

THE MISSION OF PHILANTHROPY IN THE UNIVERSITY

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HONORING BRIAN O'CONNELL

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Let me offer a word of caution to Brian O'Connell, borrowed from T.

H. Marshall's preface to his famous lectures on citizenship:

"The invitation to give these lectures gave me both personal and professional pleasure.... It may be -- and the thought is a disturbing one -- that sociology is on trial here in my person. If so, I am sure I can rely on you to be scrupulously fair in your judgment, and to regard any merit you may find in my lectures as evidence of the academic value of the subject I profess, while treating everything in them that appears to be paltry, common, or ill-conceived as the product of qualities peculiar to myself and not to be found in any of my colleagues."ⁱ

After struggling for two weeks with this paper, I am reduced to following the outline I gave to the panel for tomorrow's discussion. That is, I propose to talk about what I said I would talk about.

Brian O'Connell, and Independent Sector under his leadership, have had much to do with bringing our field into higher education. In addition to his direct influence, his support and encouragement of Virginia Hodgkinson and her work rank with among the most contributions in getting the whole field underway. There is abundant reason for a festschrift to show our appreciation and our indebtedness.

That isn't what this paper is about, however. This paper is an attempt to talk about why this field has come into being. What is it about the world that calls the study of philanthropy into higher education in the first place? To pose the "mission question," Why do we exist? I learned from a fund raiser named Hank Rosso that to answer the mission

question means specifying the urgent and important social problem that cries out to be solved. Without a clear sense of mission, Hank learned through years of working with organizations and institutions, the purposes are likely to become self-justifying.

My own answer starts -- but does not end -- with American society, and the role of philanthropy in that society. I am convinced that it is not possible for the United States to remain a free, open, and democratic society without an extensive and vigorous third sector. Very few modern societies will achieve and sustain freedom, openness, and democracy without something very like a third sector. It is difficult to conceive of a modern democratic society that is not guided by a constitution. It is disturbing that the place of voluntary action has no clear philosophical expression in our own constitution. Good works are essential to the good society.

During my professional lifetime I have seen the arrogant and grandly ambitious Great Society pre-empt for government many of the activities that had long been sustained and supported through voluntary action. The third sector seemed prepared to become a mere extension of government in order to achieve the assurance of adequate funds. Since that hope was frustrated, the third sector has increasingly taken on the qualities of the marketplace, also in the search of more adequate and reliable financial support. Few of the stewards of our philanthropic institutions seemed to see the differences among the sectors clearly enough. I believe those differences exist and that they are important. The essential values of philanthropy are in jeopardy as the boundaries among the sectors change, and when the stewards of the sector are unaware of the different values that make it reasonable to talk of three sectors rather than one or two or none at all.

The value of philanthropy is like the moral sense that James Q. Wilson has written about: it is vitally important but it is a weak force rather than a strong one, and it is therefore always vulnerable to the strong forces of wealth and power.ⁱⁱ

Organized philanthropy is essential to a free, open, democratic society. For me, this is what William James once called a "live hypothesis" -- it works for me even though I can't prove it and I may not even be able to explain it.ⁱⁱⁱ

The condition of our society is alarming, of course. The voices of alarm seem always persuaded that our time is historically unique and threatening. There is always much about the world that upsets anyone who is paying attention, and it is true, as Joseph

Duffey, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, once observed that "Chicken Little only has to be right once." For purposes of our discussion, let's assume one can make a plausible case for being worried, and that it is reasonable to be upset.

Whatever the picture we draw, two things will be true: things often go wrong; and things can almost always be better. As long as those two generalizations are made about the natural world and the human condition, philanthropy will be needed. The question is not whether it will be needed, but what shape it will be in when we need it.

One justification for the study of philanthropy, then, is to discern more clearly its role and influence in our lives and in the society. What is it? Is it an It?^{iv} Is it becoming stronger or is it truly a tradition at risk? If the tradition is important, as some of us insist, what are we doing to keep the tradition alive?

These questions take us back to the mission question. The arguments I advance claim that the tradition of philanthropy is in some peril in part because we have neglected to learn about what it is and how it works, how it relates to other activities and values, and what sorts of things make it stronger and which weaken or undermine it.

The second justification that I offer for our existence as a new field looks not at the need for knowledge and understanding but at the needs of young people. Most of the people outside the university that I talk to believe philanthropy is important because young people need to make it part of their lives.

It is not because we need young people trained to take over the leadership of our philanthropic institutions, these people say; their conviction is that young people need to have a concern beyond themselves. Some of those involved with the Commission on National and Community Service^v were convinced that the greatest social benefit of such service is to the young people who perform it.

