

Black Philanthropy:
The Potential and Limits of Private Generosity in a Civil Society
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In the African-American community in which I grew up, the rivers of compassion ran deep. We were poor, but when we were hungry we shared with each other and when we were sick we cared for each other. We did not think of what we gave as philanthropy, because sharing was an act of reciprocity in which both the giver and the receiver benefited. We did not think of what we did as volunteering because caring was as much a moral imperative as an act of free will. But despite the long African-American tradition of self-help and mutual assistance, most Americans, when they think about the participation of Blacks in philanthropy, consider them only as recipients of charity rather than as members of a community with its own unique tradition of benevolence.

Three ideas are converging to make Black philanthropy an idea whose time has come. The first is the notion of a civil society, that cluster of ideas and ideals, organizations and social arrangements through which the public mobilizes itself and finds its voice. Black Americans have always believed that society precedes the state and that the patriot must be willing to protect his country even from his own government. It is for many people in many parts of the world, however, a new way of thinking.

The second idea is civic engagement, the notion that individuals acting independently of government can make a difference in the life of a community or culture. Black Americans have never regarded private action as a substitute for government, but they have always seen it as an important alternative to government. They have often taken matters into their own hands because they recognize better than most that while some governments in some parts of the world are working well for some of their people, no government anywhere in the world is working well for all of its people – especially those on the margins. It is for many people in many parts of the world, however, a new way of acting.

The third idea is personal and social transformation, the notion that neighbors helping neighbors and even strangers helping strangers can provide a new perspective, a new way of seeing ourselves, a new understanding of the purpose of the human journey. People around the world are finding out that when they get involved with the needs of others, both those who help and those who are helped are transformed. It is for many people in many parts of the world a new way of being.

I am, thus, convinced that the 1990s will be a pivotal decade for those concerned about the potential and limits of African-American philanthropy. Now that the reality of a future in which the majority of our citizens will be descendants of non-Europeans has begun to take shape, there is a growing interest in the culture, values, attitudes and social vision of the various groups that constitute the American society. But no one seems to be asking what these changes portend for the way in which Americans meet social needs and solve social problems. Is there likely to be greater dependence on government, a greater role for the public sector, or will the historic pragmatism that has seen us balance private generosity with public benevolence continue?

This is the underlying question permeating this lecture, but before we can assess adequately the challenges and opportunities that lie in the future, we need to understand better the religious, economic, social and political influences that shaped African-American philanthropy in the past.

The Genesis of Black Philanthropy

Invariably, the question is asked whether or not the emphasis on Black philanthropy fosters a separatist mood or encourages divisive practices. Quite the contrary, the genesis of philanthropy in any form is community. Where people feel a sense of belonging, they are likely to feel a sense of obligation. And as their sense of community expands, so does the scope of their philanthropy. It is one of the ironies of our time, however, that as communities around the world are becoming more alike – with our economies more interdependent, our life styles, values and aspirations more similar – the more people are turning inward, seeking to return to smaller, more intimate centers of meaning and belonging.

This may appear at first to be a contradiction, but I am convinced that it is a natural part of the search for common ground, a search which involves, first and foremost, the search for beginnings. As John Naisbitt argues in *Megatrends 2000*, the more humanity sees itself as inhabiting a single planet, the greater the need for each culture on the globe to assert a unique heritage.

This tension between the larger community of meaning and the smaller community of memory is part of the duality of Black life that W.E.B. DuBois wrote about in *The Souls of Black Folks*

Almost a century later, African-Americans are still forced to come to grips with what DuBois described as this "twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

It should be no surprise, then, that this dualism is evident in the philanthropic practices of African-Americans. Both King Davis and Emmett Carson have pointed out in their studies that Black philanthropy has been both a survival mechanism in which members of the community sought to provide for each other and a response to the overwhelming social, economic and political difficulties facing the community.

