

FOUNDATION WORK MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Some Occupational Dangers
of Grant Making
(and Grant Receiving)

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At the time this article was written, Roy Menninger was both a seeker of grant money (the Menninger Foundation was near the end of a \$22 million capital campaign) and the recipient of requests for money which he invariably turned down, since (despite its name) the Foundation was not a grant making institution.

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Asking for money is a difficult business and one that stirs up a variety of feelings. At times the qualities of honesty and sincerity that ought always to be at the heart of the process seem to slip away, making it seem that fundraising is a bit of a con job. This feeling has little to do with the purposes for which the money is sought; rather it reflects the complex nature of the transaction between seeker and donor.

Some of the psychological aspects of the giving and receiving transaction are familiar to many of us, but they are not commonly discussed or shared with others, even our close colleagues. Even talking about them is embarrassing and seems unprofessional, as though giving voice to our thoughts would demonstrate some kind of personal inadequacy. Many of us manage these thoughts and feelings by saying nothing and pretending that the problems, if there are any, belong to someone else. But of course, when the less attractive, less acceptable aspects of the giving/receiving transaction are forced underground, they are more likely to return later in some more destructive form.

Money stirs up considerable ambivalence in most of us. It is a metaphorical freight car laden with a variety of beliefs and fantasies. To some extent these are idiosyncratic, but they are also culturally determined and reinforced. We have all kinds of fantastic notions about what money means and what more money could further mean.

Most simply, money is thought of as a means to do or get something. But other motivations, which are commonly unexpressed and perhaps not even acknowledged, are no less important. We see money as a way of burying love, or appreciation, or approbation. We can see it as a way out of dependency and a means of becoming autonomous. Money can be power to control others, or to get revenge.

We use numbers representing dollars to characterize ultimate value. The phrase “net worth” states the value of the individual. And we honestly do believe that the larger that number, the “more valuable” — and

somehow “better” — the individual is. By an insidious transformation we convert quantity into quality. On reflection most of us do acknowledge that there is no necessary relationship; indeed we can often see inverse relationships between quantity of money and quality of life, whether we’re talking about individuals or institutions.

Yet we persist in the fantasy that money “makes the difference.” As I examine projects as a member of a review committee for another organization, the covert message is very strong. “If you simply give us the money, we’ll figure out what to do with it. Don’t ask us for the plan first; we don’t need one. We’ll work it out as we go along.” Along with the common view that money is necessary, goes the fantasy that money alone is sufficient.

Many people think that a generous application of money can substitute for carefully thinking through a problem, and that enough money can make the problem go away. There have been signs of this point of view in earlier social programs of government, and many of us have seen a pattern of substituting a financial demand for thought within our own organizations. Having enough money makes it easy to avoid the tough task of figuring out where one is going and what one is trying to do.

Many of us do-gooders seem to feel that idealism and good intentions are their own justification, and therefore, we should not be required to be effective or accountable; some of us feel that a saintly performance and motivation on earth is enough to get points in heaven.

Money can be a problem in other ways. It often distorts relationships. Look at what happens to our relationship with our own teenagers when we are hit up for another handout for the third time in a week, or consider how money can be a bribe for grandparents trying to buy the love of a grandchild. Money, when it is used to buy and control relationships, ultimately demeans them, albeit unintentionally.

Reasons for Giving

Reasons for giving come from several sources. They’re not always conscious; one can discern, if one looks carefully, several lower levels of motivation even in the most altruistic acts of giving.

The first level is the narcissistic level. A donor gives money for honor and glory- for the name on the building, or even the whole institution. Here is a wish — often a transparent one — for the visible evidence of one’s commitment. This kind of giving fights the anonymity many of us find disturbing in life and intolerable in prospect after death. The narcissistic level of giving also reflects a great need for love and recognition. Giving often masks a fearful preoccupation that one is unlovable or unwanted for oneself alone, as if only by generosity can one gain a sense of worth. The self-esteem of such a donor is actually quite low. But precisely because giving can increase one’s sense of worth, it also confounds the basic question: would people love me if I had no money at all? This is a point of concern that people who’ve never had money have trouble understanding and accepting.

The second level of giving is moralistic and conscience driven, with guilt as the motivation. Sometimes the guilt stems from having more than others, or for the way in which the money was earned, or simply for having it at all. Some people feel guilty for living, and their wish to give money may be an effort to appease this very distressing feeling — to buy it off by gifts to others.

This level of giving reflects the moral or religious view that giving is a duty. “It is expected of me; I have to.” (Sometimes the “having to” refers to the IRS.) But giving, when seen as an obligation, does bring its own reward-lessening feelings of embarrassment, shame, guilt and fear.

