

Philanthropy as a new global ethic

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Never doubt the ability of small groups to change the world...indeed they are the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

As in nature, the most precious resource of humankind is diversity. The diversity of human talent has led to the transformation of matter and spirit through reason: man is the only animal that has been granted a unique capacity to inspire and bring about change at will.

This limitless capacity to imagine, create, produce and transform is the hope that should dissipate all fatalism and despair, provided we have the necessary freedom to exercise this unique gift and the will to use our talent beyond our personal needs for the benefit of others, regardless of time or place. Any attempt to shape, influence, manipulate or restrict this potential denies the richness of human nature and limits our ability to adapt, survive, provide and grow.

However, the characteristic individuality and freedom of Western civilizations and, specifically, of the United States, is seen by other cultures as excessive, leading to economic and cultural decadence. The enormous capacity to build and transform has a corresponding, if not larger, capacity to abuse and destroy.

For this not to occur, diversity must operate within a group culture

that reflects moral values and a sense of pride, belonging and continuity. Wisdom cannot flourish by freedom and knowledge alone; it must come from a higher sense of responsibility, which only ethics and morality can provide.

Borrowing from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "In Plato's *Protagoras*, there is a mythical account of how Zeus took pity on the hapless humans who were no match for other beasts. To compensate for these deficiencies, Zeus gave humans a moral sense and the capacity for law and justice, so they could live in larger communities and cooperate with one another."

Our capacity for law and justice is currently doubted by many, perhaps because we have lost our moral sense amidst the comfort of economic progress and our confidence in science.

Myths are a literary interpretation of wisdom in an earthy and simple form, and they transmit the mysteries of the unknown, especially as regards morals and religion. Religion is the guardian, interpreter and spiritual force of intrinsic morals. Without morals or ethics, our actions would lack depth, direction and continuity, and our system of justice would be overburdened and unable to enforce its laws.

Every day we are shaken by news of crime, famine, health-threatening epidemics, armed conflicts, human rights abuses, drugs, rape, political refugees, corruption, the homeless and many other dreadful calamities which we try to ignore, assigning the responsibility to some hierarchy or capricious gods. Escapism and indifference have become goals that are respected as an art form and lifestyle.

If things are going to change for the better, humanity has to care. Caring is the stimulation and spark for action and participation. To care, one must be involved. Imagination and dreams are open to all, but spiritual values can only be formed through compassion and caring. Change can and should occur, but only in the direction of those that want it and pursue it. Today everyone is part of free-market forces and the most powerful weapon for change is the vote we exercise daily as we spend money and select or reject certain goods and services.

Even though humankind has made great progress in many fields during the last two centuries, there are increasing signs of deterioration and wearing down of our planet which cause alarm among scientists, intrigue educators, worry governments, and directly affect the physical and mental health of all urban-dwellers. A growing population, locked in a closed biosphere with limited resources and limited waste-processing capacity, consumes and demands increasingly more, while the majority struggles to obtain the bare essentials needed for survival.

Over-confident about the miracles of science and technology to solve our problems, we have concentrated on scientific research, mass production, intensive agriculture, rapid transportation and speedy communications.

The ever-increasing demand on natural resources, including the energy to process them, disregards the limits

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imposed for renewal like someone who, not satisfied with the interest, consumes the capital that generates it. Thus, forests disappear, soil erodes, fossil fuels are depleted, water becomes scarce and many species become extinct. As a consequence of this interrelated and damaging process of rapid and unsustainable development, we accumulate waste, poison the soil, pollute the air, and contaminate the water.

Since poverty ravages the environment, development must continue, but progress cannot be associated with destruction, inefficiency, deterioration, over-consumption and short-term unsustainable gain. Progress has to be equated with sustainability and long-term planning.

Sustainability means being able to provide for future generations on a continuing basis. Implicit is the quality of life with its cultural and biological diversity, which is the basic source of material and spiritual requirements for human survival and intellectual growth.

There is no science or technology that can clean up after, sustain and provide for all our excesses and selfish behavior, nor can we rely solely on laws to protect us from future deterioration. There is no nation, no government, no financial institution with enough resources to rescue a society without values, without sense of purpose, without dreams, without compassion, without willpower, without restraint, without profound beliefs that go beyond the immediate present.

Progress cannot be measured only in economic terms, with little or no regard for the millions of people who are profoundly unhappy with their lives, isolated, disconnected, adrift and lost. A sense of purpose and active participation are the revitalizing forces of body and mind. What better sense of purpose than the desire and will to change things we

don't like for no better reason than love for humankind? This is philanthropy, precisely in its original meaning and practice.

Philanthropy is as old as human existence itself and the innate concern to help one another. From simple and direct acts of charity that humanity has performed since ancient times, thanks to modern communications philanthropy has now reached all structures of society, promoting change and helping to solve problems that often go beyond the capacity of any given state.

Modern philanthropy means organized philanthropy: well-informed, properly represented, officially recognized, professionally run and more universal in coping with global problems. Whether constituted as foundations, private voluntary organizations, non-governmental organizations, charities, benevolent societies, or any other legal entity, these groups are now part of a large and growing sector known as the third sector, the voluntary sector, the independent sector, or the non-profit sector.