The communal tradition of caring for each other has deep historical and metaphysical roots. *Homo-communalis*, the idea that we live and have our being in a caring social community, is at the heart of African metaphysics. The emphasis is on a network of kinship in perpetuity, a community that is not simply intergenerational, but includes the living, the living-dead and the unborn. One can still find manifestations of this idea among members of the African diaspora in very different places in very different parts of the world. Several years ago, the first lady of Costa Rica took a small group of us down the intricate waterways of the Caribbean Coast where descendants of Africa settled.

When we stopped to meet with local residents in a rural village along one of the remote canals, I saw a sign on the wall of a local school that said, "this land belongs to all the people of Costa Rica. Some are dead. Others are still to be born."

This cosmology of connectedness provided the first principles of early Black philanthropy. The cooperative spirit that emerged led to the formation of self-help mutual aid societies, first, to provide voluntary services and financial resources among free Blacks in the North and South, and later to ease the transition from slavery to freedom for those who had been slaves. The earliest of these mutual aid societies was the African Masonic Lodge in Boston and the Free African Society in Philadelphia, both formed in 1787. Very soon, thereafter, voluntary associations to promote and facilitate self-help could be found wherever African-Americans settled.

While basically ignored by de Tocqueville and others who celebrated voluntarism and philanthropy in the United States, African-American voluntary groups provided the means for economic survival through the sharing of resources and through training in the skills and knowledge needed to cope with a cruel environment. Moreover, they helped the dispossessed to make sense of their reality by serving as vehicles for cohesion, group consciousness and positive self-identity.

What is remarkable about these early manifestations of the charitable impulse among African-Americans was not simply how they served the illiterate and poor in their own midst, but how they served the larger community as well. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones are celebrated in Black history for their role in the founding of the Black church, but they were also the founders of the Free American Society, a non-sectarian group designed to provide mutual aid to members in sickness and to care for widows and fatherless children. There is a very revealing piece about Allen and Jones and the scope of Black philanthropy in the archives on the great plague of yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793:

The elders of the African Society met on September 5 and decided that they must see what the Negro inhabitants could do to help the stricken white citizens. Two by two, they set out a tour of the city. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen went to a house on Emsley's Alley where they found a mother dead, a father dying, two small children hungry and frightened. They sent for the Guardians of the Poor and moved on. That day they visited more than twenty white families. Other Negroes did likewise, and afterwards all the elders came together again to tell what they had seen. Next day Jones and Allen called on Mayor Clarkson to ask how the Negroes could be of most use. The Mayor received them gratefully... Most of his Federalist friends had fled, and nearly

his entire civil service, but the city was at last producing new and courageous leaders from his humblest people.

When one considers that Richard Allen and Absalom Jones formed the Free African Society after being forcefully removed from a white church for mistakenly sitting in the white sector, it is, indeed, remarkable that they would risk their own health and well-being in order to provide help to the white victims of the plague. Yet, what is even more remarkable is that despite the valuable contributions of Black voluntary associations in the early 19th century, several states enacted laws banning all Black "literary, dramatic, social, moral or charitable societies."

What acts of oppression by public officials could not banish or weaken, however, was the Black church which was from the very beginning the center of Black philanthropy. It was both a religious institution supported by charitable giving and the primary intermediary for charitable giving to other institutions. The first formally organized community foundation was not created until 1914 in Cleveland, but the Black church has always been a kind of community foundation; encouraging giving, collecting funds and distributing them for the good of the I community. Black ministers understood better than most Americans that philanthropy, like community and caring, is not necessarily a given. It does not always happen automatically. It needs a catalyst, a vehicle to activate the latent impulse, to bring community needs and community assets together.

