

Doing good deeds just as important as feeling good

Forum

By Frank Hanna

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Millions of Americans will make year-end charitable contributions in the next few days.

Last year alone, Americans donated \$295 billion to charity, according to the Giving USA Foundation. Individual donations accounted for about 76 percent of the total. This is serious business and should be treated as such.

While the 2006 total included several high-profile "mega-gifts," such as financier Warren E. Buffett's donation to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, wealthy Americans are not the only ones who support charity. Most Americans do. Indeed, as George C. Ruotolo Jr., chairman of the Giving Institute, notes, "About 65 percent of households with incomes lower than \$100,000 give to charity."

Dollar amounts are important, of course. But there is more to charitable giving than writing out checks.

When we donate money to someone else, we are giving something of ourselves. We are making a statement about what is most important to us. This is not something to be taken lightly.

In the end, sacrificial giving is one of the primary means by which we become who we are - as a spouse, a parent, a child, a co-worker, and as someone who gives time or money to someone else. And so, charitable giving is not a casual, feel-good activity, but a profoundly serious undertaking - an investment that should be carefully planned, targeted and evaluated. Giving effectively requires love, but authentic love also requires deliberation.

Every year, in mid-November, America's nonprofit community observes National Philanthropy Day. The theme this year was: "Change the World with a Giving Heart." But a giving heart is not enough. We also need to use our heads when we give, seeking to maximize the effectiveness of the gifts we make.

While there's no concrete formula for effective philanthropy, you can't go wrong if you do the following:

Give away as much as you can possibly afford. Take care of your family needs first, of course. Then identify those causes that touch you deeply. In doing so, you will see your own life deepen.

Start giving sooner, rather than later. If you can afford to give, but don't, you're denying help to somebody in need.

Conduct your philanthropic activities with intelligence and rigor, starting with a clear vision of the goal you hope to achieve and careful consideration of the best means to achieve it.

Support indispensable causes to which your support is indispensable. You should provide financial support to causes you consider truly essential, and then consider whether your support for this particular cause also is in some way indispensable. In other words, give to those who truly need it from you.

One also should take special care to support organizations with effective leadership. Know who's in control. Extraordinary results come from great leadership.

Seek accountability. Good leaders welcome evaluation and are not threatened by it. So look for results.

Having the ability and capacity to give to others is in itself a gift - and a privilege. As with any privilege, however, it is accompanied by a responsibility to use the privilege wisely.

Writing a check may make us feel good, but that is not enough. We also are obliged to think things through, so that we not only feel good, but we do good.

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