



The Millennium Generation and the End of Charity

Are you ready for a new generation of nonprofit leaders?

By Robert Egger

In the weeks leading up to my commencement speech, I received calls from reporters who all asked a similar question: Was I going to be speaking to the Class of 2010 about the need to “give back”?

As if.

In fact, I wanted to do just the opposite. I wanted to challenge the expectation that any class graduating in this era needed to be asked to give back. To illustrate that point, as I began my remarks, I asked members of the graduating class to humor me for one last pop quiz.

I asked them to indicate, by a show of hands, how many had, be-

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fore coming to Gettysburg College, with its motto of “Do Good Work,” performed community service. To a person—they all raised their hands.

Simply put, anyone who asks this “millennial” generation to “give back” doesn’t know a damn thing about them.

Consider the facts. This is a generation almost 70 million strong. They’re the most diverse generation in the history of our country. They’ve been raised doing service. They’re surging out of the best edu-

cational system in history in record numbers, and the bulk of them are still in the pipeline, doing volunteer work in every community in America.

Giving back—are you kidding? They are about to redefine the entire construct of charity in America.

This generation has spent their entire lives giving back—in effect, eating their fill and then offering their leftovers to programs like the DC Central Kitchen, which I founded in Washington in 1989, the year most of these graduates were born. In those subsequent 21 years, my organization and 1.4 million other nonprofits in America have done powerful work. Yet our ability to solve such societal problems as hunger and homelessness has proved limited.

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And if we don’t acknowledge that fact, this up and coming generation will. Why? Because they’ve been raised *inside* our programs, volunteering almost since birth. They respect the idea of charity, but they know it doesn’t work and that they can’t afford to sustain it. They also have different views about how they want to live their lives, make a living, and spend their income. They’re hell bent on merging their personal, professional, and spiritual lives, saying, “I don’t want to be defined by my paycheck, and I want a job that does good—a job that *is* my philanthropy.”

And that’s a profound concept.

This is a generation that has pushed for fair trade coffee, demonstrated for fair wages, and demanded green policies. They’ve done mission trips abroad and helped rebuild the Gulf Coast after Katrina. They’re forgoing meat centered diets, riding bikes to work, and wearing Tom’s shoes so that people in Haiti won’t have to struggle through the rubble in bare feet. They’re dedicated disciples of Muhammad Yunus’ micro-credit economy, avid surfers of global media, fluent speakers of the international language of hip-hop, and passionate founders of a new generation of businesses called social enterprises.

In short, they are charity’s (with its unintended yet deeply interwoven “redemption of the giver, not liberation of the receiver” power dynamic) worst nightmare—and our world’s best hope.

They’re not Gen Next. They are Gen NOW.

We who run America’s charities can’t be faulted for the shortcom-

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ings of the system we work in. The problem is that the grant system we rely on isn’t designed to build capacity, let alone foster innovation and dynamic programming. This funding design is almost a failsafe to keep the sector from challenging the status quo of the system that often creates the very economic, social, and environmental situations that charity is expected to correct.

For that, the sector needs access to capital and an equal footing with traditional business, so that it can unleash an entrepreneurial revival that will help America right its listing economic ship. And for that we need new polices, along with the uncompromising bravery of a new generation of leaders. To those ends, Generation NOW is bursting forward.

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In America, it’s every generation’s birthright to respectfully but firmly challenge the authority of their elders, to change the rules, and to mold a society in keeping with the times they live in. We, their elders, must be prepared to help them.

This isn’t an either-or proposition. Like the graduates of 2010,

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there’s an equally impressive cohort of nonprofit leaders from Gen X and aging baby boomers who share in this vision, ache for new opportunity, and are ready to step up to the challenge of forwarding these new ideas. Together, this new generation will stretch the boundaries of society so that business and philanthropy, profit and purpose, faith and work, life and living are merged into more uplifting experiences.

So be warned and be ready. They are coming. In fact, they’re already here. Don’t be afraid. Hire them, encourage them, and help them learn. Listen and learn from them in turn.

We have nothing to lose but the need for charity itself. ■

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