While the Black church and the Black minister were at the center of Black philanthropy, the real heroes were the ordinary people who, with meager resources, accomplished extraordinary deeds. Mired in poverty, racked by frequent epidemics and, oppressed by vicious racism, the poor reached out to the poor, sharing what little they had with each other. But it would be a mistake to assume that this was the sum total of Black philanthropy. The benevolence of the Black fraternal orders, mutual aid societies, the Black church and the Black family was supplemented by a curious caste of what one author called aristocrats of color. In my own home state of Louisiana, for example, there was a 19th century Black philanthropist named Thorny Lafon who contributed so much of his own money to the development of New Orleans that the state legislature ordered a bust to be carved in his likeness and set up in a public institution in that city. According to historians John Hope Franklin, Carter G. Woodson, Charles H. Wesley and others, individual cases of affluence and philanthropy among free Blacks were numerous. The wealthiest Black in early America was James Forten, who started out as an errand boy around the docks of Philadelphia, became a sailmaker and accumulated a sizeable fortune. By the time he died in 1832 at the age of 66, he had given away most of his wealth financing the escape of runaway slaves, buying the freedom of others and contributing to countless causes in behalf of his oppressed brothers and sisters. And there were others of significant wealth like Jehu Jones, a proprietor of one of Charleston, South Carolina's best hotels, and Solomon Humphries, a leading grocer in Macon, Georgia.

From the benevolence of others and from their own efforts, free Americans of African descent became large property owners as well. They owned so much property in New Orleans that more than 100 years before David Duke, the *Daily Picayune* was moved to describe them as "a sober, industrious, and moral class, far advanced in education and civilization." As early as 1800 free Blacks in Philadelphia owned nearly a hundred houses and lots. It was aid given by some of these property owners that helped to fuel the institutions of self-help that contributed to the survival of the widely scattered diaspora.

If the first stage in the development of Black philanthropy had to do with the survival of the diaspora, the second stage was in response to an unresponsive government. From the very beginning, African-Americans believed that a good society depends as much on the goodness of individuals as on the soundness of government and the fairness of laws. But they also knew and understood both the potential and the limits of private action. After all, a benevolent slaveholder was still a slaveholder, and while mutual aid societies provided important forms of self-help, the resources available to them were neither large enough nor consistent enough to cope with the social problems and social needs of the time. Early African-Americans understood what many now forget, that whenever a large share of the burdens of coping with the social needs of a society is dependent on private action, it is almost certain that the resources made available will be less than what a truly benevolent community considers optimal.

The freedom of the private benefactor to determine which public need is to be met by private action is one of the strengths of a democratic society. However, it is also true that this freedom has its limitations. Those who use private resources for public purposes will rarely use them to benefit all segments of the community equally. Thus, serious gaps may occur in the coverage of categories of need as well as groups in need. Private benefactors may choose to provide housing for the homeless. They may choose to feed those who are hungry. They may choose to help heal the sick. But when the intention is to promote the "general" welfare, the well-being of the community cannot be left to the private choices and preference of those who voluntarily choose to be benevolent.

Thus, it should be no surprise that the third stage in the evolution of Black philanthropy involved a shift in emphasis from the use of philanthropic institutions to transcend government to the support of voluntary organizations in order to transform government. Those who seek to promote democracy abroad tend to forget that the model for victors over communism in Eastern Europe and fighters for more independence elsewhere is the American civil rights movement with its strong network of voluntary organizations, supported by contributions from Blacks of both significant and modest means. The legacy of Black philanthropy as a vehicle for social change is, thus, a reminder that the best way to demonstrate the efficacy of our system abroad is to demonstrate that it can work equitably for all of our citizens at home.

The fourth and present stage in the evolution of Black philanthropy is its use as venture capital to maximize the impact of the charitable dollar. It involves a new sophistication about the various legal options available to take advantage of tax incentives and to ensure

that charitable dollars will be streams flowing in perpetuity rather than just bail outs of institutions in crisis. Gifts like Bill and Camille Cosby's \$20 million contribution to Spelman College are making the headlines, but many other Blacks, often of more modest means, are establishing foundations, creating charitable funds in community foundations, giving through the National Black United Fund and taking advantage of other opportunities to invest their charitable dollars the way they invest their other financial assets, for maximum return.

So while one-third of Black America continues to live below the poverty line, the growing affluence of others in the Black community indicates the strengthening of the philanthropic potential of African-Americans. It is not simply individual giving, but the charitable activities of established groups that address community needs, such as child welfare and education, that demonstrate the power of this potential.

