

SEVEN MYTHS OF PHILANTHROPY; SEVEN OPPORTUNITIES IN UNDERSTANDING

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My professional training in the history of religion/comparative study of religion has conditioned me to associate the English word “myth” with the Greek word “mythos,” used to describe sacred stories of origins, archetypes, not wrongheaded misconceptions. But in considering the themes of philanthropy it is interesting to use the term “myth” as it is used colloquially—to mean “an error needing to be debunked,” even if at times it may lead to starker contrasts than I usually arrive at. So in this article I will suspend my usual attempts to get people to think of myths as profoundly true symbolic stories. Instead, for once in my life, I will join the large majority of people who use the word colloquially and pejoratively, to see where it takes me. The seven questionable issues I will discuss in this paper have struck me in recent years as especially fruitful to explore.

Myth 1: America faces the same basic money issues as the rest of the world because human nature is the same everywhere.

It is commonly held that it is not permissible to speak as if American culture is imbued with Christian values and ideas, even if the majority was Christian for a long time. In this view, even if the heyday of America’s taken-for-granted Christian background ran up until the 1960s, and even if it is still a strong presence today, we must not broach this topic because it is politically incorrect and stirs animosity. Psychologist James Hillman’s (1983) observations about money and Christian values might be useful in helping us think about specifically American-style spending and American-style philanthropy. To explore the deep archetypal attitudes of our American views of money in relation to soul, Hillman begins by noting that American culture has historically embodied mainstream attitudes with a Christian framework. This formative background includes the story of Jesus casting out the moneylenders from the temple, calling their workspace a den of

thieves, (literally “coin clippers”), as if they were turning the temple into a clip joint. It also includes comparing a rich man’s likelihood of getting to heaven with the difficulties a camel would face getting through a needle’s eye—a dramatically graphic image of extreme unlikelihood. And it involves stories of taxes, especially the one where Jesus responds to a question about paying tribute to Caesar by advising followers to keep worldly and spiritual realms separate: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” (Mark 12:17).

Hillman (1983) notes that in these examples of Christian teachings money seems to split human concerns rather too neatly into the spiritual on one hand, and the worldly on the other, asserting that poverty is always better, from a religious view. If one stores up worldly wealth, moths and thieves will get it; it will be corrupted (or corrupt you); and “you can’t take it with you” into the realm of heaven which is supremely important as one’s eternal home.

Hillman observes that money in human experience, being a protean psychic reality, is ambivalent, and gives rise to polar opposites—just as forces such as love, religion, work, and death do. So, money will always be multivalent and complex, troublesome and “devilishly divine.” Hillman argues that money as a deep psychic reality can never be contained in a simple box of depreciation by Christianity, “and so Christianity time and again in its history has had to come to terms with the return of the repressed—from the wealth of the churches and the luxury of the priests, the selling of indulgences, the rise of capitalism with Protestantism, usury and projections on the Jews, the Christian roots of Marxism and so on” (1983, 38). The “projections on the Jews” referred to would presumably include accusing Jews of being overly smart about finances and obsessed with making money, and non-Jews having feelings of superiority because of their naïveté/innocence regarding money.

Hillman asserts that a belief system which has a built-in devaluing of money inevitably will threaten “the soul with value distortions” (1983, 39). Psychologically speaking, we cannot have soul or money one without the other. If we think of them as mutually exclusive we are making a mistake. Hillman thinks the “moneychangers” should be kept in view in the “temple” of our “pious aspirations.” Thus Hillman analyzes and criticizes the old Christian ethos regarding money as too one-sided. If a rich man can’t get to the highest goal any more than a camel can expect to get through a needle’s eye, that’s a pretty disabled rich man. It also sets up bleak prospects for the ones who pursue the American

Dream and succeed. Few in the modern age will renounce money, and those who do will be ridiculed by many people. It would improve matters to find a synthesis, to receive the grace that comes from integrating the two sides. A spiritual sense of disinterested detachment (a goal of religious poverty in earlier ages) joined with a balanced and healthy life in the world might make living with money and doing good things with money more possible. Therefore, that seems the most desirable path today. Being worldly wise and spiritually wise would seem to be a productive combination, promising the ideal of mature fulfillment.