The third level — which might be described as the most mature form of giving — is a way of participating in the life of

others, or an expression of gratitude. Here the key element is the other, the recipient; not the self, the giver. The giver wishes to be, and becomes a genuine participant who shares in an achievement by facilitating it. This giving also has the reward of a beneficent return, although the benefits are primarily for others rather than oneself.

We all like to think that what we do is altruistic giving. Why, then, emphasize some less attractive sides of giving? Because giving is never pure. The most altruistic and most noble giving also contains elements of narcissism and guilt, and even gifts which seem blatantly self-aggrandizing include an altruistic element. The point is to recognize that elements of each level play a part in every gift receiving transaction, and that the relative strength and importance of each will affect the transaction itself.

Donors and recipients need to feel that the decision to give is justified, and that the transaction concludes with a worthwhile psychological contract. Discussions between both parties about the purpose of the money may really be a process of mutual testing where the giver tries to determine what form his rewards for giving will take. At the same time, the receiver “psychs-out” the giver as he tries to determine what kind of reward the giver really needs. This may be self-glorification, release from guilt, a chance to participate in someone else’s important work — or all three. The fact that the same proposal can be described in three different ways proves the point.

For example, I am carrying on a conversation with a wealthy widow from Dubuque; purpose, money. I am very eager to know what form of reward she will most appreciate. In describing the purpose for which the gift will be used I may emphasize the possibilities of naming the facility for the donor if I sense the reward is self-glorification. Or I can speak about the moral obligation we collectively have to the mentally ill, if I think the key is guilt. I might also dwell on the opportunity to participate in the development of a new approach to mental

illness, thus appealing to the altruistic urge to give.

This is, of course, an oversimplification. I don’t mean to suggest that the process of trying to understand the psychology of the giver is crass, manipulative or hypocritical, although of course it may be. But even altruistic givers are motivated by reasons linked to their unique psychological needs. None of us ought to forget that giving is bilateral; those who seek to be given to must also be prepared to give in some psychologically meaningful way to the giver. The psychological trappings of the transaction may in fact be of greater influence in the donor’s decision to give than the practical details of the proposal itself. We all know of proposals, nothing but blue-sky, which were set forth with such conviction and enthusiasm that the donor responded with the funds, feeling that this opportunity to participate was just what he’d been looking for all these years. “He’s such a marvelous person with such a strong sense of where he’s going and what he’s all about! I certainly don’t understand what he has in mind ... but I love him!

Sometimes a very well-thought out, well-developed and meticulously detailed plan is put forward by a reticent research-oriented person whose presentation is (though not by intention) dull. Only under exceptional circumstances will a donor overlook the missing promise of psychological reward.

Sometimes the very dedication of the seeker, if he over-identifies with his cause to the point of narcissism, can be a problem for the donor. The seeker has become so convinced of the greatness of his purpose that he believes few other things are, or could be, as significant. So absorbed can the seeker be in this conviction that he and the project seem one. This is not unusual; all of us are only partially separable from the things we believe in. The trouble comes when the seeker in effect says, “Love me, love my dog,” and expects the donor to accept his commitment without question. For the donor with a strong need to be a “nice guy,” but some doubts about the project, the seeker’s narcissism is unsettling. And a donor who

finds it difficult to approach the project (and its salesman) rationally may be forced to withdraw, even though he wants to be helpful.

Such is the nature of human communication that every communication (including much that is non-verbal) contains clues to the relationship itself — what it is, how one or the other would like it to be, what it must become in the future. A communication of matters of substance always conveys something else as well: information about the parties' hopes or fears for the relationship. This is not to say that the content of a proposal is of no importance (although sometimes that is clearly the case), but to suggest that the psychological basis of the transaction also bears attention, and warrants an effort of understanding by both parties.

Psychological Aspects of Giving

The average man-in-the-street thinks giving money away is a simple, straightforward proposition. He assumes that philanthropy is easy and pleasant. Certainly it is not work; you will even make friends. But as you know so well, the reality is that it is exceedingly hard work. It's difficult to make really good decisions. You know you don't have all the information you'd like; you are not at all sure you even have the right information. There are surprises, sometimes unpleasant ones; there are contests of value, swings of preference, paralyzing ambivalences, pet peeves and hobbyhorses. Indeed, you will probably be making enemies at least as often (if not more often) than friends. "This business of benevolence", as Andrew Carnegie called it, is anything but a straightforward proposition.

