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## They Don't Need Us Anymore

**Marv Baldwin**

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**Marv Baldwin**

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### They Don't Need Us Anymore

That is what I said to myself joyfully as our group traveled by van back to Nairobi, Kenya, after visiting Machakos, Kenya, a community that has historically been wrought with low crop-production rates, hunger, intermittent rainfall, and material poverty. All this changed for the people of Machakos several years ago when the people of that community said to one of their pastors, “We appreciate this food aid as it keeps us from starving, but what will we do in the future?”

### “We need a longer-term solution.”

This situation and the events that surround it can be very instructive if we allow them to be. As we think about demonstrating and communicating impact in the twenty-first century, we must keep in mind that lasting impact comes from long-term thinking. Situations are often more complex than they appear on the surface, and without careful consideration, donors can actually do more harm than good.

One of the main points that this essay will make is that transparency is the key in philanthropy, and if those of us involved in philanthropic work are not completely transparent with those that give to the work, we need to find something else to do, immediately.

Therefore, in the context of this essay, four issues will be discussed:

1. Hierarchy of giving
2. The mindset of individuals and groups in the Western world, often referred to as “the North”
3. Communicating, sharing, and educating people about giving
4. The path forward—getting real—bringing it “into the light”

In this essay, I will make the argument that there is a *hierarchy of giving*. There are good gifts and bad gifts, and those who are involved in philanthropic work must be open with donors about the potential power of a donation to do good and, possibly, to do harm.

Philanthropy as “brotherly love toward people and society” is often misconstrued simply as giving “what we feel like giving” or “what we are moved to give,” when in fact, we need to always stop and ask whether the gift we will give is, in fact, going to help the individual organization or community that we are giving to for the long-term.

During the twelfth century, a rabbi, physician, and philosopher named Moses Maimonides was active in Spain, Morocco, and Egypt sharing his thoughts about many topics. One of the topics that helps us think about the *hierarchy of giving* is his enumeration of the various forms of charity, from “the greatest to the most weak” (a quote from Maimonides or perhaps one of his contemporaries).

The Hebrew law encouraged *tzedakah*, which is often translated as charity. Ironically, the root word of *tzedakah* is *justice*. The simplified translation is one example of the disconnection experienced between charity and justice in our world today.



Maimonides' view of *tzedakah*, from most desirable to least desirable:

- Giving a person independence so that he or she will not have to depend on *tzedakah*. Maimonides enumerates four forms of this, from the greatest to the weakest:
  1. Giving a poor person work
  2. Making a partnership with him or her (this is lower than work, as the recipient might feel he doesn't put enough into the partnership)
  3. Giving an interest-free loan to a person in need
  4. Giving a grant to a person in need
- Giving *tzedakah* anonymously to an unknown recipient via a person (or public fund) which is trustworthy, wise, and can perform acts of *tzedakah* with your money in a most impeccable fashion
- Giving *tzedakah* anonymously to a known recipient
- Giving *tzedakah* publicly to an unknown recipient
- Giving *tzedakah* before being asked
- Giving adequately after being asked
- Giving willingly, but inadequately
- Giving "in sadness"—it is thought that Maimonides was referring to giving because of the sad feelings one might have in seeing people in need (as opposed to giving because it is a religious obligation)

***Tzedakah* may be best thought of as a donor utilizing a donation to create a framework or hold a space where justice may occur for those in need.**

Demonstrating and communicating impact in the twenty-first century starts with a commitment to be transparent. People who give must be given the opportunity to completely understand what their gifts will do. Some will want to invest the effort to understand, and others will not; but those of us involved in this work must always be prepared to share the whole story.

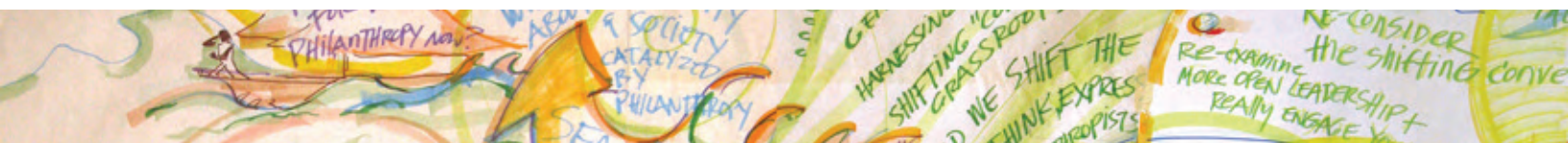
As a math major, I have been wooed by the temptation of control and exact science many times. Mix that desire for cleanliness (dare I say neatness) with a fierce independence and we have a recipe for disaster. The mindset of people living in "the North" (westerners), especially Americans, has to be considered carefully as we think about the how to communicate impact. Many "northerners" feel that they have earned their place on the economic ladder, or at least act as though they have arrived there by their own efforts and wit. This donor perspective can be the undoing of many an organization.

We have found that twenty-first century donors want to know the answers to three basic questions

As leaders in this area, the transparency we must use is critical. It is often difficult in our society to be honest with people of means, but we must do it. Such honesty and openness communicates that people are more than the sum of their finances. A friend shared a quote with me that highlights a concept we should keep in mind when dealing with all people: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; rather, we are spiritual beings having a human experience."