“Doing well and doing good” is a theme we hear fairly often in today’s thinking about philanthropy. Being more at ease with money and being more at ease with a spirituality that can use money well and wisely seems a helpful ideal. It affirms that practicality and spirituality can be complementary. In fact, it can be argued that it takes a wise soul to use money well.

The afflictions of money troubles bring out humility, tragedy and comedy, humanity and inhumanity. Money involves us in turmoils of conscience, aspirations, hopes, fears, and secrets.

A lot of secrecy and unspoken words surround money like an aura of mystical formulas and complicated charms, perhaps to try to prevent things considered valuable and powerful from causing panics and stampedes, tsunamis of greed. We have secret passwords, secret account numbers, hidden stashes for a rainy day, money under lock and key or in a shoebox or under the mattress for emergencies, like a getaway car. Talk about our own personal money, like talk about sex, politics and religion, is chancy and often makes people nervous. It is a private matter, with secrets to keep safe. Talk about money is sometimes a conversational taboo. Is it because we unconsciously intuit that decisive forces are at play in knowledge about our comparative economic statuses? Is it that by not talking we better preserve our semblance of equality—affirming that our financial worth is not our sole standard of value? Is it that if we speak of money and our income we might tip the measure of our identities onto the side of the material, and that not speaking of it keeps us more on the spiritual side of invisible values? Not speaking of personal wealth seems more democratic. Is our reluctance to talk about it an unspoken affirmation that equality comes from our individual soul’s dignity, reason, conscience and other spiritual resources, not from our tax bracket?

Taboos like this one may sometimes play a positive role of enabling stability, “maintaining the status quo of established social patterns” (Wuthnow 1996, 140).

And our conscience's response to money questions may determine our soul's condition—just what will we and what won't we do for money? How penny-wise and pound-foolish are we? What would we betray for thirty pieces of silver? "What would it profit us to gain the world but lose our soul?" is a stark question from Mark (8:36) about spirit and matter. To show the ultimatum rivalry between worldly and celestial, the ultimate is depicted in terms of precious valuables. Consider, for example, the imagery of "the good treasure of the heart" as source of human becoming and destiny, "the pearl of great price."

What else can conjure up value, even transcendence, but a material wealth image—like a pearl with perfect beauty so fine, small but worth selling all else to gain. It is not by chance that the Latin word *caritas* and the Greek *charis* originally carried the meanings of dearness, high price, being precious in value. In time they came to connote experiences of grace, gratitude, goodwill, fellow-feeling for others beyond one's kin, and compassionate love. Other Christian teachings use the language of treasure as well, for example, in depicting one's inner resources: "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Luke 6:45).

In Carl G. Jung's understanding, "Money-making, social existence, family, and posterity are nothing but plain nature—not culture. Culture lies beyond the purpose of nature" (1953, 131). Culture is something more universal; it involves an expansion of our sympathy's horizons and our ultimate identity. Under some circumstances, philanthropy becomes culture, reaching beyond self-interest, ulterior motive, and clan consciousness. Isn't the goal of philanthropy to "do unto others" without one hand knowing what the other hand is doing, as the Christian teaching says? Maimonides also taught that that was the highest form of giving. Poet Allen Ginsberg's terse line, "Must give for no return" sums it up (1996, 39-40). But dealing with money is a learning process. We learn as we go, and the instructional messages are often mixed. Bumper stickers today smirk: "He who dies with the most toys wins." Andrew Carnegie said, "The man who dies rich dies disgraced." To live well and give well are activities requiring genius, or at least intelligent care. They, like all true arts, don't just happen by mere chance. Christian values inevitably are a factor in the ongoing attitudes about giving in America, no matter how unconscious we may be of their roots.

Myth 2. We learned everything we need to know about giving from kindergarten, etc.

We often labor under false assumptions when we attempt to understand situations and formulate solutions to problems, because we strive to avoid complexity. Because we like simple answers, we are likely to accept erroneous preconceived notions. We find simple answers comforting, easier to absorb, requiring less effort than more complicated and nuanced ones. We often accept the convenient one-sided and linear concepts when complexity and multiplicity more accurately grasp the actual traits of the case at hand.

