

## TWO KINDS OF ASSOCIATION

Considered politically, the voluntary association is the genius of American democracy. The voluntary association is the instrument of voluntary action. The voluntary association empowers the individual by bringing human resources together to address problems; one person cannot easily build a school or a church, or staff an orphanage, or bring an end to the pollution of a river. It takes money, materials, organization, and other people. Philanthropy is about concerted action, about doing good in concert with others rather than remaining mired in impotent isolation.

But when we limit philanthropy to collective action we often obscure its inner and personal meaning and motivation. There is, I will argue, a second kind of voluntary association, an association of the spirit, a solidarity of joy and sorrow, a bond of memory and hope.

This is offered as a spiritual or religious principle, rather than a political or economic one. The principle is captured in the incredibly bold idea -- so familiar to us that we can't see the boldness of it -- that all humans are in some way deeply interconnected, even interdependent. There is an ethical hierarchy that ranges at the bottom from meanness of spirit and grasping selfishness slowly and painfully up a ladder toward generosity of spirit and a sense of oneness even with "genetic strangers." Great commercial as well as religious organizations are built upon this insight: global televising of the Olympics assumes the ability of each member of the vast audience to "identify" not only with the defiant elation of victory but with the raging frustration or stoic emptiness of defeat.

The miracle of sympathy and our ability to share the joy and sorrow of another, even another who is in every visible way different from us, often overcomes chauvinistic bias. In religion this is the domain of the spiritual, the dimension of human experience in which we seek to relate to God. But it is more than that: for many of us, it is a great leap to feel kinship with the whole of humanity. One lens enables us to see the whole of humanity but remain blind to individuals; another lens enables us to see individuals but to remain blind to our common humanity. When the two lenses focus as one we are sometimes able to convert an anonymous and even faceless humanity into images of children laughing in a schoolroom or of children bewildered and hungry in a refugee camp.

The solidarity of joy and sorrow is not limited to people who act in great numbers, who are a great distance from us, who are unrelated to us, or who have no claim on us. In one way, the greatest gulf of all is between us and those closest to us who are now "dead and gone." Every religious tradition helps its believers to preserve the bonds between the living and the dead, a present link to a past full of meaning and to a future full of hope. The way we honor those who are no longer physically among us assumes that there is a "spiritual" connection of some sort that transcends death. The notion of "tradition" assumes that there is a spiritual linkage among generations over time. Most of us are not

cynics nor are we nihilists. We believe in ideas, values, traditions, things of the spirit. The search for meaning and purpose in life is a spiritual rather than a material quest. In that quest we discover the virtue of association with others, association that sometimes transcends time and space. The voluntary association of the spirit underlies the voluntary association of action.