BRIEF HISTORY OF CHARITY AND PHILANTHROPY

The outpouring of aid to others, nationally or internationally, is sociologically documented as an outgrowth of American social structure. As early as 1630, Puritan, John Winthrop, preached to the passengers on board the *Arbella* as they sailed into the Massachusetts Bay. His discourse entitled *A Modell of Christian Charity* became a classic as the new colony was established as a "City upon a Hill."

Winthrop set a social frame compelling the new inhabitants to a higher level of common practice. He stated, *"Wee must be knitt together in this work as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brother Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities."*

Thus, the Anglo-American settlers adopted a charitable set of practices to be applied to all people:

1) Every community was obligated to take care of its own legal inhabitants. When individuals and families fell in need, they could name a rightful claim on the collective for relief.

2) Aid was direct, personal and concrete. Overseers of the poor visited the persons, inspected their circumstances and supplied the items required. However, money was not given, just the specific quantities of food, clothing, fuel or other goods needed.

3) The needy were not separated or institutionalized in any way. Normally, people were cared for by their own family or in the household of another. Much like foster care today, the town resources sustained the aged, the sick, the orphan, and the indigent.

4) All of these unfortunate situations were regarded as opportunities of stewardship. No effort was made to distinguish the needy from the truly needy. The Rev. Samuel Seabury urged his Boston Episcopal Charity Society in 1788 to assist *"every one who is suffering from want. And no matter how their suffering comes on them, whether by accident, by idleness, by vice—while they suffer, they are entitled to relief."*

5) Strangers were treated with a sterner standard. There was no automatic claim to aid if you were not born in the town. And if a person arrived as a newcomer or passed through as a transient, they were likely to be warned to leave. Towns had no legal obligation to assist newcomers who became poor. Paupers were forced from the towns back to where they originated or out in the countryside with no resources. (John Adam's Diary—Braintree, Mass, 1767)

Eighteenth century America was a society that was localized, corporate, and inclusive in its expression of charity. There were a few charitable endowments—a fund for the purchase of

Communion Silver, a legacy for the "Silent Poor" of the town maintained by taxes and church donations to supplement town grants to the poor. Seldom did funds leave a town until the great fire of Boston (1760) and the "revolutionary crisis" of 1774-75.

After the 1720's cities began to emerge with large urban centers primarily in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Mobility of populations resulted from commerce and trade yielding to a more formal institutionalization of social needs. Benjamin Franklin embodied the practice of philanthropy. However, for Franklin, the object was not so much spiritual communion, as Winthrop had extolled, but the practical improvement of the human condition.

Franklin formed societies for the general welfare; he initiated a club among enterprising merchants and tradesmen for their self-improvement. The *Junto Club* was a means for young tradesmen to go around the established patronage and power structure used in most European societies. The Club gave young merchants access to books, information, contracts and credit that they would ordinarily have to obtain from the privileged and aristocrats. Franklin forged a new middleclass that allowed individuals to learn and improve themselves without the selective tutelage afforded by wealth or position. He literally broke the servitude system that indentured those who sought access to an individual's library. Until the formation of The Club, young men would spend decades to pay-off this debt to their master either financially or through a set number of years work will minor compensation.

It was from this social shift that Franklin developed the first volunteer fire department, the first public library, free schools for the poor. Philanthropy took shape as a means to inspire the poor with new hope and establish a means of self-support. Franklin viewed traditional charity or alms as a form of dependence and inherently self-defeating. It should be noted that philanthropy in Franklin's day was not impersonal; people still maintained a hand's on approach to their neighbors in need.

By 1820 the post-Revolutionary era ushered in the "age of benevolence" with some 2000 charitable institutions formed primarily in New England. Virginia did not allow for the incorporation of private or "selfish" associations. In 1792 the Commonwealth of Virginia confiscated the endowments of the Anglican Church and redistributed the funds to the counties. Reflecting this public ownership, Jefferson established the University of Virginia as a state institution not a private one.

