

Bookshelf

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Robin Hood Was Right: A Guide to Giving Your Money for Social Change

By Chuck Collins, Pam Rogers, and Joan P. Garner

Published by W.W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2000

Don't Just Give It Away – How to Make the Most of Your Charitable Giving

By Renata J. Rafferty with Foreword by Paul Newman

Published by Chandler House Press, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1999

REVIEWED BY JULIE WHITE

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There is much to like about both of these books but, although I can't quite put my finger on why, I felt some disappointment with each of them. In the case of *Robin Hood Was Right* I was reminded of a conversation in "The Big Chill" where one character observes how differently their lives and the world turned out from what she expected, "It's a cold world out there", she says, "and to be honest, I'm getting a little frosty myself". At the risk of sounding like the ultimate boomer reflected in the movie, I have to say this book left me feeling a little frosty.

But before I get into that, let me say first what I did like. Well, certainly I liked the fact that the writers encourage readers to get beyond their own emotional reactions to immediate and obvious social symptoms and dig down underneath problems to their root causes. Heaven knows there is little enough money for systemic change and anything that results in more people asking pertinent questions and righting the power and resource imbalances in our society is a good thing. The book takes its role of basic primer seriously and asks: How does social change happen? Who are the players? What are the barriers? It entreats readers to look into their personal barriers – cynicism, hopelessness, and attitudes toward money – getting under their own systemic biases. The book is loaded with interesting examples and "how to" suggestions – even forms for identifying personal resources and attitudes. There are some moving quotes. ("Justice after all, is what love sounds like when it speaks in public", a quote from Eric Dyson of Columbia University.) The book even has a good crack at defining some of the terms many of us involved in supporting systemic change use frequently, and not necessarily effectively, with those we are trying

to influence. I liked this simple one on page 205: “The goal of social change is not personal transformation or the enhanced self-esteem of individuals, although these are powerful outcomes of people’s involvement in social justice activities, but to make the world better for everyone”.

The best part of the book, however, is the preface by Alfred Woodward:

I believe that generosity is a natural instinct that beats, however faintly, in every human heart. Those of us who act on our hunger for justice, who get creative with our righteous anger, who connect and comfort with our empathy, are very fortunate indeed. Generosity links us, beyond time and place, to people of conscience and action everywhere who have made our world freer, kinder and more just. Philanthropy and activism are a gift to one’s self.

When dramatic world events give way to the steadier process of rebuilding, many turn away, thinking the task is complete. In fact, the fight simply clears the way for the work to take place, the work of alleviating the ills of disparity. Tearing down employs emotion, reaction and righteous zeal. Building up demands a progressive stance. It asks for focus and heart. Doing good takes more than good intentions. It requires listening to and building partnership with the people affected by the problems. It demands patience and resolve. It requires funding. Even small amounts of money, given in strategic places, can have a lasting impact.

Both those thoughts – that systemic philanthropy taps into one’s most urgent and joyful impulses and that real change requires thoughtful, sustained collaborative strategies – should have formed the basis for the book. The fact that this is a rewrite of a book written 20 years ago is telling. The tone and underlying values are deeply rooted in the strategies of the sixties and early seventies: that social change = social movements; that social movements = organizing; that organizing = demonstrations. I call this the Sisyphus approach to social change – the meaning is in rolling the stone up the hill, not in how many times it rolls back down.

Perhaps this is the source of my dismay. Those of us who demonstrated, who organized and spoke up and created powerful advocacy groups in the seventies, lived to see our decades of work wiped out at the stroke of the pen of a new government. Nonprofit, community-based day care? Virtually gone. Anti-racism programs and affirmative action initiatives? Gone. Improved welfare policies and rates? Rolled back. We’ve watched community-based health care services awarded to the lowest cost, profit-making organizations, squeezing out vulnerable local charitable organizations. We’ve watched our schools lose their arts and recreation programs. We worry about whether we will get the cancer treatment we may need in a timely fashion and whether a loved relative in another town is lying in her own urine in her nursing home.

