

## COMMENT ON GUNDERMAN

*Jennifer Morse*

Dr. Gunderman has given us an excellent introduction to the issues involved in developing a new and more humane paradigm of philanthropy. I want to suggest that his vision is both more radical and less novel than he seems to suppose. We have an entire sector already at hand to implement his vision. Yet harnessing this sector will require an even more radical shift in vision than that of merely giving up the charity view and the scientific view. I would like to call his view (and mine) an organic view of giving.

The sector that is already at hand is women, or more particularly, mothers. The reason Gunderman's vision is not so novel as he supposes is that women have a long and dignified history of precisely the kind of giving Gunderman endorses. In the last generation, however, women have been persuaded to abandon this activity in favor of work in the paid labor market. This is why the organic vision of giving is so radical: we need to reimagine the role of women in society in a much more profound way than we have been willing to do until now.

Within the last generation, women have been convinced that their dignity depends in important ways on their earning power, their job titles, and their personal independence. Women have defined their dignity in terms of equality with men in the competitive and commercial arenas of life. A more radical and yet organic view of the role of women, however, sees interdependence as a good thing; it sees market activity as derivative, not central, to the main business of a life well lived; and it sees the parental vocation to love as far more dignified than even the most exalted profession.

### ***Necessarily Dependent***

Gunderman identifies two major paradigms of philanthropy as the charity view and the scientific view. He correctly diagnoses several weaknesses of these approaches. I would like to add to his critique. Gunderman observes, "If the scientific paradigm succeeded on all fronts, neediness itself might be purged, and philanthropy might put itself out of business."

The problem with this view is that some people are necessarily dependent. We might even describe them as legitimately dependent. Every child, for example, is born dependent. And although individual parents aspire to “put themselves out of business” in the sense that they want their children to grow up, society as a whole can not harbor any such aspiration. The young, and other dependents, will always need sustained attention. The chronically ill, the mentally ill, the elderly, the seriously disabled—all these people are legitimately dependent, and will remain so, no matter how successfully the philanthropic sector is organized. Dependency is simply a fact of the human condition.

The autonomy we so value is the normal condition only for some people, and only for part of their lives. We are all born as helpless infants, completely dependent on others for our care. We may be lucky enough to live so long that we will again be dependent on others for assistance of many kinds. In addition, anyone could get a bump on the head that would render him radically dependent upon others. Any of us could become incapacitated by a mental or physical illness. Our ability to take care of ourselves, the independence we cherish so much, is not a necessary condition but rather a contingent fact, one that could be other than it is.

It is unreasonable to attack dependency as if it were necessarily a problem in itself. Gunderman’s critique of what he calls the charity view of philanthropy suffers from the same problem. He correctly observes that meeting immediate human needs is a good thing unless it fosters further dependency. I would amend his analysis, however, by observing that some people are necessarily dependent on others. For those people, the charity view is undoubtedly the superior model. The chronically ill, the mentally ill, the infant—these are people whose dependency is not likely to respond to incentives. They are, as a matter of fact, simply unable to care for themselves. As a result, the charity model works best for them; it encourages personal methods of providing care, and these methods are far more humane means of assisting the legitimately dependent. Both donor and recipient can benefit from such encounters. As Mother Teresa used to say, “The rich save the poor, and the poor save the rich.” The interaction with the poor, or the dependent, helps the able-bodied, or the rich, to see that his autonomy is itself a gift from God.

### *Natural Volunteers*

It is our failure to see the naturalness of dependence—indeed, our fear of seeing this—that has been behind much of the modern impulse driving women out of the home and into the market economy. The fear of dependence deludes us into believing that independence is the normal condition for a decent human being. A person who is as radically dependent as a child is a creature to be avoided, both because he is entitled to make unreciprocated demands upon us and because he reminds us of how greatly our own independence is really contingent. We have also developed a cultural norm, which sees something suspect about a person who spends their time taking care of others. Such a person is herself dependent upon the material support of other, presumably independent, people. This way of looking at things is at the heart of the careerism that has dominated much of the modern women's movement.

But once we see that this view is mistaken in important ways, then the need to go to work to find fulfillment diminishes dramatically. A self-respecting woman can very well stay home, knowing that her intellect is not atrophying and her gifts are not wasted. On the contrary, she can wholeheartedly place her gifts at the service of her family and the larger community, rather than at the service of her employer and her own ego.

This understanding opens up great possibilities for Gunderman's new paradigm of giving. It is the mother who typically takes personal care of her own children. In the process, she helps them to become people who can give to the best of their abilities rather than take as much as they can get away with. She is the one who joins with other mothers to build up the community around her child. Baseball leagues, dance schools, scout troops, and church groups can benefit her children, and it is thus in her interest to contribute her time and talent to these groups, for her own children's sake. Thus this private interest of hers becomes a community or social interest. No child can play baseball by himself. The success of the group is exactly what is of value to the mother and her children. In this way, each mother is necessarily drawn out of her potential self-absorption and into a concern for the good of other people's children.

For these groups to work, somebody has to have the time to organize them and run them. No one cares about the success of these little groups the way mothers do. The mothers, in turn, recruit the fathers, the grandparents, and friends to participate in these little platoons. This participation helps connect these people, who may be full-time participants in the paid work force, to

something outside their jobs and commercial interests.

This used to be the way large segments of the philanthropic sector were organized. Women contributed their time and talents to the community. Their husbands, in effect, contributed to the community by providing their wives with the necessary time. But much of this activity fell by the wayside in the past half-century, a victim of both the women's movement and the professionalization of philanthropy. Many of those who used to do this work felt patronized by the feminist movement, which denigrated their volunteer activities. The feminists told them, "You don't value yourself. If you did, you would insist on getting paid." I have lost track of the number of times I have heard this account from women of my mother's generation.

Many of these women abandoned their philanthropic work with regret and a little bitterness. That work is now done by paid professionals. Instead of being done by amateurs—literally, those who work for love—the work is done by people who are paid for it. Surely the loss of these highly committed, highly motivated, and well-educated volunteers is a great loss to the community.

Dr. Gunderman has given us much to ponder. I only hope that he will have the courage to take his own ideas seriously enough to bring them to their logical conclusion. A society that tells women to suppress their desire to care for their own children is in danger of becoming no society at all but instead a mere collection of individuals. Insisting that every able-bodied adult be a full-time participant in the paid labor market is a big mistake. In this day and age, it takes courage to say so.