

The currencies of philanthropy
by Nancy Dickenson-Hazard

Our children attended a small parochial grade school, and twice a week the school proved hot lunches for \$1.50. As a working mom, I loved these Tuesday and Thursday lunches because they meant 10 or more minutes of sleep at least two times a week. Our son and daughter enjoyed it because, for those two days, they were freed of PB&J (peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches), carrot sticks and boxed drinks.

When our son was in fourth grade, I dutifully dropped him off at school on hot-lunch days with his \$1.50. But when I picked him up in the afternoon, I noticed he was cranky and often complained of being hungry. Thinking his hunger was induced by a growth spurt, I started bringing after-school snacks with me for rapid consumption as soon as he entered the car. This tactic worked quite well, and then I noticed he wasn't having these hunger attacks on the days he took lunch, only days he went with lunch money.

I asked my 9-year-old what he was doing with the lunch money, and he sheepishly told me he was giving it away to the various causes the school took collections for—causes such as UNICEF, needy families and March of Dimes. He said he didn't need lunch as much as those people needed help. Needless to say, I was touched by his generosity, but somehow I had to convey that using his lunch money was not the best alternative. We finally struck a deal in which he would have part of his allowance to give as he chose. Throughout his school years, he practiced this philanthropy, even extending it in later years to service hours for others.

In recalling this experience, I am reminded that philanthropy is simply the expression of being generous with oneself. This generosity is expressed in different ways—sometimes through time and in other instances through talent, money or other resources. All are expressions of intentional generosity, expressions discovered through reflection and alignment of values with action.

Sometimes, what starts out as giving time or talent leads to giving other things. What prompts people to give can stem from a variety of motivations. It can come from a sense of obligation, from guilt-induced pressure or from self-promotion. The most powerful motivator, however, is giving because of passion or a highly held, personal belief in the cause, what it stands for and what it seeks to accomplish.

When people are passionate about a cause, they see a connection between themselves and the cause. They see their beliefs being lived out through activities engaged in by the organizers—that the activities are making a difference in realizing their beliefs. As a result, they are motivated to become involved, to support the cause and to be generous with themselves in seeing the cause and their beliefs advanced.

People who invest in a cause they are passionate about want a return on their investment. They want to see that time, talent or money is well-used. Passionate people expect a high degree of responsiveness and results from the causes they contribute to and ask for very little in personal return. For themselves, they wish only for appreciation. They are content with recognition, a simple thank-you as their paycheck. The ultimate payoff for passionate people is the satisfaction of contributing and giving of self.

As individuals, our biggest challenge is not to find causes that we value, but rather to discover which currency of philanthropy to choose in expressive our generosity. For some people, time is a limited commodity, so investing extensive hours to a cause might not be realistic. Their currency might be small investments of time for a short-term task or project.

Others might elect to make a monetary donation. For others, money is their limited resource, so they may choose to give of their talent by organizing an event, creating a brochure or preparing food. The point is twofold: Each person has something to contribute, and each person has to find the best expression for himself or herself.

We can use our \$1.50 for hot lunches...or for something else.

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