There were marine societies, mechanic associations, Masonic loges, humane organizations, a dispensary, a hospital, a school for the deaf, several orphanages, asylums, missionary societies, Bible societies, Sunday schools, temperance associations, agricultural societies, social circles, peace societies and many more.

These vast and varied associations were identified and summarized by the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, 1831. Tocqueville wrote about the "*immense assemblages of associations*" for every purpose imaginable. As Tocqueville stated: *"as soon as Yankees developed an opinion, they were forming associations of the like-minded."*

Associations allowed Americans to exercise power in society through combined agreement around a given issue, project, cultural need, or product development. During the postcolonial period, charity began to give way to a new mode of philanthropy. Groups of Americans began to efficiently organize the care of the poor and the building

of educational, medical and cultural institutions. The local associations of the "independent sector" grew into a national scope emerging into the nonprofit sector we experience today.

These various societies were not as spontaneous as Tocqueville seemed to view them. Many of these groups were chartered by state legislatures and endowed with a public purpose. As legal entities, the organizations transcended their individual members. They could own real estate, assume obligations, conduct business, and be free from corporate debt and taxes. By 1840, people could incorporate a voluntary association simply by hiring a lawyer and filing the appropriate papers.

Charitable societies continued older and valued traditions of seeing to the needs of the poor; however, they also significantly contributed to breaking those traditions. Women's charitable societies began to incorporate, raise and handle money, hire staff, lobby for legislative privileges and go out into society at large away from the home. In addition, donors became more distant from recipients. Efficiency became a hallmark of associations. Rather than each member of a congregation giving a portion of their goods to their minister, they established a fund to purchase needed supplies for the minister's upkeep.

The care of the poor, the dependent, and the insane became more impersonal and formalized in the nineteenth century. The commercial and industrial revolution soon ensued as transients and strangers replaced the once familiar worker or journeymen. This estrangement forced the poor to take on a more threatening appearance. They were viewed as disorderly and removed from daily society. They were segregated to other neighborhoods and place in the care of institutions.

Philanthropy and the practice of charity allowed individuals to fund institutions, confident not to come into contact with any of the inmates. The new-style philanthropy was a "paying the bill of conscience." Gone was the true spirit of charity—Christian love.

During the mid-nineteenth century personal charity, or the care of neighbors, did not disappear. But a tension did develop between traditional charity and modern philanthropy, which continues to our day. Symbols of these extremes were illustrated in Jane Addams, who founded Hull House for the poor of Chicago, and John D. Rockefeller who hired a Baptist minister to *"spare him the burden of overseeing his donations."* These two avenues have continued to keep charity and philanthropy on opposite spectrums.

Pushing the nonprofit associations into the realm of philanthropy were the great foundations formed by Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockerfeller dividing American humanitarianism into two traditions: charity and philanthropy.

Volunteerism is the one element that brings these two institutions together. The mission and the moral purpose are centered in the person who gives of his or her time, leadership and financial support to any charitable cause.

Sources:

Giving in America: *From Charity to Philanthropy.* Robert Gross (Lecture to the National Planning Giving: College of William & Mary, 1993)

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DEFINITIONS

Charity: A complex of ideas and practices rooted in the Christian, particularly in the reformed Protestantism brought by English settlers; it was later reformed by Catholicism and Judaism brought by immigrants in the nineteenth century. Charity is expressed as an impulse to personal service; it engages individuals in concrete, direct acts of compassion and connection to other people.

Philanthropy: A more secular impulse, rooted in the Enlightenment, and oriented to the solution of social ills and human needs. Philanthropy seeks not so much to aid individuals as to reform society through the promotion of progress and advancement of knowledge.

Thus, charity and philanthropy stand at opposite poles: the one concrete and individual, the other abstract and institutional. But they need not be at odds but rather complimentary of one another.