Take for example the mystery of gratitude: it can inspire cascades of generosity, and *to give gratitude is to be the richer, not the poorer, for the giving.*

Sometimes a paradox—a dynamic, seemingly contradictory union of opposites—enables thinkers to avoid speaking half-truths. Often “either/or” formulations are ultimately less accurate in grasping actuality, and not as useful in giving us a reading of actual situations as “both/and” formulations. There are birds and serpents, but the dragon archetype is a more dynamic image to help us think about the mysterious nature of existence. The Chinese use of dragon imagery to depict dynamic concepts about energy is an example of this. Cosmologist and universe story popularizer Brian Swimme’s work is another example (1984, 25). He calls the universe “a green dragon” to remind us that the cosmos is mysteriously deep, beyond description in language, awe-inspiring, imagination boggling, fierce and benign, creative and full of wisdom. Any enormity which is challenging to deal with can be cartooned as a dragon being fought. Dragons in various cultures carry associations of transcendent energy, wealth, wisdom and awe.

Today the pragmatic need to solve actual problems in a practical way drives us toward embracing both sides (or multiple sides) of approaches—to be more encompassing and comprehensive of actualities. In times of great polarization, extreme partisanship and oversimplification, we tend to lose the art of creative synthesis. Stress makes us seek short cuts and we lose the ability to listen to other approaches, and forego the attempt to harmonize and reconcile multiple stances. We lose the talents of being both winged and serpentine, as it were.

In our attempt to understand better the kind of world we live in at this transitional time we need to explore and understand the scale of things and appreciate the multiplicity of new and old approaches to social problems. The international nature of modern commerce, and the way business, government and

nonprofits are not separate, as well as the way old dichotomies, like socialist or capitalist, charity or entrepreneurship, require a larger compass to be comprehended. It is useful to call to mind concepts and examples of comprehensive mutualities. Through such images and complex concepts in writings we learn about and remember needed values and outlooks. The various sciences and arts of our time are making available new analyses and understandings, and we cannot be complacent with paradigms of the past. We need to keep learning from new research to face adequately the new challenges.

Myth 3. We are inevitably partisan creatures and we should strive to be fierce adversaries, going at it hammer and tong. Competitive strife, not cooperation, is our salvation.

The world is not always stable—tsunamis, pirates, and con men may not be daily threats, but various destabilizing forces are always there. To endure a long time a system has to have a recognizable form, a viable structure with limits, regulations, ongoing procedures, and it also must be dynamic, adaptable, alive to new changes in conditions, rising to challenges and renovating itself. India's civilization has survived a long time. Some Indian concepts can give us ideas, showing us how one large sector of humanity has answered perennial questions. *Yogakshema* is a deep concept—meaning “keeping and getting” or “sustaining and progressing.” This involves a pattern which I would say holds true for communities, and also scientific and artistic disciplines: conserving what is attained, and developing new applications and adaptations which work.

V. Raghavan's (1976) classical Hindu tradition-based concept of *yogakshema* helps us understand the complementarity of convention and invention in Hinduism. *Kshema* involves keeping the valuable cultural attainment already won, while fresh accession of new creativity is *yoga*, because one of the meanings of yoga is “gaining.” There is an ebb and flow of tradition and innovation in humanity's evolving history. Thus the ongoing cycles of life and art are dynamic with retaining and expanding, holding and advancing. *Yogakshema*, as the secure preservation and ongoing acquisition of life's necessities is often translated as “well-being,” and the conventional meaning, Raghavan says, implies that welfare and progress are dynamically balanced with dual aspects: direction and control, accelerator and brakes, freedom and discipline. Nonconformist innovations have been absorbed and consolidated by selectively-receptive, gradually-changing traditions throughout Indian history.