Benevolence had probed far more difficult than he had dreamed when he glibly wrote in his *Gospel of Wealth* about "the man of wealth becoming a trustee for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom, his superior ability to administer, doing for them better than they could or would for themselves." Before long, Carnegie was disenchanted with "the supremely difficult art of spending large sums of money in undertaking to be of permanent advantage to the public." The public, he discovered, recognized no experts in philanthropy; there were only men with money, and other men trying to get it away from them. He was to say repeatedly that he had not worked one-tenth as hard at acquiring money as at divesting himself of it. By 1906 he was so sick of the game that he wrote, "the final dispensation of one's wealth preparing for the point of exit is, I've found, a heavy task. You have no idea of the strain I've been under." And he went on to say, "Millionaires who laugh are very, very rare indeed."¹

¹ Wall, Joseph Frazier. *Andrew Carnegie*. NY: Oxford University Press. 1970. Pp. 880-881

I think one of the most difficult tasks in the psychology of giving must be how to decide among the many “goods” which come to the door seeking help. With more than a million organizations and countless individuals seeking help, (and now, profound reductions in federal support for human service programs) the opportunities for generosity are myriad. One is responsible for a wise choice, yet the guidelines for decision are not always clear.

The process of deciding is fraught with complications. Who sets the criteria for choice? Who has what kind of power to decide what? With individuals, or even small foundations, this is relatively easy, since only one or two people do it all: investigation, presentation, decision. But in larger foundations it is often not clear who has what role: is it the donor who decides, even from the grave? What if his concepts are now so anachronistic, or specific (who wants buggy whips anymore?) as to exclude 99% of the proposals?

Perhaps the Board decides. The Board is full of good intentions but it is all too aware of its fiduciary responsibilities, saddled with its own pet projects and hobbyhorse interests, yet uncomfortably dependent upon a staff for information, evaluation and even recommendation.

What about the staff? This group has taken pains to learn about the proposals and, in fact, may know more about some of the projects than do the seekers themselves. Staff members sometimes find it hard to remain properly humble when they believe they are probably brighter, and certainly wiser, than either the board or the seekers. Succumbing to the seductions of the God complex is a real occupational hazard. Having money to give away and the power to decide whom to give it to is intoxicating, and foundations can be irritating examples of the “narcissism of the righteous.”

Any organization where several parties are engaged in the decision-making process has the ingredients for various degrees of tension and disagreement. The broader the range of the value systems represented in the

organization, the greater the likelihood of conflict. But unfortunately foundation staff and trustees do not often discuss these differences in value and viewpoint, since to do so seems to invite open conflict, and is not a part of “the way we do things.” This is a prospect that many people will do anything to avoid, even at the risk of chronic sub-surface conflict, low morale, passive resistance and procrastination, as well as inefficient operations that conspire to make foundation giving less imaginative and of less consequence than it ought to be.

The process of giving puts special burdens and obligations on individuals who come into the philanthropy business motivated by a desire to do good. I see this in my own field; many of us in mental health share a strong need to make the world a better place. We carry into our work a tremendous inner conviction about how important the tasks are and how important it is for us to do them.

People who feel this commitment are generally pretty conscientious men and women. Society should be grateful, since such people work harder, longer and for less than one would think reasonable. They're a great social benefit, to be sure, but at what personal cost? Chronic depression; a pervasive sense of doubt about one's effectiveness or sense of self-worth; obsessional worrying and behavior that sometimes makes decisions almost impossible; an enormous need to be liked and to be seen as helpful by others. People like this sometimes have a recurring problem of over identifying with the grantee. Some reach the point where the conflicting pressures can no longer be handled and overreact in the opposite direction, at which stage they seem curt, cold, and withdrawn.

A high risk of burnout afflicts conscientious people who are so strongly motivated to provide service to others. They have a much higher need for appreciation and fulfillment than they are often willing to recognize. Most conscientious people, for example, have a terrible time taking a vacation. They feel indispensable. They feel

guilty about leaving. They feel they do not deserve to be good to themselves, that personal pleasures are not nearly as important as working to help these suffering people or those vital projects. To believe that one is stronger, and indispensable, is a kind of negative arrogance — and it isn't true anyway.

Sooner or later, the backlash comes. The personal needs that have been pushed to the back burner become painfully obvious. People are open systems, with a need to take in as much as they give out. When the system is radically out of balance, the inevitable result is psychological bankruptcy, or burnout.

Most people can carry on at high levels of effort for the short run, and even need to work this way at intervals. But without a recouping effort of some sort (I don't mean just a vacation, but some kind of psychologically satisfying input) one stands at high risk of burnout. That applies to all of us—not just the workers in the trenches, but the executives and even the Board members.

Psychological Aspects of Asking and Receiving

Asking for money isn't easy either. For me, becoming a fund raiser has been a very painful process. At bottom I, and I think others, often find the process an affront to one's sense of integrity. No matter how significant the project or prestigious the institution conducting it, the pursuit of funds often puts the seeker in the role of having to appeal to another for help, a position that sometimes feels like begging. The role is uncomfortably reminiscent of the dependent position all of us were in as children. Asking for money is a disturbing downward shift from a more adult role of coequality. Asking implies need, of course; it's the obvious reason for asking. But need also implies inadequacy, and having to ask someone to meet this need exposes one as well to feeling patronized and even depreciated.