The second live hypothesis: the involvement of young people in good works is a way of bringing or sustaining meaning, purpose, and hope in their lives. There are many ways to find those qualities in one's life, but I am persuaded that involvement in good works is essential to the good life.

You may look elsewhere for studies of meaning and the problems associated with it.^{vi} I refer here to the notion that membership in a social group is an important source of meaning. Membership is profoundly important -- so important that it manifests itself in gang

membership, or membership in a dysfunctional family, or in other pathological settings. Membership is better than isolation.^{vii} The voluntary association that exists for philanthropic purposes is often the best environment for children and young people to find themselves.

There are many noble purposes to which one may aspire; the purpose I talk about is service that goes beyond the self. Being concerned about someone else's well-being, especially someone a bit removed from one's own immediate community, seems to provide a sense of self-worth.^{viii} Giving anything of value to others means that one has something of value to give. If that something is compassion or interest or encouragement, something more than material, it is a gift of the self.

Part of the justification for what I do as a professor in this field is to help my students in the search for meaning, purpose, and hope in their lives: meaning is found in association with others, especially association with the purpose to serve others as well; hope derives from such things. One place to find meaning, purpose, and hope, then, is in participation with others in voluntary action for the public good. Good works provide an important avenue into the good life.

The subject of philanthropy, as I pursue it, is inescapably normative, value-laden, and tied to action. Religion is the most powerful and extensive aspect of philanthropy, and the study of philanthropy brings with it into the university all the same kinds of intellectual problems as the study of religion. The study of religion with faith leeches out of it is the study of something else; the study of philanthropy with philanthropic values and aspirations leeches out of it is the study of something else.

We may see that best not in our writing and research but in our discussions with our students -- not in the discussions of the class or seminar but in the personal discussions that fall under the rubric of "advising." The most widely shared characteristic of the students I know who want to study philanthropy is that they want "something more" than "just a job." It is the great scandal of government and business in our time that so many young people see neither meaning nor hope in the other two sectors and turn to the third sector almost by default. I am gratified to see so many bright and highly motivated young people seek careers in public service and philanthropy; but the de-professionalization and de-moralization of business and

government will continue until morally and professionally committed young people come in to reverse those trends.

Most students will pursue careers in the other two sectors, and rightly so. I hope some of our students of philanthropy go into business and others into government service. They will bring a perspective that is badly needed; they will have a better understanding of how the society works, and why. They will enrich their own lives by the volunteer work they do after office hours. They may serve as models to others because they will have found a better version of the good life than is found as a spectator waiting to be amused.

There is another more practical reason why young people should look to careers in the marketplace: that is where wealth is created. Andrew Carnegie understood that very well. To the extent that money is sometimes useful in philanthropy, someone has to create it. Almost all giving is giving out of surplus and the second sector is the only one of the three that generates surpluses. (The problem of the marketplace is not whether it is free of control by government but whether it is open to all those who would compete in it.)

A second practical reason to advise students to look seriously at business for at least part of their working lives: the vast majority of voluntary associations are unprepared to protect the long-term economic needs of their employees. If you rely too heavily on the determination, much less the ability, of voluntary giving to provide for your old age, you may well wind up like those elderly nuns soliciting alms in Penn Station. If there are, indeed, seven-and-a-half million people employed full-time in the third sector, someone should conduct an empirical study of the financial provisions for their retirement. My guess is that what is known about the financial plight of clergy is also true of a great many people in secular organizations as well. I suggest to my students that they spend the next ten years waiting for third sector retirement reform building equity of their own by working in the marketplace.

Students often forget or simply aren't aware that those who work in philanthropy for their livelihood, as well as those who are volunteers, are also family members and parents, citizens and voters, consumers and believers. All of those roles make legitimate claims that must be met.

"Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out, to thy house? When thou seest the naked that thou cover him, and that thou hide not thyself from thy own flesh?"

"Then shall thy light break forth as the morning..."^{ix}

The challenge to make that poetic aspiration meaningful while at the same time trying to be as honest as one can about the everyday reality of philanthropic work is one of the most difficult challenges we face in teaching about philanthropy. In part because we know that the world would be an impoverished place without people who give themselves to make the lives of others more meaningful and tolerable, and in part because we often admire most in others that which we see deficient in ourselves, we praise those who pursue a life of good works. We encourage young people to take the career of service seriously; we praise them for it and we admire them -- even envy them -- for it.

Advising others to pursue activities or careers that may well carry serious risk -- humanitarian relief, for example, sometimes in regions engulfed in civil war -- is a reminder that "philanthropy" is serious business.

Bringing the two aspects of high aspiration and stark reality into consciousness at the same time offends the aesthetic sense.^x It is very difficult as well as awkward to talk about such different things in one conversation. One of the redeeming things about teaching is that conversations can be continued over time.