All communities need ways of allowing creativity into the traditional, adapting new points carefully to stay in continuity with time-proven patterns. Raghavan pictures a constant cultural process of creativity in which new elements are initiated or domesticated into a style and ethos of the long-abiding tradition, and what is not assimilated struggles on the fringes and dies. “Such is Non-conformism, such is Tradition, always vibrant, assimilating its correct material of enrichment and growing in its puissance” (1976, 189). In other words, improvisation enhances the tried and true, keeps it alive and extends it. Canon and commentary, authority and extension, fixed order and the transcending of fixed order in freedom, are all like Gregory Bateson’s view of dual dynamics of nature and biological evolution which involve the interplay of structure and freedom, or “rigor and imagination” in Bateson’s words. Cognition and evolution, consciousness and tradition are flip sides of the same coin, constants in the processes which nature and culture go through in time. There is a place for orderly reason, and for dreamlike imagination in freedom, because they dynamically work together. Accepting limitations and overcoming impasses with creativity are basic to life.

How do we carry tradition forward by maintaining a limited scope for allowable innovation, sometimes called reform or rediscovery? The needed strength is depth and endurance in time; the danger is sameness, approved acts repeated by rote, stagnant and irrelevant. *Yogakshema* pictures a complementary balance of stability and flexibility with features both conservative and liberal contributing to the whole. We need the stability of time-honored structure with values from the past, but also fresh originality, improvisational energy, to keep things relevant. The Founding Fathers of America, writing the Constitution, devising the modern democratic form of government, answered the same need that *Yogakshema* addresses—stable enduring structure allowing for change, revival and innovation. This gives a conscious awareness to an ongoing process able to adapt to new times and needs, safeguarded by checks and balances. Coming to new times, we’ve been unconsciously living on our inheritance. What can we learn from past forms of self-governance and social welfare, and what other paradigms can help us deal with “unprecedented” current crises creatively, enabling our holding-together and advancing, our need to encompass conserving and progressing without too much animosity? The greatest musicians know the possibilities “backwards and forwards,” able to play the scripted time-honored way, and to improvise. The point of this discussion is to envision a way to rediscover cooperation and not be stuck, mired in animosity. It points to the need for conserving what is good and innovating. Relating it to philanthropy, the concept suggests a balance of time-tested modes of giving, and improvising new ways, too.

Myth 4. The natural state of man is ‘All against all,’ so, people must be forced to do good.

Feeling proud of our actions brings self-esteem. Who would want to claim credit for ungenerous behavior, meanness, violence and the results of recklessness? The classical Taoist view from China is an example of a view which focuses on inborn traits, a personal deep sense of sympathy/solidarity. This nature wisdom values the sympathy in our innate structure, which today scientists would say includes “mirror neurons,” and is nurtured by family, friends, and tradition, or ruined by abuse and bad company. Born with “mirror neurons,” humans soon develop sympathy for others. Research on “mirror neurons” opens new understandings of the processes of empathy (Iacoboni et al. 2005). Researchers are beginning to understand empathy better at the neuron level in the brain. Empathy involves interiorizing and truly reflecting on others’ plights. This ability is normally exercised early in life, usually in interacting with the mother. (Hrady 2009).

A recent example of spontaneous generosity concerns Johntel Franklin, a DeKalb (Illinois) high school basketball player whose mother died of cancer after five years of struggling with the disease. Later the same day, Johntel went to a basketball game and wanted to play. His name was not on the roster, and the rules say that the team of anyone who plays without being on the roster must accept the penalty of a technical foul—the opposing team gets two free throws. The other team took them, but elected to not try to hit the basket—they refused to profit from a penalty that seemed to punish the other team for a grieving player just wanting to play. Spectators cheered and a coach said, “We knew we’d done the right thing, teaching kids the right thing to do” (Associated Press 2009).

This act of generosity, sympathy, and solidarity acknowledges something more important than winning—embracing the larger truth of being part of humanity. This sense of humanity, beyond team spirit, showed what it’s like to “win the game of life,” as one of the coaches put it. A small gesture, it had life in it which grew. Both teams were invited to a Milwaukee Bucks and Washington Wizards game. There, the high school teams were honored publicly, and donations were collected to help Johntel’s family. Friendship developed beyond short-term gains; love prevailed. The wellbeing of the larger whole emerged. Mandatory safeguards are needed, but discovering love within has a genius all its own. Just as “two heads are better than one,” so too, two teams celebrating are better than one, because of a bonus of added experiential richness.