The Challenges and Opportunities Facing Black Philanthropy

It is important that we celebrate the legacy of Black philanthropy and encourage its continued practice in both old and new forms. But this lecture would be incomplete if we did not look beyond the celebration of the past to the new challenges and opportunities posed by the future. Let me call attention to three: 1) the opportunity to infuse the community of philanthropy with new vitality; 2) the opportunity to infuse the culture of giving with new values; and 3) the opportunity to infuse the practice of philanthropy with new vision.

Consider, first, the opportunity to infuse the community of philanthropy with new vitality. It is safe to predict that the changing demographics of society will change the demographics of philanthropy. We already know that low-income citizens give a larger percentage of their income for charitable purposes than their better-off colleagues, but most Americans know very little about the traditions and practices of the more than 800,000 African-American families who have incomes of more than \$50,000. Recent research by Independent Sector and the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies has found that there is very little difference between the giving practices of Blacks and whites with similar levels of income. In fact, both Blacks and whites base their decision to contribute to charity on the same factors: their belief in the goals of the organization; their judgment as to whether the organization is effective in meeting those goals; and whether they identify, racially or otherwise, with the organization.

While recent research has begun to dispel old myths and shed new light on the philanthropic potential of African Americans, few Americans know that there are more than 64 Black organizations with giving programs and more than 50 Black foundations or funds in community foundations. Many of these new foundations are still in the formative stage, but those who analyze trends in philanthropy are convinced that the African-American community is poised for a breakthrough in the establishment of philanthropic foundations on a large scale.

Two of the best examples of this new potential are Earvin "Magic" Johnson and Michael Jordan. Many athletes and entertainers lend their names to charitable causes, but Magic and Michael bring the same creativity to philanthropy that they bring to the corporate suite and the basketball floor. Magic has been responsible for millions of dollars donated to the United Negro College Fund, but he has also given heavily to many other worthy causes that benefit Americans regardless of race. The Michael Jordan Foundation is a very different model of organized philanthropy, but it is part of the new infrastructure of African-American giving that is bringing new vitality to the whole of the philanthropic sector rather than simply Black philanthropy.

But it is not only African-Americans with means who have the potential to contribute to the supply side of philanthropy. In Ohio, an African-American janitor at a theological seminary left \$100,000 to set up a fund that is being used to support Black church studies. A Black caretaker at a golf course in Washington, D.C., left more than \$300,000 to set up a special fund at his church.

And the chairperson of the Council of Foundations' committee on pluralism and her sister a, black woman of modest means, established two funds, one at the Southern Education Foundation in Atlanta and the other with the Arizona Community Foundation in Phoenix. In each case, these donors were struck by the way in which a public or community foundation enabled them to multiply the impact of their charitable dollars. And that is why I am convinced that we need a special effort in every community to make sure that people whose giving has been crisis-oriented can now take advantage of the incentives and techniques of planned giving.

If the first challenge is to infuse the community of philanthropy with new vitality, the second is an opportunity to infuse the culture of giving with new values. Just as American philanthropy in its first two centuries was a product of the tradition and values of a mixture of immigrant groups largely from Europe, so it will evolve and change in the next century. As the new groups redefine American culture, so are they likely to redefine American philanthropy.

It is useful to look at a profile of the new pluralism. According to the World Development Forum, if you lived in a representative global village of 1,000, 564 citizens would be Asians, 210 Europeans, 86 Africans, 80 South Americans and 60 North Americans. There would be 300 Christians (183 Catholics, 84 Protestants and 33 Orthodox), 175 Muslims, 128 Hindus, 55 Buddhists, 47 Animists and 210 confessed atheists and 85 from other smaller, religious groups. Of these 1,000 people, 60 would control half the total income, 500 would be hungry, 600 would live in shantytowns and 700 would be illiterate.

