Rethinking “Us” and “Them” in Family Philanthropy

BY ASHLEY BLANCHARD, MPP AND KELIN GERSICK, PHD
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IN THE PAST WEEK, WE HAVE BEEN INNUNDATE information about how philanthropy can respond to this pandemic. Many emergency and collaborative funds are being formed by reputable intermediaries, making it easier to get money into the hands of those who need it most. It’s heartening to see the clear and consistent messages coming from all parts of the sector: assure your grantee partners that you have their back; keep your funding flexible; support both immediate needs and long-term recovery; and focus on the most vulnerable. We’ve learned these lessons from other crises and need to apply them now.

But of course this isn’t like any other crisis. As we sit hunkered down at home, we’ve been thinking a lot about how this unprecedented event may change not only the practice of grantmaking, but the experience of philanthropy in the lives of the philanthropists as well.

Inherent in philanthropy is an inescapable division between the providers and the receivers – the people giving away surplus wealth (theirs or others’) and the families and institutions who need those distributed resources to survive. But all of a sudden wealth is not a protection from an enormous threat. Uncharacteristically, donor families are experiencing in their own lives the kind of vulnerability, plummeting net worth and helplessness that is ubiquitous for many they support. Of course, to say that “we are all in this together” does not mean that “we are all in this in the same way”; those with means are undeniably better positioned to weather this storm. Yet privilege doesn’t inoculate people from this virus, as evidenced by the business and world leaders who fall ill every day. And beyond the egalitarian threat of infection is the startling awareness that wealth and privilege cannot always buy special treatment or service. The rapidity and scale of this pandemic highlight the instability of systems that we normally take for granted: health care, education, social services, religious communities, and transportation.

This pandemic reveals our interconnection in ways that may change how donors think about what it really means to engage in philanthropy. For most, participation in family philanthropy is an optional activity, involving little sacrifice (and much reward). Yet suddenly we are all being confronted with the life-and-death reality that we are part of a larger humanity, facing common perils. This awareness of vulnerability may override, at least for the moment, the routines of the practice of philanthropy – the ways that grant dockets and rigor and professionalization ordinarily make deciding who gets what into a strategic exercise, at a distance.

Will the softening of the barriers between the givers and the receivers have some enduring (if unconscious) impact on philanthropy? Will philanthropists approach their work differently,
recognizing that sharing and allocating resources more significantly is essential, not only for the benefit of the recipients, but for the survivability of all, including the heretofore “winners” in the game? Will it lead to more discussion in philanthropic families—especially once the immediate need to consider tactics and emergency response is over—of not just the “how” questions, but the “why” ones? Questions such as: How does seriously engaging in philanthropy change us, especially as parents and siblings and spouses, but also as neighbors? What is the role and identity that families aspire to in our communities and in the world? How should we be sharing priority-setting, both within the family and with our recipients? As we absorb a new awareness of life’s inherent fragility, how can we more authentically identify and empathize with the vast sectors of our society who ALWAYS feel as vulnerable and out of control as we are feeling today?

This crisis also highlights the fundamental tension between the goals of protecting one’s own family and healing the world. On one hand, this pandemic minimizes that differential: we socially distance not only to protect ourselves, but to serve the greater good. At the same time, people who can are exercising their privilege in ways large and small: it provides comfort to horde toilet paper and face masks. We recently heard a story about wealthy families trying to acquire ventilators by contacting manufacturers directly, offering any price to divert equipment for their private use. It’s not hard to imagine the same families simultaneously ramping up their philanthropy to help the local hospital purchase equipment as well. Is this reprehensible, or a completely understandable human inclination, to protect one’s family using all the means at your disposal? How might our experience of philanthropy change when that tension between familial protection and an amorphous “public good” is far less abstract?

David Kessler, an expert on loss, argues that what we’re all now feeling is grief: “The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we’re grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.” He posits a sixth stage of grief: meaning. It seems likely that this pandemic will encourage philanthropic families to think a lot about meaning—not just of their giving, but of their wealth in general. In some ways this crisis has highlighted the enormous differentiation between the have and have-nots. But it has also provided a wake-up call that amplifies our fundamental connection and the universality of some truths: vulnerability has always been part of the human condition, death is a matter of “when” not “if,” and all treasures can be lost in an instant. Our best “strategy” in the face of those immutable realities is to simultaneously pursue our own welfare and the general good, searching in our actions and ourselves for the best balance we can find between “social distance” and “loving empathy.” Philanthropy provides families not only an opportunity to take action, but a forum to collectively discuss and deliberate those fundamental questions of meaning.

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1 https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-your-feeling-is-grief