There is a large amount of Sisyphus-ian attitude required to build any strong society. We have to keep going every day, celebrating gains, taking the losses

in stride, not losing heart, feeding our “righteous anger”, but surely we have learned something in the past few decades about what works and doesn’t work. In Ontario we have to ask: How did the Harris government find it so easy to ravage 30 years of social change? And as empowering as the Days of Action felt, why didn’t they stop the steamroller of the so-called “common sense revolution”.

Perhaps we spent too much time focusing on government and not enough time building broadbased public awareness and support. If demonstrations and in-your-face lobbying are important for raising the alarm, strategies that create broad momentum, that build strong infrastructures to support sustained implementation, and that create the capacity to evolve with learning are equally important. To the extent the environmental movement has been successful, it has been because most people feel a stake in it and are able to find some meaningful way to contribute. This range of awareness and participation is what drives public policy, not the other way around. This isn’t to say that influencing effective policy isn’t critical, but without broad public support, public policy is only as good as the government du jour. And influencing government policy doesn’t just come from demonstrations, but by presenting solid information and alternatives and by the slow process of building credibility and constructive relationships.

Perhaps in our commitment to the causes themselves we didn’t focus enough on the boring but essential work of building well-managed, well-led organizations. There is some validity in the complaint that nonprofits are inefficient. Some assume this to be related to over-spending or to fat in the system. For anyone who has worked in social change organizations, it is to laugh, as they say. For the most part, charities do a lot with remarkably little, but they still may be poorly managed in the sense of good governance and human resource practices, as well as planning, evaluation and communication systems, and collaboration and conflict resolution skills. One of the most systemic granting initiatives I’ve seen in this regard comes from the Kahanoff Foundation’s work designed to integrate nonprofit management and leadership into mainstream business schools. It has served not only to strengthen leadership in the sector but also to build awareness of the sector in the business community.

Perhaps we put our arms too tightly around our issues of choice. I’ve come to understand that most social issues are interrelated and that true social change has to look at the broader context. For example, after years of pretty well disregarding recreation and sports as important feminist issues (except at the professional level), it turns out that one of the major predictors of teen pregnancy is the degree of involvement of female teens in sports: the greater the involvement, the less likely is early sexual activity.

My main point is that it is hard to know what the real levers of social change are; we have to look broadly and deeply to find them. If we look too narrowly

in terms of context and solutions, we miss them. We have to get beyond ideology. We have to be vigilant to challenge our own assumptions about causes and effects and welcome counter-intuitive ideas. And although this book doesn't just deal with marginal in-your-face groups, one has to work hard to find points that broaden the notion of social change beyond strategies focused on particular issues.

Don't Just Give It Away is the flip side of the coin. It focuses almost entirely on the mechanics of making philanthropic decisions and for this it is very good. There are a lot of practical, usable ideas. I particularly like the chapter on "Ten Warning Signs: Where to Look for 'The Bodies'". This could be useful for a funder of any size and covers the territory from how you are treated on a site visit to the state of recipient financials and your own "gut" feeling. I liked that one. We can be as rigorous as bankers but in the end philanthropy requires good judgment; it's not a science.

Having said that, the book includes some good tools – a diagnostic tool for organizations, a list of interesting web sites, and a list of donor organizations. It also provides the ubiquitous self-appraisal form for determining readers' areas of interest. I say ubiquitous because these personal assessment forms designed to explore the inner philanthropic child seem to be in every book on philanthropy I have seen lately. Although I understand that personal philanthropy should be grounded in what matters to the donor, I find these pseudo-analytical tools a bit much. Excerpts: "What was the single, greatest, surprise of your life?" "Who were the individuals who stopped to really get to know you?" "What was your favourite place to go alone as an adolescent?" It makes me want to say, "Hello! It's not about me!"

Which is my main complaint about this book: unlike *Robin Hood Was Right* it is completely neutral on what is needed or useful to society and doesn't give much guidance on making those determinations other than to picnic in one's psyche. However, it is well structured, well written and actually useful if you need to analyze a particular grant opportunity.

