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A Profession of Philanthropy

James Allen Smith

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Taos Journey

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Where Are We Starting?

Our *Taos Journey* essays depart by looking back at philanthropy's recent past. As the field has become more formalized as a profession, it also has attracted exposés and critiques. Many have called for greater accountability, transparency, and proof of effectiveness. While the critique is worthy and perhaps overdue, historian, philanthropist, and former GIA board member James Allen Smith calls for a deeper, shared understanding of professionalism. He reminds us of the essential relationships that are created when a gift is given, and how to give with expedience and respect.

A Profession of Philanthropy

James Allen Smith

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I have spent twenty years working in foundations. By now I should be willing to concede a simple truth, a reality that I have long resisted admitting to myself: I am a foundation professional. Indeed, I have been employed by three foundations, served on the boards of others, and have presumably become what some derisively term a "philanthropoid." Yet when asked my profession, I am still inclined to reply that I am a historian. My early academic training, intellectual instincts, and professional credentials always trump my business card and paycheck stub. For those of us who work in foundations, it is not uncommon to situate our professional identity and ambitions elsewhere. Philanthropic work is treated variously as an interlude in an academic career, a way station after government service, a sinecure for a business colleague approaching retirement, or a reward at the end of a college presidency. For those entering the field in early or mid-career, there is seldom any systematic introduction to the work.

Nevertheless, there is widespread talk about the "professionalization" of philanthropy. Nonprofit management programs have burgeoned, some with courses about philanthropy. The emerging field of philanthropic studies has found at least one university home. There are a few nascent training programs for foundation staff and aspiring donors. Professional associations and affinity groups now devote attention to best practices, shared learning, and performance standards. Prominent business consulting firms are ready to apply corporate managerial practices to foundation work.

But what core knowledge might define a philanthropic profession? Is there a discrete set of technical skills that all should learn? Is there a body of historical literature and social science research through which members of a profession can learn about this domain of activity? Is there an agreed-upon set of individual ethical standards that ought to be as deeply ingrained as the lawyer's commitment to attorney-client privilege or the doctor's injunction to do no harm? Few foundations seek to inculcate their program staffs with the skills, techniques, or even the basic civilities that their work requires. Fewer still offer their staff members any perspective on the history of philanthropy or introduce them to the increasingly abundant social science literature on civil society and the nongovernmental sector that could inform their work. The fundamental question of what it means to be a professional in the field of philanthropy demands more careful discussion than it has so far received.

At the outset there are obstacles to even considering it a profession. Philanthropic work writ large is a congeries of professions – the public-health expert or medical doctor, the Ph.D. economist or sociologist, the human rights lawyer, and many others drawn from diverse professional domains – whose training, core knowledge, academic certification, and professional ethic have been formed outside the realm of foundations. Philanthropic work is also undertaken by donors, volunteers, and passionate amateurs who are often skeptical of the very idea of professionalism; many foundations operate with limited assets and on so small a scale that they cannot aspire to anything resembling a professional operation.

It is surprising how few individuals are actually engaged in full-time foundation work and, indeed, how few foundations employ any staff members at all. Of the nation's larger foundations, which the Foundation Center defines

as those with more than \$1 million in assets or with grant budgets of more than \$100,000 – a universe of nearly 21,000 foundations – only one in six employs staff. When we consider the entire universe of foundations, slightly more than 5 percent are staffed. Of those foundations that employ staffs, the median size is only two staff members and the average foundation staff size is 5.3 employees. Only some thirty foundations have fifty or more staff members.

In any domain, professionalism combines a widely agreed-upon set of skills, a body of knowledge, and a set of ethical standards.

The philanthropic sector is far from reaching agreement upon any of this. Certifying individual competence, setting entry requirements,

and disciplining (or excluding) members of a profession who fail to meet the standards is neither feasible nor desirable for individuals who work in philanthropy. We must acknowledge that philanthropy will always remain accessible to other professionals; it should welcome those who are engaged in it as volunteers, as board members or as wealthy individuals exploring new terrain as donors.

Nevertheless, there ought to be minimal “professional” expectations in the form of administrative competence, civility and responsiveness toward applicants and grantees, and strict adherence to fiduciary duties and laws governing nonprofits. Attaining this level of individual responsibility and organizational competence does not constitute professionalism in any profound sense. It merely requires some knowledge of the law, an understanding of nonprofit finance and accounting, and basic managerial skills. Individuals and foundations that fail to meet legal and administrative standards tend to make all of us in the foundation sector look unprofessional, and in some instances can put the entire philanthropic enterprise in jeopardy. But even when these standards are met, they do not rise to the level of professionalism. The bar must be set higher.