We have found that twenty-first century donors want to know the answers to three basic questions:

1. How much is the overhead of the organization?
2. Who decides how my donation will be used?
3. Does the donation really get to those who need it?



Donors may not articulate these questions for fear of offending someone, but we know these questions are on their minds. It's essential that we provide donors with this information whether or not they ask for it.

One of the important things we have done at Foods Resource Bank (FRB) is to ask our community-growing projects to designate the money they raise. In that way, they have a better sense that the answers to some of their questions (2 and 3 above) are satisfied.

Question 1 is also a key question because it goes beyond a percentage; it speaks to the effectiveness of the organization and the relationships the organization builds with donors and other organizations.

One telling sign for us at FRB is that we offer growing projects the option of designating to all programming or part programming and part operations. Many inquire about our need for operating funding, and many voluntarily contribute to our needed operational funding. Another key to this approach is to engage people in conversations about the ratios, the operational activities, etc. What we have found is that people know that organizations have operational costs and they are willing to fund them. The bottom line is, they want to know that the organization is not wasteful.

There are several deeply held beliefs that seem to be at work with many “northern” people, which will be addressed here briefly. People often feel that an organization needs them or should act like they need them. We have discussed the human desire to be needed and how this can be an obstacle to real gifts. People also have a desire or an internal need to exercise control over the gifts they give. In essence, we can view donors' gifts as “our gift to them” instead of something they have entrusted us with to provide mercy or bring justice.

FRB has been in operation for 10 years, and yet because of our many partnerships, members, and experienced volunteers, we have more than 10 years' experience. Our linked experiences allow us to think about some very deep issues that create long-term impacts and can bring unintended consequences.

We have seen several specific views expressed through some of our volunteer donors that are instructive in demonstrating progress toward transparency and long-term transformation. Those views are captured in the questions listed below:

- How might I best support this organization to ensure it can meet its mission and vision?
- Will my gift hinder the work or distract the staff, board, or other volunteers from doing the work they are supposed to be doing?
- How can my gift empower and equip rather than create dependency?
- Might I damage this organization by giving too much money or by designating it to the wrong things?

Another big advantage FRB has is the wisdom of farmers. Farmers take the long, generational view, and this helps FRB be less reactive in a sound-bite, do-it now world. FRB credits the farmer's life, humility, and wisdom for our development as an organization. At a core, farmers bring a balance to FRB and those that associate with us. This is not to say that these traits are true of every farmer, but many have had to bring themselves along through many years of difficulty, worry, and uncertainty. What we see is that time and again, farmers and those who respect and understand farmers are just the type of long-view people that we need in our society today. Jim Collins, in *Good to Great* and *The Social Sectors*, would say that FRB has much value, essentially resource based on our brand and our time added (or perhaps multiplied) together. A farmer's wisdom comes from their dealing with many complexities in basic ways. The best farmers are not monolithic, however. They are focused and disciplined. Many farmers see the world in varying shades of gray—or perhaps green?

As an aside: One of our farmers once mused about the many, many shades of green in nature (and he was not talking about money). It is worth making ourselves present to notice things like that in our world!



## Learning to Give Thanks for Others Rather Than Just Thanking Them

Thanking people for giving something sets up a potentially damaging cycle that can fuel the donor's "they need me" engine.

A few years ago, our senior staff had a great discussion about thanking people for their gifts to FRB. Conventional wisdom in fundraising circles says that a donor should be thanked seven times.

At our meeting, Joan Fumetti, who is on FRB's staff and is a pastor with the United Church of Christ, shared that she felt thanking people was manipulative, and after much contemplation and discussion, we agreed.

Thanking people for giving something sets up a potentially damaging cycle that can fuel the donor's "they need me" engine.

We have shifted to a "giving thanks for people" stance, which we feel puts the credit where the credit is due. Our view is that we are all God's children, and no material things actually belong to us. We believe strongly that we are stewards and must consider mercy and justice first as we decide how to use the resources we have been fortunate enough to accumulate. Much of society's language revolves around earning what we have and controlling what we have. We feel is not transparent to continue to fuel those falsehoods.

One of the pieces we have turned to many times is Henri Nouwen's *Spirituality of Fund-Raising*, which speaks to two issues that need to be highlighted as we consider how to communicate with donors.

1. Nouwen points out that we must share the vision and mission of the organization and then invite people to join
2. Nouwen says that the problem with philanthropic work, especially work that focuses on the poor, often carries a bias toward the rich. He says that we must be cautious to always treat people as people, and be very careful to never treat people as financial resource<sup>1</sup>

Communicating clearly about what our vision and mission are will be central to communicating impact in the twenty-first century. People who consider giving to an organization must have a clear understanding of what the organization's purpose is.