What I would have liked is to take the best from the two books and combine it into a book a quarter of the size. Despite its shortcomings, *Robin Hood Was Right* has some inspiring thoughts and focuses on a seriously under-resourced area of the sector – groups involved in the forefront or at the margins of social change. You could say they are focused on encouraging donors to spend their money well. *Don't Just Give It Away* is more focused on ensuring the money is well spent and also serves as a practical checklist.

Suddenly, I don't feel frosty after all. Maybe I'll go and dust off my old placards.

Making Money While Making a Difference: How to Profit with a Non-profit Partner

*By Richard Steckel, Ph.D., Robin Simons, Jeffrey Simons and Norman Tanen
Published by Hightide Press, Homewood, Illinois, 1999*

REVIEWED BY BRENDA GAINER

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This book is written by fundraisers for business people in an attempt to make support for charities more attractive and palatable. The authors set out to convince business people that partnerships with charitable organizations can be worthwhile, satisfying – and profitable too. Moving from cheerleading to an operational mode, they provide a lengthy “how to” section on forging beneficial links with nonprofit organizations.

Nonprofit fundraisers will find little in *Making Money While Making a Difference* that is new to them. They are already well aware of the benefits of corporate partnerships. For years now, everyone from granting agencies and foundations to Independent Sector, the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy and prestigious management publications like the *Harvard Business Review* have been advocating just such a strategy. As nonprofit organizations turn their attention to replacing lost government revenues and declining individual and corporate donations with new sources of revenue, a book such as this one could play a useful role in demonstrating to the business world, the value of partnerships with nonprofit organizations.

Unfortunately, this book is unlikely to be very helpful in this regard. The authors of *Making Money* begin by insulting their target audience. The pop psychology of the first few chapters proceeds from the utterly unjustified assumption that business people have lost their idealism and feel badly about themselves and their pursuit of the bottom line. Follow our directions, they imply, and your missing sense of self-worth will be magically restored.

The message of this book is that companies and individuals can do the right thing socially and feel good about themselves again, all with no monetary sacrifice. (Quite the contrary!) Everything can be expected to fall into place when a business teams up with a nonprofit: sales and revenues will soar, market share expand and even the Republican promise of reduced taxes will come to pass! Of course, the authors are not entirely wrong. Charity *can* be profitable, but in eradicating all possibility of tension between social goals and bottom-line advantage, in telling business people they can have their cake and eat it too, and in advocating the position that only those charities that are popular with consumers in the “free market system” deserve to survive, *Making Money* seriously misleads its corporate readership about the need for individuals and

corporations to engage in both what they call “pure” philanthropy *and* “self-interested” partnerships with charities.

In addition to this fundamental problem, the case study research upon which this book is based is extremely superficial. There are very limited data included on each case – most cases are simply anecdotes. There is almost no critical analysis in any of the cases. Almost every example that includes the monetary benefits of the partnership quotes the gross revenue figures, not the net profits. More importantly, many of the examples do not indicate the financial benefits at all. To be fair, not all of the benefits that the authors point to are immediately quantifiable; some of the partnerships result in more amorphous benefits such as “good public relations”. However the financial costs are almost never included in the examples and there is also no research reported about other aspects of the partnerships. For example, much more detailed information about how much time the business put into meetings and planning would be useful, as would the actual cost of releasing employees for volunteer programs. There is no analysis of the aggregated data that could lead to useful conclusions about general principles: what appears to work with whom, under what circumstances – and what doesn’t. Almost all the cases included purport to be success stories but leaving out failures does not help business decision-makers recognize situations to avoid.

Making Money While Making a Difference would be a more useful book if there had been some assessment of whether the partnership met its business goals (for both sides). In some cases the financial benefit to the nonprofit organization appears to be so small that one can’t help but question whether the nonprofit organization considered the venture to be an overall success in terms of its costs. Likewise, from the business point of view, while the benefits are detailed in general terms, there is often no sense of whether this was what the business aimed to achieve through the partnership or not.