I still vividly remember when I was in medical school, and would go with my father to cocktail parties, where they'd give him a chance to tell his story about our little shop on the prairies of Kansas. He was very articulate in his corn-fed country style. He could raise money without ever using the word or directly asking for it. I don't know how he did it; only that he had a marvelous sense of himself and was comfortable at it. But I used to get almost physically ill as I watched him at what I thought was a demeaning work, hardly fit for a doctor. I'd get angry at him, and say "How can you have spent years becoming a doctor and then a psychiatrist, only to turn into a boomer!" He didn't take well to those comments! And here I am twenty years later, doing the same thing! In retrospect, I think he was bothered by the same feeling I imply: a sense of having forsaken the great heritage of medicine, for a role as a drummer and mendicant.

A successful shift — he was able to make it; I am struggling with it — involves some new thinking about one's roles and talents, the tasks to be done, and most important, the

meaning of the work one is raising the money to do. Even so, the sense that one is selling oneself, with all the negative and debasing connotations of the word, is never vanquished. The terms we use to describe the process are revealing.

The notion of “getting money” seems active and aggressive, while “receiving money” implies a polite form of passive acceptance. Seekers use various images according to the different ways they look at the grant seeking business. So we regard it as a form of combat — an aggressive struggle in which the seeker must be victorious by grinding down the giver. Some will see it as a game with winners and losers and a score to keep. In a game, of course, it’s fair to use tricks and surprise tactics.

Others make the business of giving and receiving money sound like a seduction or a love affair; the language they use and the overtones. Eroticism may even take on an aggressive character; in the strain to persuade, the love words give way to more vulgar terms. There is flattery, fawning, the desire to be liked and likeable (proved by being given to and depended on) as if being attractive were the ultimate key to acceptance.

Lastly, there are those who simply regard fundraising as a straightforward business transaction of proposing, negotiating, buying selling and trading. The selling aspect reminds me of the Arab sheik who returns home from the United States. A fellow sheik asks him, “Well, what impressed you most about the Americans?” “Their salesmen,” he replies, strapping on his skis.

One seldom sees any of these one-dimensional approaches in pure culture, especially among sophisticated fundraisers. They are caricatures, although there is usually something of each in most seeker-donor engagements. In small doses, they add charm and challenge to the exchange. But each sums up certain attitudes and expectations seeker and donor have toward each other, attitudes that obviously affect the evolving relationship between them.

I think it’s important for givers and for foundation staff to realize that asking for money carries with it difficult feelings for the asker, no matter how sophisticated he seems. These feelings can give rise to hypocritical or offensive behavior, ranging from fawning, gushy praise to inappropriately aggressive and challenging postures. Sometimes the feelings will be covered up by bravado or disdain. One often sees in seekers particularly in the face of a turndown, a contempt for the giver — a real sour grapes attitude. This is a way to discharge the contempt and shame one feels for oneself by displacing it onto the giver, along with some negative comments about what kind of a foundation they are, anyway! The point is that there is always some ambivalence contained in the dependent status of seeking money.

Conclusions

We all need to be aware of some of the darker sides of human views of money and of giving and receiving if we are to keep from exploiting the power position of the donor or the dependent position of the seeker. On both sides of the equation, all of us are affected by power and need, as well as by the less attractive aspects of money. We are all part of the problem.

This is part of the process of giving, intrinsic to the transaction itself. It is not possible to avoid these darker sides by conscious intention. No matter how righteous one is, no matter how good a person (indeed, maybe because one is all those things), one is inevitably a part of the problem of the giving/receiving relationship. Acknowledging this is the beginning of a healthier approach to a complicated business. These feelings can be managed much more effectively if they can be identified. If one can put a name to them, recognize them and begin to understand their part in the process, they cease to exert a kind of influence that seems magical, covert and incomprehensible.

We all find it difficult to ask for money, and I suspect many of us are also ambivalent about giving. I believe that these feelings can be adequately handled only in the context of a genuine relationship.

The giving/receiving process is fundamentally a relationship, one which deserves to be respected in its own right. Both giver and receiver must work to create the basis for mutual respect and appreciation. If this is not true, the whole thing is a sham. Put otherwise, there has to be a genuine *quid pro quo* between giver and receiver. Each must feel that the decision to give is justified and worthy, with a worthwhile psychological contract the result. Because it is based on relationship, a great deal turns on the qualities of the interaction, and the extent to which the donor is willing to be involved. The reluctance to enter into such a relationship reduces these interactions to their barest denominator — of

being crass, manipulative or mechanistic, or, put simply, plain seductions or aggressive acts.

It is the refusal to be involved in, concerned about, and committed to the relationship that contributes to some of the less attractive aspects of the philanthropic business.