We are already seeing the impact of this new pluralism in our educational and economic infrastructures in the workplace, public schools, college curricula, and the marketing strategies of some corporations. It is surprising, however, that in a society that depends so heavily on civic organizations and voluntarism, so little attention has been given to pluralism in our civic infrastructure. The old pluralism was hierarchical. It regarded a

difference in color as a difference in kind. The new pluralism must be egalitarian. Unless we are prepared to honor the history and accept the aspirations of people of very different cultures and complexions, we will find that diversity will be divisive and the coherence that leads to community, illusive.

Everywhere I go, I find people romanticizing the good old days when social cohesion and civic solidarity came from a common race, a common religion or a common culture; when neighbors came together to build each other's barns. New voices are now suggesting that the community of the future is likely to be a dynamic process in which strangers meet, discover their commonality, deal with conflicts and celebrate their unity while still remaining strangers.

We will, thus, need a paradigm shift from the notion of a network of neighbors to the metaphor of a company of strangers. The new strangers with whom our lot is cast are fundamentally different from the Anglo-European and Mediterranean populations who dominated our society in the 1800s. Few changes are as unsettling as the decline of European dominance abroad and the declining influence of the descendants of Europe at home. This inevitable evolution in the American culture raises discomfort and concern in our civic as well as economic life.

Does this mean that pluralism in philanthropy is an unrealistic goal? Quite the contrary. In a 1990 issue of our magazine, *Foundation News*, Asian, Hispanic, Native American and African-American writers describe in fascinating and intriguing ways how their communities are enriching our culture of giving. We are now learning that the forms of benevolence that promote the well-being of others have no ethnic or cultural boundaries. The charitable impulse is triggered whenever people see themselves as part of a community, whether it be the family, the neighborhood or the nation. And as the notion of community expands, so does the scope of their philanthropy.

Moreover, as new groups see members of their communities involved in ways that promote confidence in existing civic organizations, they will likely infuse these institutions with both the largess of their labors and the vitality of their culture. So as the tradition and practices of Black philanthropy go mainstream, I hope that we will see much more emphasis on the relationship between the giver and the receiver. I hope that how we give will matter at least as much as what we give; those who receive will be seen as not less than or different from those who give. I hope that when we engage in the act of giving, we will do so in such a way that the humanity, dignity and equality of both the giver and the receiver are acknowledged and affirmed. I hope that Black philanthropy will be creative money supporting grassroots advocacy and high-level policy analysis rather than simply maintenance money bailing out endangered institutions. I hope that Black philanthropy will be used to strike out at the causes of social pathologies rather than simply ameliorating the consequences of social neglect.

I hope that Black philanthropy will help put those much maligned, but very fundamental, values like pluralism, diversity, civil rights and equal opportunity into perspective. Many civic organizations are finding that inclusiveness is not only right and appropriate, but

very often a pre-condition to effectiveness. They are discovering that as we move closer to a global village, removing barriers to participation and including diverse perspectives and talents increase organizational effectiveness, provide new vitality and expand social vision. Infusing the practices of philanthropy with new vision is our third challenge.

The vision our society needs most, and the one I hope this lecture series will be used to affirm, is that of a caring community. We need to know more about how to cultivate the charitable impulse and how to use philanthropy to foster pluralism while maintaining enough social cohesion to enable us to act as a single community. Here I find that the most compelling vision of community still comes from John Winthrop's notion of a city on a hill in which we delight in each other, seek to make others' condition our own, rejoice together, and labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body. It is in making the condition of others our own that an enduring connection is likely to be made. That condition may be the need of some group in the community – rather than the whole community – but a sense of community develops when the involvement brings together significant portions of the community in a way that creates a community-wide ownership of that need. When what was "their" problem becomes "our" problem, the transaction transforms a mere association into a community.

It is this kind of involvement with the needs of others that provides the social cement that binds people together in community. Organized philanthropy is not the only formula or the final answer, but it reminds us that doing something for someone else is powerful. When we experience the problem of the really poor or troubled, when we promote excellence in theater or dance, when we help someone to find cultural meaning in a museum or creative expression in a painting, we are far more likely to find common ground. And we are likely to gain a sense of personal satisfaction and meaning in the process.

