western civilization that is increasingly influenced by a non-Western world.

In place of voluntary action and giving, we may find, on the one hand, increasing self-centeredness, and on the other, increasing dependence on the state. Mutual aid and self-help--the companion values of philanthropy--may be missing from the lives of those who need them most.

We can see this void demonstrated in the planned economies of Soviet-bloc countries where no "space" was allowed for voluntary action; whereas, in the United States, voluntary action is guaranteed as a First Amendment right.

Our forefathers secured for us the inalienable right to criticize and advocate, not only as individuals who are willing to make voluntary sacrifices to advance our ideas and values.

Securing a right

The authors of the Constitution understood that voluntary associations could be a treat to unity. But they also realized that such associations represent the most effective balance to the abuse of power.

Clearly, the voluntary sector is central to our survival as a democracy. Yet the fact seems to have escaped the attention of educators until recently. Examination and reflection on the philanthropic experience are in their earliest stages on the American campus.

Philanthropy as a "liberal art" is just being discovered. Even though an overwhelming majority of those employed in the third sector came out of college with a liberal-arts background, very few had an opportunity to take even a single course in philanthropy-in any form.

Fortunately, encouraging signs suggest that respected scholars in a wide variety of fields are beginning to take philanthropy seriously. Scattered initiatives under other names--community action, social work, nonprofit management, arts administration--have helped focus the academic mind on related insights into the philanthropic tradition.

Philanthropic roots

A growing number of foundations are discovering the tradition that justifies their existence. Historians such as Dr. Barry Karl and Dr. Stanley Katz argue persuasively that the distinctive function of charitable foundations has been to seek out the root causes of social problems and develop strategies for their solution. Corporations are also showing signs of awakening concern about such philosophical issues.

It is unfortunate that individuals--the millions of people who volunteer and contribute--often become aware of the philanthropic tradition only through requests for support. The rationales for giving--the principles of serial reciprocity and stewardship, for example--are still too seldom made clear.

We should never lose sight of the very close link between individual giving and the formation of philanthropic foundations. Important new foundations are being established all the time, and some of the largest are the relatively recent creations of wealthy individuals (e.g. MacArthur, Robert Wood Johnson, Hughes, Packard.)

The great unknown is what some of the recent crop of first-generation billionaires will do with their fortunes. Do they have a philanthropic philosophy--a "gospel of wealth"--as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller did? Do they have a plan? What are their interests and priorities? Who, if anyone, is advising them?

Educating Ourselves

It may be that, as stewards of the tradition, we ourselves do not have a full understanding of why "voluntary action for the public good" is so important. One of our first tasks, then, is to educate ourselves.

In particular, we-the professionals, the trustees, the community leaders, the corporation and foundation executives who "run" American philanthropy-must take time to engage in a critical, analytical, historical, even philosophical discussion about our own values and practices. And the discussion must go beyond cheering one another up or sharing ominous demographic statistics.

All our familiar excuses-that we're too busy or that competitive conditions are too demanding or that the bottom line won't permit it-would sound hollow and plaintive to our ancestors of even a generation or two ago. Good works require work as well as good intentions.

And when we have come to understand our historic values, learned to manage our resources, and discovered what practices promote voluntary action and giving, we must devise new and creative means for nurturing the American tradition of service to others. We must then share our insights with all those in voluntary sectors and offer informed academic programs in the "art of philanthropy." In short, as stewards of the philanthropic tradition, we must pass it on.