Is there a larger body of knowledge or even a set of skills particular to philanthropic practice around which foundations can claim to be professional? This is by no means a new subject for discussion. With the establishment of the first general-purpose foundations in the first decades of the twentieth century, people began to ask what traits of character and what prior training would best suit those who were taking responsibility for dispensing philanthropic funds. Some asked if the new class of foundation administrators required specialized training and expert knowledge of a particular field, for example, advanced training in a discrete scientific discipline or a medical specialty. Others wondered whether it was better to have the

generalist’s ability to bridge different specializations and to make intellectual connections among diverse fields of endeavor. Specialized expertise versus broad intellectual scope and curiosity shaped one fault line in the discussion of the foundation professional’s competency. Another fault line placed greater emphasis on practical insight into institutions and shrewdness in judging individual talents than on either academic training or intellectual breadth. Still others have concluded that temperament and character matter more than expertise, general knowledge, or practical experience.

Gift-giving varies from culture to culture and era to era, but its broad outlines have been understood by keen observers throughout history.

Alan Pifer, in a president’s essay for the Carnegie Corporation, looked first to traits of character: “Above all other aspects of foundation

work, I would put the human factor. I mean by this the attitudes and behavior of foundation staff members. If they are arrogant, self-important, dogmatic, conscious of power and status, or filled with a sense of their own omniscience – traits that the stewardship of money tends to bring out in some people – the foundation they serve cannot be a good one. If, on the other hand, they have genuine humility, are conscious of their own limitations, are aware that money does not confer wisdom, are humane, intellectually alive, and curious people – men and women who above all else are eager to learn from others – the foundation they serve will probably be a good one. In short, the human qualities of its staff may in the end be far more important to what a foundation accomplishes than any other consideration.”

And it is here that we must examine the traditional definition of the word “profession.” It evokes the idea of a calling, literally a vocation with a moral core. But what is it that philanthropy professes? Where is its moral core? This is not the sort of topic we often discuss in the foundation world, whether we are sitting among our fellow philanthropists or gathered in the boardroom with trustees and donors. There, the conversations are typically about specific tasks; legal, managerial, and organizational issues; and financial and programmatic concerns. Philanthropists and philanthropists confront the challenges immediately at hand, their gaze forward-looking, with perhaps a few habitual nods to grand accomplishments in the past – Carnegie libraries, Rosenwald schools, or Rockefeller work to combat disease and global hunger.

While these institutional achievements of the past can teach us something about the strategies and tactics of donors, there is little to point us in the direction of a deeper philanthropic ethic. If doctors look to Hippocrates and if lawyers look to the works of great law-givers and jurists, to whom

should philanthropists look? I would look to those who have written shrewdly and critically on the gift relationship.

Gift-giving varies from culture to culture and era to era, but its broad outlines have been understood by keen observers throughout history. "Giving and returning," said Aristotle with penetrating insight into the societal importance of the gift, "is that which binds men together in their living." In the ancient Greek *polis* and in the later Roman republic, personal and political ties were created and constantly reinforced with exchanges of gifts, favors, or services. These "benefits," as the first-century Stoic philosopher Seneca termed all such exchanges, were to maintain social and political cohesion. Whether large or small in scale, personal or public in purpose, giving in all its manifestations proved to be a worthy subject of political and ethical analysis for some of antiquity's most celebrated philosophers.

Aristotle discussed gifts in the passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* devoted to friendship and affection and in the passages exploring such personal traits as generosity, magnanimity, extravagance, vulgarity, and stinginess. Cicero wrote sagely about gift-giving and human fellowship in his book *de Officiis (On Duties)*. Seneca, the prolific dramatist, philosopher, politician, and one of the wealthiest Romans of the first century, analyzed gift-giving in various letters and in his treatise *de Beneficiis*. Each of them understood that giving and returning were not simple matters.

The insights of the ancients are a historical point of departure for understanding the psychological, social, and economic power – along with the potential harms – that accompany gift-giving. Their observations offer important perspective on how we might think about a philanthropic ethic, a moral core for a profession of philanthropy. Of course there are major differences between modern philanthropic giving and the personal exchanges of benefits and services that characterized the ancient world. There are obvious and profound differences between contemporary foundations and the institutions, both civic and religious, that sustained charitable activities in the ancient, medieval, and early modern worlds. The contexts in which gift-giving operates have changed in innumerable ways over the millennia.

