

SELDOM ASKED QUESTIONS

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An essay contribution to
GHC Conversation 2010

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SELDOM ASKED QUESTIONS

By Ken Bartels

In preparing my contribution to *Conversation 2010*, I asked myself the following: “What questions have we never (or seldom) asked about philanthropy? Why must we ask them now and how will we respond?”

Introductory thoughts:

- Never is a very strong word. To suggest that these questions have not been posed by someone at sometime in the past is to appear rather arrogant or rather foolish – or both.
- That said, over some thirty-six years there certainly have been topics, procedures, beliefs, philosophies, even truths, that have not had a certain kind of scrutiny applied to them in my opinion.
- In answer to the first question, I will pose my questions, “Letterman fashion,” as a “top ten” list and then attempt to answer them in line with the second question.

With apologies to Letterman then, my top ten questions “that we have never before (or seldom) asked about philanthropy.”

1. Does the average person even understand what philanthropy is? (That’s even for those who practice it.)
2. Where is philanthropy introduced as a concept in today’s society?
3. If you accept that philanthropy is beneficial to the world, why is it that so many do not embrace it in any fashion?
4. Are philanthropy and advancement simply linked or are they similar in their basic values?
5. Advancement and fundraising are different in my world. Does that mean that philanthropy and giving are different as well?

6. Time, talent and treasure...are they the only things that measure philanthropy and philanthropists?
7. Are we sure that everything we raise money for is philanthropy? (Can you philanthropically support a "bad thing?")
8. When one looks at the history of philanthropy to date and then attempts to project it into the future, what stands out as the facets to protect versus the facets to discard?
9. Could the world live without "it"? (That is, both philanthropy and the causes it assists).
10. If the average person does not understand it, can it possibly be as important as we believe it to be or are we just creating our own preferred outcomes? (If it is that important, how do we do a MUCH better job of educating people about it and engaging them and their dollars within it?)

My answers, more like my thoughts, now need to follow, and, WOW, am I in over my gray-haired head! That admission stated, however, I will just do that, answer the questions, and see what happens. They are my questions after all. We will try a James Joyce kind of stream of consciousness effort and hope it is at least unique to Conversation 2010 if not actually helpful to "philanthropy".

1. **Does the average person even understand what philanthropy is?** I strongly doubt it. Several years ago I saw a video produced by the Minnesota Council on Foundations that was a series of random, street, interviews asking the question, "what is philanthropy"? The answers were amazing and mostly wrong. Everything from believing that philanthropy was the study of prehistoric fish, to linking it to philandering, to describing it as a painful surgical procedure. Of course, some people got it right but the point clearly was...most didn't know what philanthropy was. The chilling outcome is that the general public is our collective donor and prospect pool. If we are assuming that we only need to explain why they should give to our special project or organization...we are mistaken. We must start with why they should give anything to anyone at anytime. The benchmark appears on the whole to be very low.
2. **Where is philanthropy introduced as a concept in today's society?** I recall my first encounter with philanthropy (at least I think I recall it). I was with my paternal grandfather in church. Collection plate time arrived and he handed me a quarter. I was happy to take it and I put into my pocket only to be admonished that the quarter was to be placed into the passing plate and be given away! What sense did this make? To me, at the time, no sense. I had no concept that a church needed money to operate and to do God's work. In fact, my question likely was more in the direction of why would God need my quarter...a quarter I had only just received. But, enough about my grandfather's generosity.

So, where does the concept get introduced then? It would seem to me that some of the more traditional ways still exist. That would be churches, Salvation Army bell-ringers, needy family assistance efforts, smaller-scale endeavors that might include smaller-size donors. Here is the deal though, now days it's really other places that appear to be the introduction portals. That would be the food pantries, clothing drives, walks, runs, relays, shelter providers, dream-makers and hands-on clinics just to name a few. Big-time, organized charities, whether they be diseases, education, social service, cultural, or whatever, do not seem to be where people are learning about giving. Knowledge of giving seems to be assumed at these places...something that doesn't hold up for me. The same is starting to show up with volunteering as well. Ask folks to participate in something with a specific task and time table...get in, do it, get out...you have a shot at their time and their attention. Ask folks about three-year board service, long-term campaigns and multi-year pledges and see how fast you're looking for another conversation.

