Charity as a Good Virus

By Karl Zinsmeister

It was when I received an e-mail from the little Bavarian village of Oberammergau that I knew the Wuhan coronavirus had stirred up a hurricane.

In 1632, the bubonic plague descended upon Germany’s Alpine region. As towns began to be ravaged by the disease, the burghers of Oberammergau gathered to offer a fervent appeal to God: If their community could be relieved of the Black Death, they would enact, as their thanksgiving, a solemn religious tribute. Not just once, but every ten years thereafter.

The contagion receded, and in 1634 the villagers kept their word, creating an ardent Passion Play about the last days of Jesus. The public reaction was so strong the performance had to be moved from the sanctuary out to the surrounding churchyard, where the graves of recent pandemic victims reminded all present of their salvation. Every decade since—over four centuries—grateful residents of the town of 5,000 have faithfully kept their promise. Local men start growing patriarchal beards a year in advance. Families teach their children to play instruments specifically so they can man a full pit orchestra.

The open-air spectacle, which mobilizes 2,000 villagers to act or play music in a five-hour performance, has been canceled only twice—one in 1770 amidst church turmoil, and once in 1940 due to World War II. So when the letter arrived telling me my September tickets to the 2020 Passion Play would have to be refunded, I realized we were in the midst of an historic disruption.

Of course we’ve lost far more than just centuries-old traditions. Today’s wreckage extends to jobs supporting millions of families, waylaid educations, the crushing of many enterprises that were a life’s dream. Funerals and weddings have been ruined, religious worship and all sorts of communal gatherings banished, non-virus medical treatments canceled, and lives shortened. Hardly any social sector, industry, or human activity is unaffected.

Here is one part of American society, however, that has kicked into a higher rather than lower gear—and that is philanthropy. Despite lockdowns, layoffs, stock-market collapses, and stay-at-home orders, many donors increased their giving. This has been true of both institutions and individuals, large givers and our masses of small givers. Candid counted $11 billion in special coronavirus gifts by the end of May. A good deal of that went into medical research (see “Gifts of Health” starting on page 16). Other donations aimed to soften the economic and social dislocations of the pandemic.

Many givers focused first on their home regions. The Lilly Endowment, for instance, rapidly dispensed $80 million to help neighbors across its home state of Indiana. Leon and Debra Black offered $20 million to assist health-care workers in New York City, and other small and large donors in Manhattan created special funds stocked with close to $200 million to provide social services in their city. Jeff Bezos pledged $25 million to match relief efforts of other givers within Washington state. The Murdock Charitable Trust pushed out, all across the Pacific Northwest, 145 pandemic-assistance grants totaling $15 million. (Murdock executive director Steve Moore’s comments in this issue’s Interview montage give a glimpse of how thoughtful donors in hundreds of communities have stepped up to face the coronavirus.)

Big, broad blasts of assistance were offered by many philanthropists. The Hewlett Foundation immediately committed $140 million. Jeff Skoll announced a $100 million covid gift and an overall quadrupling of his normal grantmaking over several years. Jack Dorsey pledged a full billion dollars—close to a third of his entire wealth. Google put up another billion through its philanthropic arm.

Niches where there were special needs attracted other givers. Quick boosts to hard-pressed food banks, for instance, were offered by helpers ranging from the Duke Endowment to Sheryl Sandberg (see her explanation in our Interview collection) to Jeff Bezos (at a level of $100 million). Ray and Barbara Dalio bought 60,000 laptops for children unprepared for the distance learning suddenly required of them. (For more on today’s experiment in mass online education and how givers are aiding it, refer to our feature article on page 22.)

Small givers have done their part. In the first weeks of the emergency, the United Way received a quick surge of $382 million for covid relief. Fidelity Charitable reported at the end of April that its thousands of contributors to donor-advised funds had already given away $2.5 billion in 2020, a significant chunk of that zeroed in on anti-virus efforts. A study of thousands of small accounts at 64 different community foundations found that their donors gave away 60 percent more this March and April than last March and April. Two different public-opinion surveys in the spring found that 80 to 90 percent of everyday citizens will maintain or increase their giving this year despite the national shutdown.

PHILANTHROPY
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Comparing to the way philanthropy stepped up to our virus emergency, the performance of government functionaries has been less impressive. From the U.S. Centers for Disease Control to the World Health Organization, responses to the coronavirus disaster by our public agencies have been error-ridden and weak.

To be fair, a new threat like this will always be hard for a bureaucracy to prepare for, adapt to, and cope with. And that is a prime argument on behalf of diffuse voluntary action. Rather than putting all of our eggs in a few rigid baskets at the WHO or CDC or NIH, philanthropy relies on a sprawling variety of strategies, ideas, and money flows. Private giving seeds thousands of distinct organisms across society, and the ones that grow loveliest get copied by others.

