

Lessons in Community Philanthropy

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With the presidential debate under way at this moment it might be appropriate to ask you a question that I asked a group of graduate students earlier this year:

If there were a Philanthropy Party, what would its platform be?

One way to answer that is to ask another question, what someone called *the first ethical question: What is going on?*

A provisional answer to that question appeared day-before-yesterday in the *New York Times*: The headline announced that the "Index of Social Well-Being Is at the Lowest in 25 years." The lead paragraph goes on to say that "children and young people are suffering the most." The Index is an annual report on sixteen different social problems, comparing each "with the year in which it was at its best level," on a scale from 0 to 100. The best report would have a high number for the combined ranking: on the basis of statistics going back to 1970, the best year was 1973, when the index stood at 77.5.

"In a related finding," the story concludes, "the study compared the nation's social health under recent American Presidents. In the Nixon-Ford era, the index averaged under 73. Under President Jimmy Carter, it fell to 60. Under President Ronald Reagan it fell to 43, and under President George Bush it fell to 40. In the first two years of the Clinton Administration, it fell to 38."

According to the director of the study, "The findings suggest that despite a range of stated differences in philosophy and policy, neither political party has been able to achieve significant progress in social health over 25 years."⁴

The story encourages one to think that perhaps there might be need for a Philanthropy Party, and that the kind of issue the Philanthropy Party would put forward would be the decline in social well-being. The platform of the Philanthropy Party would recommend ways to turn those numbers around, to help the nation return to such things as a higher level of personal security, a narrowing gap between rich and poor, a decline in infant mortality and in the number of children in poverty.

According to the *Times* story, the director of the study "noted a widespread cynicism among youth today, as well as more isolation and less sense of community. 'The teen suicide rate is 95 percent higher than it was in 1970,' he said."

The Philanthropy Party might then conclude that social well-being is not a partisan matter. The decline in social well-being is not partisan either in the people who might be thought "responsible" for the problem or in the people who are its victims. Rather than wasting its words trying to assign blame, the platform of the Philanthropy Party might be written as steps that would be taken to improve those numbers.

A motto of the Philanthropy Party might be *You can't do it alone*. That is, if we are going to improve something as fundamental and important as the index of social well-being, we are going to have to draw on as much of the talent and determination in the community as we can.

Unlike the other parties, the Philanthropy Party would recognize that it is both liberal-conservative and conservative-liberal. It would recognize the obvious: that no ideology provides the whole truth about anything. The notion of "community philanthropy" makes that much more clear than is possible at the national level. Although there is a new romanticism about the virtues of state and local government, at the community level we have to face up to reality. Perfect we ain't.

At the level of where we live and work and nurture our families, ideology is much less important in dealing with social well-being than is social trust. Social trust is a diffuse notion that can appeal to very different political philosophies: Bob Dole spoke of social trust when he talked about the strength of community he knew growing up in Kansas in the 1930s, and Hillary Clinton talked about social trust in her book, *It Takes a Village*. People of very different beliefs can identify with the need for social trust - *a community of high social trust is a community in which everyone matters*. Social trust calls for individual responsibility along with an assumption that there is a collective responsibility as well.

A provisional argument in the platform committee might go like this:

First, there is a serious problem in the decline of social well-being.

Second, the Philanthropy Party should put that issue high on its agenda.

Third, a critical factor in building social well-being is the development of social trust.

Question: how do we build social trust?

Provisional answer: *Philanthropy itself is perhaps the best means we have to build social trust.*

One reason is the nature of philanthropic organizations: the causes supported by philanthropy tend to cut across the divisions of the society. A graph might show on the vertical

axis, for example, the community divided into age groups; the horizontal axis might show the community divided by race, gender, religion, and national origin. The philanthropic causes would then represent a diagonal line cutting across those divisions by ethnicity and age. It is the principle that comes out when we say that air is breathed by everybody and so clean air is in everybody's interest.

The Philanthropy Party is therefore a unifying party, a voice for community, a defender of the public square and the common ground.

Some skeptics in the party will challenge the others with two final questions: the first will be the "in-your-face" question I asked my students when they declared themselves committed to ideals of community service: *What business is it of yours?* Every claim someone makes in behalf of community has to be tested against the rights and interests of the people who make up that community. Philanthropy can't be taken for granted anymore than anything else.

The other question is statistical: if there were a Philanthropy Party, who would belong to it?

My provisional answer draws on statistics about Indianapolis and Indiana. Here are some numbers to think about:

First, a recent study by the Center on Philanthropy indicates that 56.7 percent of people statewide volunteer. If the percentage holds true for the Indianapolis metropolitan area, that means 653,158 people volunteer -- *giving an average of four hours a week.*

Compared to what? That number of volunteers would fill the RCA Dome ten times over. That number would equal all the shoppers at Circle Center Mall for a period of almost three weeks.ⁱⁱ Perhaps more to the point:

According to the 1990 census 593,974 people were eligible to vote for mayor in Indianapolis; in 1994 only 113,355 voted (19 percent).

When politicians talk about a larger tent, there is no single larger tent in American society than the one that brings people together in voluntary action for the public good. Not only that, it is through voluntary action for the public good that people learn to develop social trust, and social trust, much more than money or political power, is what builds and sustains community.

The unifying value that brings 650,000 people together in this one metropolitan area is the shared value of voluntary action for the public good. It becomes a common ground on which people of great diversity of opinion and purpose can stand together. Problematic though it is, working at the margins, claiming only a fraction of our time and resources, often losing out to more insistent claims, it is by far the largest and most powerful unifying-while-diversifying instrument we have.

Indianapolis Foundation 80th Anniversary Celebration

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ⁱ Nick Ravo, *New York Times* 14 October 1996, p. A14

ⁱⁱ Circle Center Mall estimates a million shoppers a month