Nevertheless, the power and harm in gift-giving have been persistent topics of concern throughout philanthropy's history. So, too, have been the subjects of right and proper giving. If there is an ethic of giving, its origins can surely be found in these classical texts. In the end, our

contemporary discussions of philanthropic practice will be better grounded if we reflect on humankind's long experience of gift-giving.

To understand why the gift relationship is so fraught with potential harms, we must first ask what makes gifts powerful. Gifts have always enabled individuals to reinforce their personal relationships, solidify friendships, and strengthen social or political affiliations. But a gift's power can reach beyond the individuals directly involved. Gifts exert their force across time and generations, as in the

Iliad when Glaukos and Diomedes ended their combat upon suddenly realizing that years earlier their grandfathers had enjoyed a hospitable relationship, sharing a meal and

exchanging gifts. Gifts can also operate across geographical and political boundaries, ending violence and promoting amicable relations between hostile tribes and great empires. Anthropologists, historians, and literary scholars have found abundant evidence of gift relationships that have pacified warring groups. The essence of the gift's power resides in the relationships that it creates and sustains. As anthropologist Mary Douglas explains, "The theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity."

The connection created between donor and recipient is key to understanding a gift's power. Seneca suggested that the interdependence of the gift relationship was symbolized in the visual image of the Three Graces, Greek goddesses collectively representing charity and individually depicting beauty, charm, and joy. The three women were conventionally portrayed with their hands interlocked in a merry circular dance: "Why do the sisters hand in hand dance in a ring which returns upon itself?" asked Seneca. "For the reason that a benefit passing in its course from hand to hand returns nevertheless to the giver; the beauty of the whole is destroyed if the course is anywhere broken, and it has most beauty if it is continuous and maintains an uninterrupted succession." The image compels us to ask: What might threaten to disrupt this circular dance of giving, receiving, and returning?

Substantial power coexists with great potential for harm. As Marcel Mauss and others have noted, the old Germanic words *gift* and *gif* convey a dual and startlingly contradictory meaning: gift and poison. But why should gifts, so basic an expression of human generosity and affiliation, ever be harmful? The ancients knew that the gift-giver always – and instantaneously – turns the recipient of the gift into a kind of debtor. And as soon as the gift is received, there is always an instant of confusion – how to respond appropriately, how to interpret the donor's motives, how

to escape the inevitable feeling of indebtedness. A gift can jeopardize a relationship as readily as it can strengthen it.

The catalogue of potential harms in gift-giving is lengthy. No act of seeming generosity was viewed more critically by the ancients than the Roman *sparsio*, the sprinkling or scattering of gifts. This was the most haphazard form of giving. Traditionally, the *sparsio* involved throwing coins or food to the throngs that gathered to watch theatrical performances, circuses, or athletic competitions. Gifts so wantonly given were sometimes the source of public unrest, triggering violent brawls as the mob pounced on objects strewn at their feet. The disorder as people fought over the carelessly tossed objects troubled many observers.

“Generosity must move swiftly,” Seneca said, “for tardy good will smacks of ill will.”

On closer examination, the *sparsio* reveals several distinct categories of philanthropic harm:

1. Fundamental flaws can exist in the manner and method of giving when it is haphazard, casual, and thoughtless.
2. Motivations for giving can be dishonorable, unscrupulous, or simply self-serving. (In the *sparsio*, distribution was made for the donor’s amusement.)
3. The gift-giving might proceed despite producing ill effects on the recipients.
4. The gift itself might be of such negligible value to the recipient that it is not worth the effort of seeking it (trampled figs or perhaps nothing at all).
5. The relationship established between donor and recipient can be problematic. (In the *sparsio* the ritual is merely an assertion of the donor’s power, a public manifestation of disparities of wealth and class.)
6. The donor’s expectations for gratitude, honor, and recognition can be unreasonable or excessive.

Ancient authors knew that donors should be mindful not only of the relationship between donor and recipient but also of the impact upon those who were not direct parties to the gift exchange. In his treatise *On Duties*, Cicero advises that a donor must avoid harming both those he seeks to help as well as those to whom he must deny assistance. He elaborates on this insight: “One does not need to be warned – for it is obvious – to take care that in trying to help some people one does not upset others.” Cicero’s advice is a timeless and sensible injunction for any donor: weigh the foregone charitable opportunities

carefully and consider the plight of those who are not being assisted. Benefiting one person or institution may have unanticipated consequences for those whose needs remain unaided and unacknowledged.