3. **If you accept that philanthropy is beneficial to the world, why is it that so many do not embrace it in any fashion?** Well, a lot of people just might not care about the needs and values of philanthropy. They might believe that they need their cash for themselves. They certainly might not be educated in the ways and means of philanthropy as already has been pointed out. They may not see their participation as meaningful or even sought. When you're hearing about billion dollar efforts (a trillion dollar campaign anyone?) it might be difficult to envision that your \$25 mail-in response will actually be helpful...so why make it? On another note, however, it could be argued that we in the profession may not be seeing our own philanthropic world clearly enough. Maybe philanthropy is being overhauled into more of a doing thing than a giving one. Maybe it is being embraced but not in the ways we are used to and most comfortable with...bar charts, giving percentages, cost-to-raise a dollar analysis, giving clubs. Just maybe it's happening on a very, one-to-one level...really personal...people helping people. Hands-on, straight-up, no receipts necessary because it's not going to be deducted anyway. I hope that's true, actually, because I think that would mean that philanthropy is growing...not just in dollar terms but in its understanding. Big institutions were not always big. Harvard and Mayo and the United Way started out small, local...people providing service, help, direction and guidance to other people seeking it from friends, or at least, people who they could deal with face to face. I know that internet fundraising is all the rage and the next, great thing. I have no doubt that's true but I do doubt whether it's teaching philanthropy. I have a saying, "sometimes wrong, but never in doubt." It works for me. You'll read that again later.
4. **Are philanthropy and advancement simply linked or are they similar in their basic values?** They are linked if you "just raise money" for a living. They are similar if you vibrantly believe that what you raise money for changes the world even just a little bit. Advancement so often is a means to an end. Philanthropy can be the end that justifies the

means. The value question comes into play here as well. Curing cancer is a worthy philanthropic effort. What happens if it's cured though? The cancer advancement machine dismantled? Find a new need? (Remember the original mission of the March of Dimes to cure polio? Once that occurred, leaders had to ask these same questions. Rather than dismantling, they chose to refocus the mission on eradicating birth defects.) Philanthropy is passion to me. It goes way, way, beyond the fundraising part. As much as I always prided myself on my organizational abilities and management savvy those were only the things that got to the point of the matter...the betterment of someone...a student, a patient, a starving orphan, a shelter, someone experiencing disaster, even those desiring to hear classical music, create art treasures and neuter animals. Yes, philanthropy and advancement are linked. Yes, the great organizations at all levels have all their similarities well covered. No, don't raise money *for a living*...raise money *for living*. (Wow, these answers are really getting sermonized aren't they?)

5. **Advancement and fundraising are different in my world.** Does that mean that philanthropy and giving are different as well? Heck, yes! And I already answered this question somewhere along the way. Strategy compared to tactics...Purpose compared to practice...Vision compared to action...You must have both! Joel Arthur Barker, a futurist from Minnesota (where else?!) put it this way: "Vision without Action is merely a Dream; Action without Vision just passes the Time; Vision in Action can Change the World." Who am I to argue with a futurist? Seriously, philanthropy to me represents the highest of the human spirit. The fact that someone without coercion parts with a gift of some type to an individual, cause, organization or institution in the hope that the gift will lead to a betterment of some kind. The fact that there may be an advantage secured by this giver for the gift is where the giving notion comes in. There are people in this world who give without promise of reward. There are some people in this world who give with the knowledge that there is a benefit, tax write-off, or not, with their generosity. Both descriptions are philanthropic but somehow the one only directed at betterment seems to be the more perfect form. The same comparison fits (again for me) between advancement and fundraising. Advancement signals a process of relationships, time passage, stronger understandings than fundraising does. Fundraising hints at a shorter range need or expectation and, perhaps, a less process oriented effort. While I admit that this may not always be the case, the use of advancement for fundraising came about for a reason. One reason would have to be the fact that fundraising seemed too direct, too necessary, too common to go along with the larger role and vision of development that is attached to the advancement terminology. Semantics? Maybe, but no more than are in play in other professions. Find the word games in the legal, medical, business, service and financial sectors. They are certainly there to find.
6. **Time, talent and treasure...are they the only things that measure philanthropy and philanthropists?** No, not even close. In fact the three *t's* only set limits and artificial

bounds. Philanthropy and philanthropists are best measured in three, other, vital ways: Results, Rewards and Responsibility. Results...what did the time, talent and treasure actually accomplish? Did it build, cure, aid, inform, fix, create? Rewards...who benefited from the time, talent and treasure? Was it recipient, organization, donor, client, outcast, insider? Responsibility...What is left to be done, and who is to do it? How are people or organizations different, changed, empowered, informed, structured? Philanthropy and its proponents can look to these three *r*'s and provide answers that only relate to the three *t*'s that get all the attention. It is not enough to answer a need, even a prayer, unless there is a spot of education, self-improvement, and understanding that things can be better. To not provide these is tantamount to sentencing some in our midst to a never-ending story of need and longing and cheapen the ultimate, greatest, power associated with philanthropy...hope.

An aside on style...James Joyce, famous writer, noted for a literary form known as "indirect interior monologue."¹ This humble paper is a humble imitation.