There are 900,000 private voluntary organizations registered in the United States that make up a network of benevolent groups to defend, promote and improve—or denounce—the subject of their choice: ancient monuments, capital punishment, non-smokers' rights, breast feeding, abused children, the

rights of the handicapped, human rights, the environment and many others, including philanthropy itself.

Social change is dynamic and that is why long-term forecasting and central planning become an impossibility. Democracy and freedom, on the other hand, generate and promote the interplay of all actors, while the corresponding social forces press for specific needs of change. Through philanthropy, private voluntary action creates a key balance between two important sectors of society: government and business.

In economic terms, philanthropy cannot come close to supplying the needs and services demanded from the state, nor create the jobs or wealth that business generates; the former through the collection of taxes, the latter through the generation of profits. What the non-profit sector can provide is intelligent and honest signs of change, not compromised by self-serving interests, but on the contrary, motivated by generosity and the desire to improve the human condition and that of our surroundings. These organizations are small, numerous and efficient think-tanks of society.

During 1991, more than 125 billion dollars were donated to non-profit organizations in the U.S. But let us not associate philanthropy with an act reserved for rich corporations and foundations. Corporations and foundations accounted for one-tenth of

Humankind has lost contact with nature and the universe. With our acquired knowledge, we must restore and preserve nature, alleviate misery and hunger, promote health, improve education, build shelter and end all wars, except the battle against degradation of social values and needless suffering.

all donations; 84% came from individuals from average households who contributed about 2% of the total family income.

Added to this, 54% of all adult Americans, that is to say, 98 million, worked an average of 4.7 hours per week in voluntary activities, a staggering annual total of almost 20 billion volunteer hours, equivalent to the efforts of 9 million full-time employees. The dollar value of this monumental effort, not considering talent, is about 150 billion dollars per year. If we add the two together—money and work—we are talking about an industry (and a very clean one, at that) of 275 billion dollars a year.

adequate legislation and provide useful services to its members.

This organization started one of the first community funds in the country, and hopes to obtain and manage donations from the private sector. In 1990, it published its first directory, which listed more than 800 institutions classified for quick reference. Today, more than 2,000 such institutions are registered, and the figure continues to grow.

Thanks to funds from the Ford Foundation, the Center completed a comparative study on philanthropy in Mexico and the United States. A working group was recently formed, with representatives from Canada and

Can it become the democratic way for society to express how it would like the world to be?

Can it be a source of talent and new ideas, offering solutions and providing the driving force to carry them out?

Can it be a dynamic force in the global process of change, a balance among self-serving sectors in a market economy?

Can it lead humankind to freedom, with the corresponding responsibility and ethics that all participation requires?

Can it provide the sense of purpose and belonging that humanity badly needs?

Yes, I truly believe philanthropy can do that, and much more.

Private voluntary organizations will achieve tremendous growth as more and more people realize that individual actions shape the future of our planet and that no one can isolate him or herself from social and environmental problems wherever they may occur, and that governments cannot solve them by taxes and laws alone, nor can market forces do so by unsustainable growth. There is much to be done and great satisfaction in doing it. Well-being is not the result of isolation, possessions, or power in itself; it is found while serving others.

No nation has a perfect model for development nor a perfect culture to export. Let each and every one of us do our job with diligence, honesty and generosity, following long-term priorities and planning, sharing our knowledge in order to create spiritual and material wealth.

I would like to finish with the following quotation from the book *Give to live*, whose author Douglas Lawson is a good friend of mine and a well-known fund-raiser: "There is a wonderful mythical law of nature that the three things we crave most in life—happiness, freedom and peace of mind—are always attained by giving them to someone else." ❧

“There is no nation with enough resources to rescue a society without values, without sense of purpose, without dreams”

I wish I could compare this with facts and figures for Latin America, but unfortunately even for Mexico I do not have data. There are very old private charitable institutions in Mexico, dating back to the 17th century, but most philanthropy was carried out through the Catholic church.

Only in the last three decades have we seen the beginning of a new form of philanthropy, assuming greater responsibility and wider participation in the solution of numerous social problems, commanding the respect and deserving recognition and support from the government. In order to promote and strengthen these organizations, the Mexican Center for Philanthropy was founded four years ago. Its board is made up of an impressive group of men and women representing a broad spectrum of society. Its purpose is to gather and transmit pertinent data, promote

the U.S., to analyze current legislation in the three countries and explore ways of facilitating the flow of funds and talent in this region.

If the root of the word philanthropy means love of mankind, we can conclude that it is closely related to *humanitas* or the development of human virtue, that is, understanding, benevolence, compassion, mercy, fortitude, judgement, prudence, eloquence, and honor in a fine balance between action and contemplation.

Can philanthropy become the new global ethic? Can it provide a new humanistic movement, not unlike the Renaissance, in which all our talent is channeled toward stopping human suffering, protecting nature and gradually widening our spiritual horizons for the common good?

Can philanthropy be a significant moral guide, one without the limitations and restrictions of different religions?