The ultimate vision of a civil society, we conclude, must be cultivating compassionate values. I began the research for my recently published book with this concern in mind. Not all of the donors I studied were motivated by compassionate values, but, for those who were, I found four stages in the development of the charitable impulse: stage I, in which compassionate values were developed; stage II, in which compassionate values were nurtured; stage III, in which compassionate values were activated; and stage IV, in which public options beyond private benevolence were considered.

In the first stage, I was struck by the degree to which private beneficence was often a part of a family culture. Compassionate values were taught by the family during early childhood. I am, thus, convinced that the ability to develop or sustain a caring community does not lie exclusively in either our politics or our philanthropy, but in our progeny. Our children must learn from us at an early age that if the strong exploit the weak, or the wealthy ignore the needy, the future of our community is gravely impaired.

In the second stage, I was impressed with the importance of the later reinforcement of the family's compassionate values by religion, intermediary institutions or what we call

morality tales and cultural parables. These tales and parables, which are a vital part of African-American history, can be found in every culture. They constitute a set of orienting ideas less rigid than an ideology, but also less ephemeral than a public mood. They may be rooted in religion, literature or indigenous mythology, but they help to shape the moral assumptions that lead to caring and giving.

The third stage represents the movement from empathy to engagement, from individualism to community. The dominant myth of the American experience is the story of the little guy who works hard, takes risk, believes in himself, and eventually earns wealth, fame and honor. This notion of individualism which was so romanticized in the nineteenth century and the 1980s, never reached the same level of deification in much of the African-American community. The idea of community with its networks of brotherhood and sisterhood imposed not only a private sentiment, but also a sense of social responsibility that we desperately need to recover and apply across the lines of race and culture.

The fourth and final stage in the evolution of the charitable impulse is the awareness of the limits of private benevolence and the interdependence of private, public and political life. It is this fourth stage that is so fundamental to understanding the legacy of and vision of Black philanthropy. David Owen, the great historian of English philanthropy, could have been speaking for many in the African-American community when he argued that as the view of what constitutes a tolerable minimum became less restricted in English history, it became obvious that the major social tasks lay well beyond the resources of private charity, however ambitious and devoted its benefactors. He went on to say that "to help individuals handle the unavoidable and grinding poverty of their lives with what success they could, even to assist them in meeting their special crises was one thing; but to ask why and whether the destitution and the evils associated with it were necessary in modern society raised a different order of issue."

Black philanthropy has not been, and can not be, satisfied with any suggestion that private action is a substitute for the legitimate social role of government. While it must avoid partisan politics and conform to the regulatory standards that define the limits of lobbying, it cannot isolate itself from the way decisions are made in the allocation of a trillion dollar federal budget and more than five hundred billion dollars of expenditure by local and state governments. Philanthropy is primarily a private virtue, but its use to inculcate values and shape the vision of a community extends as far back as early Egyptian, Roman and Greek societies. The effects of private foundation, and, increasingly, community foundation engagement with public policy in our own history are engraved widely and deeply – in legislation, in court decisions, in public attitudes, and in social changes across a wide front.

It would, thus, be a serious mistake for Black foundation executives and those who are creating new foundations and charitable funds in African-American communities to permit the private resources they influence to be used exclusively for meeting social needs without supporting those organizations that are asking why these needs continue to go unmet in a democratic society.

In summary, then, my vision for Black philanthropy is that it will offer hope and help to those on the margins of society; provide vitality and vision for those in the mainstream; demonstrate to the world that in a just society diversity need not be divisive; persuade those who are unduly anxious about the new pluralism that the fear of difference is a fear of the future; and, finally, help transform the laissez-faire notion of live and let live into the moral imperative of live and help live. If this lecture series can capture and cultivate this vision, I am convinced that the legacy of Black philanthropy will be secure and gatherings like this will be commonplace.

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