For the ancients, deliberation and care were clearly the first rule of giving. But deliberation about what exactly? For Aristotle careful giving was a matter of locating the mean between extravagance and stinginess; true generosity resided at the mid-point between too much and too little. While finding the mean involved a careful calculation of the recipient’s needs and an assessment of the donor’s own resources, it also demanded proper motivation in giving and absolute propriety when offering the gift.

Seneca, too, urged rational deliberation and suggested that bestowing a benefit was not akin to a business transaction. He wrote, “No one enters his benefactions in his account-book, or like a greedy tax-collector calls for payment upon a set day, at a set hour. The good man never thinks of them unless he is reminded of them by having them returned; otherwise, they transform themselves into a loan. To regard a benefit as an amount advanced is putting it out at shameful interest.”

However complicated deliberation about gifts might be, sound judgment was always expected to prevail, though never at the expense of giving in a timely way. Generosity must move swiftly, Seneca said, for tardy good will smacks of ill will. Indeed, the focus on timeliness was fundamental to the ancient authors. Their counsel should resonate in our own time. Few things in contemporary philanthropy arouse more complaints than dilatory decision-making.

The basic purpose of the ancient rules for giving was always to minimize ill will and ingratitude. It was ingratitude that most often threatened to poison the gift relationship. Ingratitude, Seneca warned, “is something to be avoided in itself because there is nothing that so effectually disrupts and destroys the harmony of the human race as this vice.” What might produce ingratitude? It could occur when the donor expected an immediate or obsequious display of gratitude, wanted a particular favor in return, or accompanied the gift with unwanted advice or criticism. Seneca warned that benefits “must not be made irritating, they must not be accompanied by anything that is unpleasant. Even if there should be something upon which you would like to offer advice, choose a different time.”

In our contemporary discussions of philanthropy, we often concede that foundation staffs can be arrogant

and unresponsive. But we rarely ask how we might avoid such accusations. We do not ponder the sources of ingratitude. Indeed, the language of grace and gratitude seems quaint, even unprofessional and demeaning, in characterizing the relationship of donor and recipient. We do, however, acknowledge the imbalance of power. It is the inequality in the gift relationship that remains the most intractable problem. Resentment is natural because every recipient feels some degree of indebtedness. Often the gift reinforces the realities of dependency. In some cases, even careful deliberation and considerate behavior on the part of the donor is insufficient to remedy the inequality of the gift relationship.

One remedy was sometimes proposed: the secret or anonymous gift. Anonymity has always been one of the surest ways of tempering the power imbalances inherent in the gift relationship. It deftly severs the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary, liberating the recipient from reciprocal obligations and dependency. It also removes the donor from public view, leaving a private space to weigh either public approbation or scorn. But anonymity would never become a general practice in antiquity, for it cut the social ties that were normally established through gift-giving and that were so essential to sustaining personal relationships. The ancient philosophers offered their advice on gift-giving knowing that giving and receiving were taking place within a thick web of personal obligations, friendships, patron-client relations, and political allegiances.

Today, while friends still exchange gifts, individual patrons still support many good works, and politically active citizens donate to their various causes, these practices occur in a much less personal context. And while our highly organized, sometimes overly bureaucratic, modern philanthropy can trace its distant origins to the charitable institutions of the ancient and medieval world, our contemporary philanthropic institutions function in a legal and professional environment that leaves little space to compare grantmaking to these older forms of gift-giving.

Many changes are clearly beneficial. Fiduciary responsibilities and charitable purposes have been explicitly defined in law, helping to assure that modern philanthropy will aim at public benefits rather than exclusive private advantage. There are also widely accepted practices that govern grantmaking, especially in the largest foundations. Some large foundations rely on external peer-review processes; most employ internal procedures to assure careful evaluation of proposals and decision-making. Formal grant agreements are also routinely required, specifying

conditions for payment and performance. These practices now define a grant relationship distinct from the older gift relationships.

But these modern institutional practices do not necessarily promote a professional ethos. They may even deter us from examining the past as we aim to create professional norms for modern philanthropy. Perhaps it is these very bureaucratic formalities that led anthropologist Mary Douglas to remark on her experience of working in a foundation, "Newcomers to the office quickly learnt that

the recipient does not like the giver, however cheerful he be." Why should this be so? Perhaps it is because we have ceased to think about the aspects of the gift relationship that remain deeply embedded in our grantmaking activities.