The heartwarming effects of giving are famous. Deriving scant joy from fellow-feeling, one gets used to the stinging effect of stinginess, and anesthetizes oneself to it with self-centered obsessions. Instead of expanded compassion, if we are “close” (a synonym for “cheap”) when charitable sharing is needed, we forego knowing our larger potential self of magnanimity and fulfillment. As Eric Hoffer observed, “A soul that is reluctant to share does not as a rule have much of its own. Miserliness is here a symptom of meagerness” (1954, 76).

Myth 5. Modern people are fact-oriented, concerned primarily with hard data and statistics, which demand serious respect. Therefore, fiction and art do not motivate acts of giving.

Works of art can be psychologically true. A song can convey a believable emotion, a story can portray an authentic example powerfully. Stories can help us see the humanity we share, imagine the plight of others and our own mortal condition. To extend ourselves in our understanding and sympathetic imagination, arts are invaluable. Sometimes a story can have a great impact. Consider Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which contributed to ending slavery in America. Or how *The Jungle*, a novel by Upton Sinclair published in 1906, stirred public awareness and caused reform in the meatpacking industry. The poem “Over the Hill to the Poorhouse” written by Will Carleton in 1872 caused many American families to change their attitudes, developing more sensitivity toward the plight of poor elderly people in their midst. As Franz Kafka famously observed, literature is an ax we wield against the frozen sea within us. Often, statistics do not reach that far into the depths of our psyches.

Consider the great impact of a story about ghosts and a miser—Charles Dickens’ 1843 novel, *A Christmas Carol*. That story has inspired generosity for generations. It has been retold in many forms—school plays, TV shows, movies, cartoons. When Ted Turner saw it performed, he decided to give a billion dollars of his personal wealth to the U.N. Others followed suit.

Arts can expand our horizons, increase our powers of empathy. Author Antonya Nelson wrote,

Reading has taught me to see myself in other people, even if they are fictional counterparts, to engage wholly in my imagination, to exercise it regularly; it occurs to me that the greatest problem most people face is a lack of imagination—they cannot think like others, cannot understand

deep differences of interpretation, cannot project likely results of particular actions. It is the problem of the obnoxious playground bully; it is the problem of the arrogant entitled political leader (2005, 35).

Literary imagination can help people tune in to the lives of fellow humans. “Art humanizes because the artist must grope and feel his way, and he never ceases to learn,” as Eric Hoffer wrote (1973, 5). Arts can throw individuals back on themselves, giving them access to their inner resources. From thinking about basic human experiences portrayed in stories we find in ourselves experiences of distress, our thankfulness at good fortune, and bonds shared with the less fortunate. Stories are focal points for reflective exercises.

As Oscar Wilde said, “...Art, even the art of fullest scope and widest vision, can never really show us the external world. All that it shows is our own soul, the one world of which we have any real cognizance... It is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves.” (Danson 1997, 112). Thus, arts enrich our psyches. To do better as citizens and fellow human beings in our communities, we need to imagine with empathy the plight of others and how we are implicated in the whole situation. (See de Waal 2009; Hrdy 2009). If all imagination is exclusively taken up by emotions like fear, anxiety, anger and panic, with nothing of human feelings like compassion, friendship, trust, and love of the common good, there is not much hope for the fulfillment of human potential. We cancel the possibilities of whatever we cannot imagine.

Imagination is the hidden treasure needed to inspire us to bring out and share some of our goods with generosity. One way to nurture this is through writing about one’s experiences of going through difficulties, traumas, needing help, and relating that to the troubles others are going through. Also, reflecting on experiences of expanding understanding helps us grow. The crucial importance of imagination in the processes of participating in uplift is indeed great. As Gary Snyder reminds us, “Failures of charity and compassion are failures of imagination” (1995, 61). Statistics can tally significant amounts in the logical mind and figure greatly in calculative descriptions, but stories and images can be counted on to touch the soul; they move and inspire us.

Myth 6. We must be true to our western segment of humanity, relying only on the Abrahamic traditions—it is unnecessary to learn anything from other cultures about giving.