Philosophers often talk about the problem of comparing incomparables or incommensurables. It seems to me that much of our work is about reconciling incompatibles. In the work of philanthropy, we have to sustain high motivation and purpose, we have to be in touch with our mission, while we must also attend to the necessities of organization and resources. In the university we deal with the problem by separating the two: the work of philanthropy is delegated to those who teach management and fund raising and the like; thought about philanthropy is delegated to those who seek to understand the deeper motives of service, who would infer ethical principles from moral behavior, or who ponder the conundrum of whether charity is possible given the free rider problem.

Philanthropy is an integrated idea for me: to study it requires that we keep science and opinion, theory and practice, the normative and the disinterested constantly present and in some tension and balance. The study of philanthropy calls for normative interpretation and even affirmation in the face of careful description, dispassionate analysis, and critical reflection.

For me, the study of philanthropy challenges the blind deference to specialization and "cognitive rationality"^{xi} as the sole or dominant mode of discourse in the university.^{xii} The study of philanthropy is a broadly liberal art at the same time that it is a narrowly professional or technical subject.^{xiii} It is certainly multidisciplinary, and may even at times succeed in being interdisciplinary.

The second topic of these remarks, then (the first dealt with the importance of philanthropy in the lives of young people) is about the place of philanthropy and the nature of the study of philanthropy in the university.

For most of you it may well be a dead hypothesis that the university is itself a philanthropic institution. The university is in the tradition of the professions: alongside the development of high competence through advanced study and some other characteristics, there is a commitment to service. There is still some life in that hypothetical wire for me, both for the university and for the professions. That is, I still cling to the notion that professionals can and sometimes do put the interests and well-being of their clients before their own, and that universities can and sometimes do serve the society even to the detriment of their own immediate and short-term interests.

It is the gravamen of the charges against the university and against the professions that they have drifted away from their sense of mission -- lost the understanding of why they exist -- and in doing so have lost the trust and confidence of the society that supports and rewards them.^{xiv}

My contention is that philanthropy is both a conceptual tool for understanding the society and a moral action guide^{xv} for the university and the professions to rediscover their mission.

The university helps the society to better understand the complex moral and other issues that the third sector insists that the society confront. One of the things contemporary social science is best at is pointing out the gap between the rhetorical

aspirations of the society and the society's performance in working toward its ideals. Social science research can help philanthropy understand what is going on.^{xvi} Philanthropy must turn elsewhere, however, to seek help in knowing what is to be done.

Philanthropy in the university must address these issues:

- the extent to which the university is committed to service to the larger society, and the extent to which it is committed first to its own needs and interests; and
- the extent to which the faculties of the university are capable of balancing the tension between the normative and the disinterested.

The issues that animate philanthropic association and action in the community are a constant test of the relevance and validity of what we teach. Part of understanding philanthropy as thought and action means direct involvement in the complexities and hazards of the world. I have learned about these things from my students; what I teach has to contend with what they learn from their experience:

A student working as a volunteer and intern in an inner city hospital has a context for the reading of Foucault. (In her normal academic studies these days she is more likely to be encouraged to read Foucault, of course, than to read a life of St. Francis or the meditations of Mother Teresa.) There is a cautionary understanding of the law that comes from helping elderly adults in nursing homes find reliable legal advice about the handling of their financial affairs. Service on a board is a good test of one's grasp of notions of stewardship and governance. Helping to distribute surplus flour to remote villages in the mountains of Macedonia provides insight into foreign aid, and into the working relations between government agencies and nongovernmental organizations. Study of the philanthropic strategies of the Society of Muslim Brothers and the Nation of Islam is animated by field research in Cairo and Indianapolis. The aggregation, analysis, and extrapolation of data about the medical treatment of children is illuminated by four hours a week as a volunteer at Riley Hospital for Children. One way to assess the plausibility of social critiques of power blocs and elites is to observe them up close as they manifest or contradict the claims of ideology. It is one thing to talk about housing for the poor; it is another thing to renovate a run-down house or to build a new one. Current talk about public-private partnerships or about privatization of

government services is illuminated by standing at a bus stop with people who have to stand there every day. It is one thing to advocate support of dance and experimental theater and quite another to raise money for those things.

Given the complexity of experience we try to understand and practice in philanthropy, the best model for thinking about the place of the study of philanthropy in the university we have thus far may be the medical school and medical center. Such places have the great virtue of combining training with education in the sciences on which training is based; of pursuing research and doing grand rounds; of mixing private philanthropy, government grants, and the earned income of professional fees, and charges for institutional services. Medical centers have hospitals, and hospitals have emergency rooms, intensive care units, and ethics committees. Hospitals provide the immediacy and the reality that may be missing from the research laboratory. The research laboratory is a reminder that much that goes on in hospitals could have been prevented. One way or another, medical education and medical practice assume that thought and action are inseparable. No other activity within the university tries to cope with such a broad sweep of action and thought.