Complaints by today's grantees resound in familiar ways to any reader of Aristotle, Cicero, or Seneca. Modern grant-seeking processes can be as drawn out and humiliating as anything faced by a person pleading for assistance in antiquity. Indeed, timely responses and adequate help may be even more difficult to win in the modern foundation world with its well-defined grant cycles and diligent review processes. The burdens placed upon the grantee to describe a project and assess results can be as heavy as any obligation that weighed upon an ancient beneficiary. Clearly, a species of gift relationship emerges when a foundation and its grantees interact. In refracting our current grantmaking practices through the lens of antiquity, perhaps we can recover insights – or at least a set of relevant questions – that will prove helpful in constructing professional norms to govern modern philanthropic conduct. What now threatens to poison the gift relationship? What are the wellsprings of ingratitude?

Ancient insights into the manner and method of giving ought to be absorbed by modern grantmaking institutions. The philosophers wrote often about the timing of the gift and about the need to avoid hesitation and delay. Hesitancy and a seeming reluctance to give were frequently the reasons for the recipient's ill will toward the donor. Today, dilatory foundation procedures, inexplicable delays, and deferrals in making a grant are among the most annoying features of institutional philanthropy. Diligence in evaluating proposals, attention to fiduciary responsibilities, and sound evaluation processes are important, but too often they can become excuses for the delay. While donors delay, grantees grow resentful. Time and timeliness in gift-giving were subjects of keen interest to the ancients. Professionals in philanthropy might also

think about timeliness of decisions and the duration of their commitments.

The ancients also were concerned with the expectations that benefactors were liable to place upon their beneficiaries. Donors were advised to relinquish expectations for gratitude or return favors; today those expectations might take the form of detailed performance measures, frequent reporting, and prompt project evaluation. A philanthropic ethic would certainly pose the question: "What burdens ought to be borne by a grantee? How can donors limit those burdens?" Similarly, ancient donors were cautioned about conveying their gifts with excessive advice or criticism, knowing that words delivered by a donor can have greater weight than counsel between equals. A donor's words can often be taken not as advice but as an order. And this advice sometimes comes from someone who has no detailed knowledge or understanding of the recipient's circumstances. This, too, is a subject rarely discussed in modern philanthropy. How and when is advice best conveyed? What intellectual deference is due the grantee? In what ways can knowledge best become part of the philanthropic transaction?

Aristotle emphasized that the gift should not only be right in proportion to the donor's resources but also right given the beneficiary's needs. A discussion of the "right" amount for a modern foundation leads in many different directions: payout levels, average grant sizes, duration of support, contributions to endowment or capital projects versus project support, loans, or venture capital-style investments. These topics, constantly discussed by foundation staff and board members, are perhaps the greatest source of tension between donor and recipient. The amount will never seem to be enough to the recipient. How can disappointment or ingratitude be assuaged? Perhaps it can be tempered when, in conveying the gift or grant, the donor demonstrates a true understanding of the recipient's needs and responds in ways that are not merely token shows of support or sympathy.

Just as the dancers must aim for something higher than mere technical skill in the execution of their steps, the philanthropic professional must aspire to more than managerial competence.

Finally, it is by reminding us to consider why we give that the ancients have the most to teach us. Aristotle, Seneca, and Cicero focused on motivation; they understood that a gift should not be motivated by the expectation of a return favor, nor by a desire to control the beneficiary, nor by the need to obtain praise. Above all, they knew that a gift should not generate ingratitude. The gift relationship suffers the greatest harm when motivations are self-serving or thoughtless. Whether an ancient patron or a contemporary program officer, the intent of the donor must always be to bestow a benefit that will sustain cohesive social relationships;

whether gift or grant the aim is human solidarity. Donors should be ever mindful of how giving and returning sustain solidarity so that the hands of the Three Graces will

remain securely and perpetually conjoined in their circular dance.

Just as the dancers must aim for something higher than mere technical skill in the execution of their steps, the philanthropic professional must aspire to more than managerial competence. The dancers must always be cognizant of their partners' every move just as any philanthropic professional ought to be fully perceptive of and sympathetic to the grantee's position. The dancers must be perpetually animated by an inner creative spark just as the philanthropist ought to be moved by a deeply ingrained moral purpose. Above all, the dancers understand that their aim is grace – to preserve, to show and, thus, to profess it. As philanthropic professionals, with the help of the ancients who analyzed the gift relationship, we can begin to seek our own moral core and purpose. We must discover what we profess.

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