We are all composite beings inextricably linked in a network of multiple existences, a postmodern medley, if you will. Our unity is expressed in community

activities, extending a helping hand. Psychiatrist Karl Menninger, when someone asked him what to do if one is about to have a nervous breakdown, advised, “Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find someone in need, and do something for them.” Self-centeredness does not bring happiness. Cooperating with others, reaching out to others, being of service to the community of life, we learn from experience and expand our knowledge and options.

Encountering other perspectives we may come to realize that we are heirs to wisdom worldwide. Some species of wisdom may be useful when others grow ineffective. We are realizing “*Mundus est unus*,” as the old Latin phrase goes. The modern rediscovery that “*the world is one* in more ways than one” (as William James observed) is valuable for a number of reasons. The visions of many traditions, when they agree on experiential concepts (such as life’s unity in the great chain of being, the tree of life, the greatness of loving-kindness and goodhearted generosity), form a kind of enduring consensus. We hamstring ourselves when we reduce ourselves to learning from our own clan only. With only a narrow spectrum, we lack a full human potential. Forgetting wholeness, or taking a part as all-important, is an issue involved in a number of the myths I have been discussing. Troubles of forgetting the whole—whole community, long-term cycles, whole humanity—exist because getting a sense of wholes is often difficult. Short-term self-interest is a convenient, natural myopia. Understanding a larger whole gives more accurate grasps of reality, and hope.

The motivation for ethical conduct and reaching out to help others may derive from a variety of sources. Jainism has its reasons for ethical conduct, and Taoism has its reasons for cultivating a motherly love toward others. The sources of human sympathy, compassion, and service are multiple, and are shaped in large part by varied conceptions of self and cosmos.

Darwin’s discovery of evolution involved a growing realization that all life is interrelated; the discovery of DNA also confirms this. This fact of interrelatedness has implications for human wellbeing. Buddhism’s teaching of interrelatedness is conveyed in the image of “Indra’s Net,” which suggests existence as a network of interdependent, inter-reflective co-existence. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* describes this image as an infinite net of star-like jewels, each of which, when examined, is seen to reflect all the other jewels, the idea of infinite interrelatedness. “Indra’s Net” provides an archetypal image of the interconnectedness of conscious beings in the universe which resonates well in our scientific age of systems theory and the

worldwide web. It dovetails with ecology, and with other ancient intuitions about unity—including shamanism, Taoism, Vedanta, and the idea of *tawhid* in Islam. If we unpack what this interpenetrating, inextricable oneness means in terms of how we treat others we may be surprised. Implications of oneness in a network or web of life include “self-interest rightly understood” because we find that others are inseparable from us. “Indra’s Net” is a profound reminder of functional unity in a world of distinct names and individual rights. A literature of useful books, documentary films, and other explorations of our actual intricate interrelatedness is helping a new generation expand their understandings and vocabularies of interconnectedness (Loy 1993; Suzuki 2002).

“Indra’s Net” helps us visualize the mystery of our actual interconnectedness. In conflict with the profit imperative, the reality that everything is interconnected can suffer when the cash nexus becomes the only connection recognized between man and nature. Then the person with a fortune has to go outside that profit system, and add philanthropy to his activities. We can be helpful to others in a more integral way, for deep reasons, Buddhism suggests. We can help because the other’s well-being is not separate from our own wellbeing.

Ideas about the whole are also found in popular culture sometimes—if one is looking for them. The perennial understanding is pictured, for example, in the film “Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire” (2005) by these words: “Though we may come from different places and speak in different tongues our hearts beat as one.” In actuality our oneness is too deep to be denied or confined; reflections of it surface here, there, and everywhere, in many dialects and metaphors. Survival and well-being depend on awareness of the whole situation we are part of, altogether.