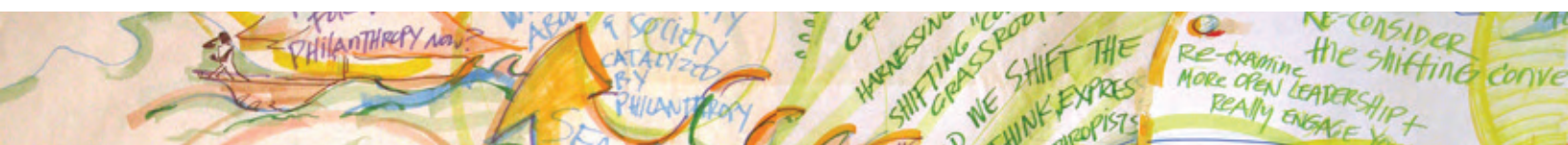
We have noted time and again that selling or convincing occurs in our society. At FRB, we work hard to be different by maintaining our vision and mission and then articulating them clearly. The challenge in this approach comes from a culture that all of us share. We are used to, dare we say comfortable with, being "convinced" or "sold" and then "closed." This view leads quickly to a relationship based on customers and vendors.

I believe this will be one of the biggest, if not the biggest, challenge to overcome in philanthropy over the next many years. People are used to selling and convincing, being sold and being convinced, and we must be very conscious in our communications not to sell. We must share our vision and mission, essentially our story and purpose, thus allowing people the opportunity to join or not.

### We should be inviting people to join us in our work.

Nouwen addresses another problem: the challenge of seeing people as financial instruments rather than God's children. This seems quite simple and direct on the surface but, in fact, goes deeply into the core of all our beings. Over the years, I have had a chance to sit with many people who have a good amount of wealth, and one of their greatest needs is to be valued for who they are rather than what they have and what they have to give, financially speaking.

In my opinion, treating someone of means as though their financial status is their greatest value is one of the cruelest and least transparent things we can do.



The other thing we need to be cautious of in our work is the trap of extreme communications. Perhaps the most vivid example is the almost constant vilification and/or victimization that occurs in our conversations and communications. As we guard against our own language, which comes from our basic views of others, we must be cognizant of making others out to be villains or victims. We must be present with people and view all people as similarly in this struggle called life. It can be a grand journey if we can view ourselves as one people and then communicate and act on that vision.

## Volume of Data Does Not Equal Transparency

Some organizations, including ours, who have a desire to bring things into the open, have a tendency to give more information than people can ever digest. This is where our work to be present, listen carefully, and ask clarifying questions becomes critical to efficient, effective, and impactful communication.

Every person measures things in different ways, and although it is socially irresponsible to admit that most of us make gut decisions, we do. All of us use the Pareto principle (aka, the 80/20 principle). Some wait for a 30 percent/70 percent ratio, but we are only kidding ourselves if we ever think we have ALL the information.

We have all developed different lenses to understand our world and to assess whether people are trustworthy and programs are working. We can do a lot of assuming about what information people want in order to understand or measure impact, but it is much more effective to ask them. It's even better if they are willing to dig through documents or visit in person to figure it out, but that generally comes only with time and deeper commitment.

So the question becomes, How do we encourage people to delve deeper into issues without burying them with information? We must not underestimate the desire for journey and discovery most of us have. If organizations that receive donations do too much of the work for those interested in learning more, the information is less likely to stick.

Layering information is the key to satisfying those who can't or won't take the time, and providing full access is the key for those who will. Helping people set up tools like Google searches and RSS feeds will be a way to help people triangulate information they need to make decisions about whether their donations are having the impact they desire.

Finally, it is important to let people know we don't have it all figured out. Some will try to hold organizations and individuals to a standard that is unattainable. We must, as leaders, be willing to be open about our mistakes, failures, epiphanies, and fears. Walter Brueggemann has written about leaders and the internal struggle each of us has. If we are not first candid with ourselves about our "darkness," we cannot ever be real with others, leaving our organizations to suffer from non-transparency and not ever knowing why.

We must not underestimate the desire for journey and discovery most of us have.

## Bringing It "Into the Light"

Communicating impact seems like a fairly straightforward thing in a world focused on measurement and time. The path for us to overcome our unfounded dependency on metrics includes utilizing a healthy mix of humility, an understanding that things are often more complex than we want them to be, and respect for others.

Many times in the years to come, we will be put in the position of making plans and decisions and then taking action to implement them. We must accept that we will never make a perfect decision, but we must make the best decision we can, keeping in mind that mercy and justice must be foremost.



As we find ourselves tempted by a desire for significance, recognition, and comfort, we must remind ourselves to focus on our own shortcomings so we might be humble and then look toward others to see who might need a word of encouragement or a hand to get started.

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<sup>1</sup>Nouwen, Henri J. M., 2004, *The Spirituality of Fund-Raising*, Henri Nouwen Society (Nouwen, 2004)



## About this extract

In Spring 2009, Gary Hubbell Consulting convened a think tank of North American nonprofit organization and development leaders. Four topics were selected for discussion, each of which became the focus of an insightful essay by each of the hand-picked attendees. The four topics are: New Perspectives on Leadership, Reimagining the Future of Philanthropy, Development in a Systems Context, and Demonstrating and Communicating Philanthropy's Impact. The resulting e-book, *In Search of New Meaning: Philanthropy, Community and Society*, is available for free download at [www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com](http://www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com). This essay is an extract from that publication.

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