7. **Are we sure that everything we raise money for is philanthropy? (Can you philanthropically support a "bad thing")?** I seriously doubt that all dollars raised are philanthropic, certainly in terms of intent. You do have the "tax deduction" factor. You have the "obligation to give" factor. You have the "just get it over with" factor. Nonetheless (love that word) a great many gifts are motivated by all the right reasons and have the integrity associated with philanthropy. By my thinking, while you can give money to support a "bad thing" it is doubtful that such an action could be philanthropic. What might a bad thing be? A hate organization of some type, a too strident agency, a hidden agenda institution using its gifts for purposes beyond what might be advertised. Philanthropy to me has a purpose of doing good as its bedrock principle and without that a gift is not philanthropic. So, support your bad things if you must and your conscience allows you to do so, and maybe even deduct it...but you're not a philanthropist in my book.
8. **When one looks at the history of philanthropy to date and then attempts to project it into the future, what facets stand out to protect versus the facets to discard?** Facets to protect: Choice, Intent, Betterment, Judgment, Care, Carefulness, Hope, Invention, Activity, Vision. Facets to discard, and there are fewer of these I feel, Power, Discrimination, Misinformation, Fraud, Hypocritical. While philanthropy will change and morph in the future as all elements of society must do, if the facets to keep are emphasized and the facets to discard deemphasized, then the spirit of philanthropy has a shot at

¹ Melvin Friedman, "Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method", (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 216.

continuing to be shared, used, and valued. One, tiny, point...philanthropy is not universal in use or encouragement the world over...BUT generosity is! Forced to make a choice, I'd take generosity. Actually, I'd like them both to be more broadly understood and embraced.

9. **Could the world live without "it"? "It"** being philanthropy and the causes it assists. I sure hope not. If the world can exist without philanthropy then either things have gotten really, really good for the world (nice thought, but...) or the place has lost its way completely. All the word roots of philanthropy point to a concept of care, compassion, love, service, aid, help, support, and a belief that those things can be and will be applied by people to people and the causes and issues that all those people represent. Philanthropy is not just fundraising for needs (as has been shared several times already) but is the highest form of humanity. The trust that the concept generates and has secured is distinctive and meaningful and it has provided the basis for global efforts aimed at global concerns, global interests, and global priorities. Philanthropy also goes beyond help for the helpless in that it provides for the arts, museums, music and the like. It presents opportunities for education, health care, social services. Philanthropy gives us all something to be proud of, to invest in, to share ourselves with, and to do greater good. Can the world exist without it? Nope.
10. **If the average person does not understand it, can it (philanthropy) possibly be as important as we believe it to be, or are we just creating our own preferred outcomes?** (If it is that important, how do we do a MUCH better job of educating people about it and engaging them and their dollars within it?) Just fell into my own mental trap with that dollars reference but I will move on anyway. I remain convinced that philanthropy is not only important, but vital, to the future of humankind (heck, maybe even universe-wise. Did you see the new Star Trek movie?) Our preferred outcome, although a correct one, has little to do with process as it has with expectations. The world that we have has come to depend on the noble callings within philanthropic individuals and organizations that they create and use. Expectations fall into all the appropriate categories...cash, creativity, concerns, connections, communication, clarity, challenge, community, complexity, and completion. Philanthropy without the expected outcome of assistance and recognized change for the good is pretty useless...just effort and expense for nothing. Instead, cure a disease, fix a limb, teach a language, play the harp, find a shelter, make a wish, dig a well, build a clinic, share an image, inspire an effort, match a plan, ...toss a coin...in a homeless person's cap, in a billion dollar campaign, in a McDonald's jar, in the collection plate. We learn and educate by doing, witnessing, sharing, promoting. No holding back. No bashfulness. No regrets. Sometimes wrong but never in doubt! Philanthropy is important. The generation of greater understanding of its value will continue to evolve. But, we have to keep it in the forefront of what we care about ourselves and what we hope others will care about as well. Philanthropy will look different in the future as it looks differently

today than a generation ago. Access, interest, endeavors, degrees, variations, responses...changes here are all okay...and wise over time. Philanthropy in the end is not about who helps whom for what and how, but rather why they even bother to do so. That they do is enough for me to celebrate.

ABOUT GHC CONVERSATIONS

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals from throughout North America for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about philanthropy, organizational leadership, and the sector as a whole. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the philanthropic environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each GHC Conversation, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek new dimensions of philanthropy. This essay is one contributed for *Conversation 2010*.



Conversation 2010

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In 2009, I ended my 35 year, formal, career in advancement. During that time I served three, private, educational institutions, Carthage College, Marquette University, and Elmhurst College. I was a part of senior leadership for 30 of those years.

Later in 2009, I formed Ken Bartels Consulting and secured a three-year contract to provide consulting for the City of Elmhurst in the areas of museum advancement, communications, strategic planning, and economic development.

Also in 2009, I joined the Community Bank of Elmhurst, where I had served as a Director since 1998, as Senior Vice President and Director. My duties include marketing, strategic planning, and business development.

At Conversation 2009, I had no idea what was in store for me shortly after leaving the gathering in Arizona. At Conversation 2010, I have many, new, experiences to share, but remain loyal to my philosophy that relationships are everything in life.

Ken attended *Conversation 2009* in Scottsdale, AZ.