The perennial issue in discussions of human nature regarding reciprocity (*quid pro quo* motivations) versus acting disinterestedly (helping others without thought of reward) raises questions, such as, how possible is selfless service, and how inevitable is self-interest? Some thinkers argue, “Don’t even bother trying to be selfless, all there can be is enlightened self-interest,” as if self-serving is basic to all human existence. At another end of the spectrum are people more like Mother Theresa, or self-sacrificing monks, and the selfless acts of many parents for their children. It does seem that as long as a human being is alive there will be some ego, some self-interest or benefit—including getting some enjoyment at seeing others happier. But it is also true that in some cultures there is more of a faith that it is possible to rid oneself of a sense of doer-ship, to forget oneself in a

process of acting for the welfare of others and giving up the “fruits of one’s actions”—an ideal of karma yoga, a practice in which one dedicates work in a consciously undertaken process of wearing away the ego.

In Buddhism, where the doctrine of “selflessness” is basic and an important part of the analysis of the human condition, it is said that no one has an enduring self (*anatta*), and the ultimate is *shunyata*, “emptiness.” Because such traditions believe in working toward more selflessness, and expanding a sense of self so that it includes all the others’ selves, it may be more possible to experience selflessness there than in traditions where it is not seen as possible. In Hinduism and Buddhism there are techniques for practicing selflessness, just as in mainstream Christianity there is the concept of self-emptying (*kenosis*) and the ideal of self-abnegation common in medieval times. The small self or ego is seen as a temporary series of changes in the Asian traditions. The person was traditionally seen as part of a family, a caste, or other community, while more often the separate individual is something built up as real in Western traditions. (D.T. Suzuki thought the Western image of the crucifix showed the Western ego needed to be violently annihilated to be transcended, while the seated Buddha—the quintessential Eastern image—showed that the eastern ego can be more quietly dissolved in meditation.) So the issue here involves the old riddle of identity. Western traditions often conceptualize the self dualistically, but the self is conceptualized differently in other traditions. The generalizations made by a thinker from one tradition may not hold true for all views of the self. In Buddhism the view of selflessness is well expressed in the “Indra’s Net” image—every self’s consciousness is like a pearl in a network of pearls which all reflect the other pearls, so the reality is not the separate entity, but the whole. In such a context-sensitive vision of existence, when one helps others, one is helping one’s own larger self.

The varied understandings of the self are valuable, and have contributed different abilities to the accomplishments of humanity. Diversity, as Gregory Bateson said, is a buffer which protects human beings from obsolescence. That’s a good thing, not a weakness.

Myth 7: There is a power in gifts that forces human behavior to respond in certain ways.

Marcel Mauss asked, “What rule of legality and self-interest... compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What Power resides in the

object given, that causes its recipient to pay it back” (1990, 3)? I feel Mauss’s question about the *mystique of the gift* is misdirected; the power is not something *in* the gift itself, but in the bonds formed by gifting. What mysterious bond is experienced when a kind gesture melts the heart and produces more kindness, and the giver senses oneness in the mystery expressed in gift-thanks relationships—relationships which evolved because of their function? Or is it a question of the logic of the overall cultural framework. George Simmel wrote, “We serve God without thinking of a reward purely as a consequence of the logic of our relationship to the absolute” (1987, 3). Perhaps by this he is referring to the dynamics flowing from the idea that the creature is given the gift of life, and so is expected to give to others, guided by seeking heaven and not hell. A corollary in Buddhism might be something like: We serve the welfare of all sentient beings as a consequence of the logic of our relationship as a part in the interdependent whole—compassion for other parts of the whole vast “self” to which we all belong.

Are these reasons fundamentally different, or do they overlap? Is the Christian teaching “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” really so different from the Buddhist teaching of mutual interdependence? What is common to these reasons for generosity? Gratitude and the seeking of grace? Both are expressions of the need for a sense of mutuality.

We graciously respond to generosity with a self-similar act, in fact, many kindred kindnesses. We generate like results which in turn generate other like results on various scales: small, medium, and large. What we encourage will grow, like flowers watered. Good deeds can multiply, because “love is a chain of love,” as the song goes, a growing fractal, a wholeness of giving parts. Each generous act can be seen as part of an archetypal complex of offerings, sacrifice, and self-sublimation. Experiencing the happiness of others with them widens our field of awareness.