Critics often carp that philanthropy is a crazy quilt, inconsistent, fractured into myriad pieces rather than unified under central direction as they would prefer. However, as policy expert Christopher DeMuth recently pointed out, “diversified centers of authority and initiative are not a problem, or a luxury.” Rather, developing the widest possible mix of sources of response and action is “the key to resilience in the face of emergencies large and small.”

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Of course, even a healthily diversified, broadly funded civil society can’t save us if we become utopian in our expectations and demands.

Life is full of danger and undodgeable realities. Insisting on perfect solutions without any risks is a prescription for paralysis, dangerous demands for rescue.
We’ve surrendered all sense of proportion in managing risks and fears.
few facilities experienced heavy surges. Hardly any of the field hospitals set up on an emergency basis ever held more than a trickle of patients. Meanwhile the finances of our medical industry have been destroyed, and the health of millions of Americans endangered, by the forced cancellation of all treatments apart from covid-19.

We are told by some that our lives cannot resume—must not resume—until there is a coronavirus vaccine. Well, a vaccine may or may not materialize, ever. Keep in mind that despite decades of effort, scientists have not been able to create effective vaccinations against the similar SARS coronavirus of 2003, or for the 2012 coronavirus called MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome), or against the HIV virus, or for the hepatitis C virus.

Fate has undeniably dealt us some bad cards. It is possible, however, for us to play them into an even worse state, through self-inflicted errors and over-reactions. Our federal government acted quickly to produce an initial $2 trillion stimulus response to the coronavirus. That blizzard of new laws and programs and honeypots produced its share of misfires (including an intentional provision that means about half of the workforce will earn more by staying on unemployment than by returning to their jobs, which is sure to delay our recovery). The overall measure, though, was necessary given the panic under way.

Then followed “Stimulus 2” and “Stimulus 3,” also hugely expensive. And as I write there is clamoring for a “Stimulus 4.” The House of Representatives wants to fling an additional $3 trillion of money at hundreds of government agencies—from the Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs to the Railroad Retirement Board and National Endowment for the Arts. The bill they passed has USDA subsidies for “beginning farmers and ranchers,” increased subsidies for daycare (at a time when all daycares are closed), and a $25 billion blank check for the Postal Service. It ends limits on tax deductions for very expensive houses. It suspends credit reporting and debt collection across the U.S. It stops welfare work requirements. It stipulates that marijuana businesses must be provided with banking services and insurance, and offers special boosts “for potential and existing minority-owned” cannabis businesses. Oh, and the provisions for helping charities that were included in the first stimulus would be rendered meaningless by the House bill’s bald redefinition of “nonprofits” eligible for assistance to include not just charities but also political pressure groups and unions.

In other words, politicians are responding with the usual indiscriminate government slush funds. Meanwhile, activists are scrambling to use the coronavirus emergency to get hundreds of thousands of people sprung from jails and prisons, to have college loans forgiven, to make Medicare available to people ten years earlier, to block immigration, to subsidize Green boondoggles, to spend billions on highways. You get the idea. A good crisis should never be wasted is the mantra of Washingtonians eager to advance their pet agendas.

Applying, most of the charitable responses to the coronavirus disaster have unfolded in ways completely different from government responses. Donors realize they can’t replace our private economy with public payments. That is a Ponzi scheme that runs out of money very quickly. Thus, philanthropists are working to reverse the smothering of work and economic production in their regions.

Donors also know they can’t order Americans to do anything. So instead they are encouraging, assisting, volunteering, and boosting cooperative behavior. They are feeding our better angels.

And there are better angels inside millions of American breasts, bursting to get out. We saw this at the Braskem petrochemical plant in Pennsylvania, where 43 men volunteered to live in their factory full-time for a month, without going home, in order to produce fabric sorely needed for protective masks and gowns worn by medical workers. They slept on air mattresses and worked long shifts in alternating groups as their personal contribution to our national emergency.

The difference between voluntary gifts and official mandates is vast. Private action is so desirable not just because it is more efficient, not just because it is gentler to individual autonomy and personal liberty. There is also a vital emotional component when people act out of free will.

Yale investigator Nicholas Christakis notes that wholesome behaviors like sharing, goodwill, and positivity are actually contagious. You might think of them as good viruses. Human societies “magnify whatever they are seeded with.” Research shows that if you pour “love and altruism and happiness” into a population, magnified versions of all of those qualities will echo through the group. Individuals with happy friends become more happy themselves. People surrounded by generosity turn generous in their own right.

So America’s millions of energetic donors can be proud of the role they’ve played in helping our nation navigate today’s coronavirus trauma. They’ve lifted burdens and solved shortages and sped healing. And they’ve raised spirits at least in tandem with their raising of resources. You can expect much more that is good and great from U.S. givers in the months to come.