For all the obvious and well-publicized problems of medical centers and medical education, they are an attempt to address the full scope of health and illness. It seems to me that we should explore that model in thinking about our own work. Having said that, it would be premature to undertake a Flexner report about the state of philanthropy in higher education. A second Filer commission, however, might move us in that direction.

The passing reference to ethics committees in hospitals reminds me of Brian O'Connell's leadership in advancing the ethical agenda of philanthropy and the organizations which serve it. Like medicine and other true professions, the practice of philanthropy is inescapably moral, judgmental, and consequential. It is significant that Robert Coles has urged his students in medical school to read Middlemarch. Moral and ethical understanding are perhaps best sought in the study of literature, both secular and religious. They are not grasped through reading textbooks in management or public administration or in the so-called nonprofit variations on the theme. As Coles has demonstrated in his own teaching, the search to understand the moral experience can take

place in the context of scientific training. The education of the professional is at least in part the development of the habit of obedience to the unenforceable.

A concluding personal note from and about "the first tenured professor of philanthropic studies." To stand for tenure for the first time late rather than early in one's career raised several questions for me that were answered this way:

- It is symbolically important that Indiana University appoint someone to a tenured professorship in this new field; it is a live hypothesis for some of my colleagues that such symbolic behavior strengthens the university's commitment.
- It was important in my case that someone be appointed professor who lacked the only true measure of academic worth -- the PhD. (Fields that tolerate other credentials are red-lined.)
- It was important to me that my appointment be in the School of Liberal Arts but not in a particular department. That nondisciplinary, nonprofessional limbo is exactly where someone like me belongs.
- It was important both to the university and to me that my tenure be based on public service rather than on scholarship. It is affirmation of the notion that public service has a value within the university, and that the experience gained through public service is relevant to the discourse of the university.

On that basis, some far-sighted institution might well discern in Brian O'Connell a resource that is much more central to its work than a passing affair with a visiting distinguished citizen. It would welcome him in courses on government and in ethics, on negotiation and management, on transcending the conflict of cultures. ^{xvii}

After two years of working together, I asked one of my students what field of philanthropy he wanted to pursue. He said it was his dream to work in behalf of philanthropy itself. He would follow in the footsteps of a Brian O'Connell. I cannot think of a better career for him to follow, or a better exemplar.

In my view, the university should help him prepare for that.

ⁱ T. H. Marshall, Citizenship and Social Class, T. H. Bottomore, ed., Pluto Press, 1992 (1950).

ⁱⁱ James Q. Wilson, The Moral Sense, Free Press, 1993.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ William James, The Will to Believe and Other Essays, Dover Publications, 1956 (1897).
- ^{iv} Henry Hansmann and others might consider It a Them.
- ^v Notably President Thomas Ehrlich of Indiana University.
- ^{vi} Try Robert Wuthnow's Meaning and Moral Order: Explorations in Cultural Analysis, University of California Press, 1987.
- ^{vii} The chapter on "Membership" in Michael Walzer, Spheres of Justice, Basic Books, 1983, is invaluable.
- ^{viii} I first learned of this through the work of the Ounce of Prevention Fund in Illinois.
- ^{ix} Isaiah lviii, 7,8, the text of a sermon by Samuel Johnson in The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Jean Hagstrum and James Gray, eds., Vol. XIV, Sermons, 1978, p. 39.
- ^x Bruce Payne defines aesthetic as "the opposite of anaesthetic."
- ^{xi} See Talcott Parsons and Gerald M. Platt, The American University, Harvard University Press, 1975.
- ^{xii} I have argued elsewhere for "exploratory discourse" as the mode most suitable to philanthropy, borrowing from term from James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse, Norton & Co., 1971
- ^{xiii} 13. I have also written on "Philanthropy in Liberal Education" for the project on The Governance of Nonprofit Organizations led by my colleague James Wood.
- ^{xiv} It is the phenomenon, very common but largely unexamined, that Kenneth Goodpaster has labeled teleopathy.
- ^{xv} On moral action guides, see David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method, Harper & Row, 1978.
- ^{xvi} I am indebted to H. Richard Niebuhr for posing the first ethical question: What is going on? The Responsible Self: A Study in Christian Moral Philosophy, Harper & Row, 1963.
- ^{xvii} . After these remarks were presented I learned that Brian will become Professor of Public Service at the Lincoln Filene Center of Tufts University, joining our mutual friend and esteemed colleague Robert Hollister.