

Great Ossification!

Darwin didn't discover private foundations. If, instead of exploring the Galapagos Islands in the Beagle, he had landed amidst a community populated entirely by private foundations, he would most certainly not have concluded that the survival of a species depends on the speed, cunning, and determination of its strongest members. Rather, he might have observed that the members rarely adapt to external conditions and we may never have understood anything about the survival of a species except for our small distorted slice of perpetuity. Even the rare mortality was most frequently the result of self-inflicted "sunset" provisions.

William Schambra, writing in the July issue of the Chronicle of Philanthropy ("*The Philanthropist* Rebuts Grant-Making Professionals") is critical of the growing sense of professionalism developing among those who labor in private foundations. Mr. Schambra devalues the contributions produced by skilled professional foundation staff in favor of more impulsive types of charity by "everyday Americans" (all the while appearing to confuse grant writers with grant makers). He goes on to suggest that professional staff do not feel the same sense of urgency that individual donors do when they see an unmet, desperate need. Thus, for the last forty years, according to Schambra, foundations have slid deeper and deeper into concrete.

In my view, the difference between original donors and professional staff is not caused by a lack of urgency on the part of the staff as much as it is a difference of viewpoint. Many everyday American donors respond impulsively to a human need they can see and touch. Whereas, many professional staff have learned to ask the next question: "why is this happening"? Add to this, the closer proximity to and control of the money by the original donor and it becomes clear that donors can move quicker. But, they can also make quicker mistakes.

He may be right that the growth of professionalism among foundation staff is partly to blame for what many of us see as perpetual motion without observable impact in a few foundations. However, if he is correct, he is only partially so. Lots of money and time has been wasted by individual impulsive donors too. The common denominator between ineffective professional staff and ineffective individual donors in my view is that they neither knew clearly what they wanted to get done. Small scale or large scale, complex or simple, short or long term, the single most clearly observable thread connecting money to poor results is a failing clarity of purpose.

Schambra is probably right that professional staff tend to confuse things with new terms (try "learning" as a noun) and complex solutions. But, the ineffectiveness of overly simplistic, penurious donors can be just as infuriating and equally harmful on the ground. My suggestion for professionals and "everyday" donors alike is that they spend a little more time defining what they intend to accomplish BEFORE they become just one more cog in the machinery of perpetual charitable motion.

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