There is also no discussion in this book of whether these partnerships are really contributing in a serious way to furthering the overall work of the particular organizations involved, or the nonprofit sector in general. For example, Canadian readers will be particularly interested in one of a couple of Canadian examples that details a business partnership with Parks Canada – at the end of the story, the reader is still wondering if the venture did anything to provide funds for the operating budgets of the parks, cutbacks to which provoked the establishment of the nonprofit organization that entered into the business venture in the first place.

The last 85 pages of the book purport to be a “how to” section, but any business person reading this book will already know the extremely general principles of partnership outlined here. The section contains only the most rudimentary and simple of planning principles and lacks the kind of specific detail that more careful research and analysis would have contributed.

The critical aspect of this book is not the rather tired point it makes that businesses want to “get something back” when they support charities. This, surely, is old news. The most unsettling aspect of the book, from the nonprofit manager’s point of view, will be the implications for social policy of the arguments the authors put forward.

The authors advocate throughout, as one would expect in a book that is unabashedly grounded in the “what’s in it for me?” paradigm, the use of consumer research to select appropriate causes for business to support. The authors cheerfully take on the nay-sayers they expect will engage in a discussion of the relative merits of “pure” versus “self-interested” philanthropy. But this issue is a red herring when it comes to considering the most important outcome of large-scale adoption of the principles of charitable support outlined in this book. Nonprofit managers will not be critical of this book for advocating self-interested behaviour on the part of corporations that partner with business. They will, however, be critical of the argument that self-interested corporate behaviour, based on polling consumers, should form the sole basis for corporate support of charities and thus dictate which nonprofit organizations should survive – and which should die.

The dangerous aspect of this book is that it does not simply advocate a consumer-driven model for business support of nonprofit organizations but that it couples this with advocating the Republican Party position that at the same time governments should reduce state support for social needs. On page 20 the authors state “the Republicans believe that if these programs were important, the freemarket system would pick up the slack. We don’t disagree with this premise. This book is about showing business how it’s profitable to pick up that slack and how to do it”. “How to do it” is clearly through polling consumers about their favorite causes. Many readers, both in the nonprofit sector and in the business sector, will question if this consumer-driven model is an appropriate method for a nation to use in deciding which social needs will be met and which will not.

Angels of Mercy or Development Diplomats? NGOs and Foreign Aid

By Terje Tvedt

Published by Africa World Press, 1998, 246 pp. \$18.95 US

REVIEWED BY GARY W. MAGARRELL

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Tvedt tackles the tough issue of the role of development NGOs whose numbers are exploding. He suggests the term NGO should be used as a common denominator, a collective term, for all organizations within the aid channel that

are institutionally separated from the state apparatus and are non-profit-distributing. His research indicates a lack of consistent data on which to base definitive conclusions, however this is an important book, for it lays out, albeit in a difficult-to-read fashion, the critical questions, such as the role development NGOs play in the political-ideological process wherein the relationship between states and societies is being fundamentally redefined.

He asks the question: are NGO staff angels of mercy, government-paid development diplomats, propagandists for a triumphant West, instruments in a coming clash between civilizations, or something else? These and other questions, impossible to answer with current data, form the basis of discussion in this book and are often addressed by current examples across the globe. The author puts forth strong criticism of the cultural theories and concepts that have dominated research and discourse on development NGOs and proposes and demonstrates different analytical approaches.

The author provides an excellent explanation of why NGOs exist and states that the common answer (“due to governments’ performance failure”) is too simplistic. In fact, he points out, sovereign states initiate the employment of NGOs. He finds the NGO scene to be extremely heterogeneous, not only within countries but even more so from an international, global perspective and shows that the argument about the comparative advantage of NGOs cannot be sustained with current research. Furthermore, there is a lack of international agreement on the meaning of accountability for development NGOs.

Tvedt is a Norwegian and uses Norway’s experience as a key system to examine. This focus, however, does not diminish this book’s value to North Americans, for the issues highlighted are the critical concerns of government, NGOs and the donor public all over the world.

This book is definitely worth reading! In the key discussions regarding the best conduits for the donor dollars to reach aid projects, Tvedt makes an important contribution towards the necessary analysis of the role of development NGOs in a rapidly changing world and the formation of a world-wide standard definition.