Michael Moody’s study of the concept he calls “serial reciprocity” offers ideas helpful in understanding motivation in philanthropy as grateful responsiveness. Moody’s study is useful in helping us picture the dynamic processes of giving in space and time (1994). Moody doesn’t explicitly use the word “gratitude” but the ethos of gratitude-inspired giving, passing on the good experiences one is appreciative of, can be seen as an essential aspect of the acts of generosity he discusses. In this view gratitude is the grounding for growing the natural enjoyments of generosity. The logic of this idea is: *those to whom much is given—from them much is expected*. This principle is revealed upon a closer look at Jesus’s parable of the “two

talents.” The master left money with three slaves. The first and second doubled the money they were given. The third buried it. One should use well one’s talents and resources. The parable of the widow’s mite may also teach the value of spending what one has, even though it may be a small blessing. There are also sayings that teach of the outcomes of such generosity: “The only things you take with you when you die are the things you gave away,” is a poignant example. The terms of reward are starkly expressed—what you cling to avails nothing, what you release saves you. Opposite the widow’s mite is the miser’s penury. American millionaire Hetty Green was called the world’s biggest miser, dying in 1916 with \$100,000,000 after her health declined because she was too cheap to get medical treatment. When her son broke his leg she tried to get him into a charity hospital. When recognized as a person of wealth, she took him home and treated the leg herself. It became gangrenous and was amputated. *To be miserly* means, in a case like this, *to make misery*.

The recipient of hospitality and help feels fortunate and seeks to give back to the community. One who feels grateful seeks to “pay it forward” to another in need. There exists a wide variety of gifts received gratefully and ways that return giving may be accomplished, as Moody shows (1994, 21). And for believers, the pattern includes Christian generous acts of thankfulness for the ultimate gift God gave them: salvation. Bonds of generative generosity can cause a cascading loop of giving thanks by giving.

The point is not quantity as much as it is self-similarity of acts of giving generated by receiving, as we can see in examples given by Lewis Hyde in his book *The Gift* (1983, 47-55). Hyde offers insight into how to picture the way gifts transform us and awaken a response in our souls. “But we cannot receive the gift until we can meet it as an equal. We therefore *submit ourselves to the labor of becoming like the gift*. Giving a return gift is the final act in the labor of gratitude, and it is also, therefore, the true acceptance of the original gift” (51). The one who has been given goods becomes a good giver. Coming full circle with our gift of grace, growing through gratitude, we become able to gracefully give. The debt is gone when the gift is passed on. As in the proverb: “One good turn deserves another,” the cycles generate ever-new cycles.

Like Shakespeare’s King Lear meeting the homeless Tom o’ Bedlam in the storm, the privileged are put in touch with deep soulfulness: “By being present with the chronic castaways of civilization they become present to the timeless incurable aspect of soul” (Hillman 1991, 164). Serving the fallen and the

downtrodden, alleviating the pain of the suffering in society, can expand one's sense of self and sensibility of the identity of humanity. Wound and eye are one and the same, Hillman reminds us; in our symptoms (and in society's symptoms) we find our soul, and in our hurts we can discern deeper perceptions. To return to places of fear and loss where the abandoned child cries, where the orphan sobs, hidden and hurt, in the wilderness cave of our psyche loneliness—this brings us back to the soul. Charities founded to rescue, give hope, feed, shelter, and clothe the “poor, lowliest and lost,” offering succor and sharing blessings, enact the teaching that what you “do for the least” you do for the greatest.

Christianity, Buddhism and other great religious traditions at their most inspiring teach such ideals as these. When we are depressed, instead of reaching for numbing drugs or other distractions we might lose the blues by helping heal the hurt in the world around us. Creativity in giving involves soulful imagination, sympathy for those suffering affliction, enjoyment in knowing that fellow humans are finding relief, and skill in not merely perpetuating dependency but empowering self-sufficiency in those in need.

Myths, often taken for granted as background reality, determine much in our attitudes and activities. Because they are so influential I feel they need to be considered anew by all of us, and not just blindly accepted. In all these examples of myths there are learning opportunities. Just as discrepancies explored become gates to discovery, so too, misconceptions cleared up can offer useful views to the conditions of existence, and a better grounding for responsible actions.

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