

Love of Humanity Made Manifest

by Mary Davidson



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Sometimes we live with a word for decades and consider that we know exactly what it means, what it refers to and how best to use it. I did not title this article “Philanthropy” because I imagined that readers might turn the page to avoid this conversation. I wonder how many of us know the real meaning of this word.

In fact, the Greek roots of the word ‘philanthropy’ refer to ‘love of humanity,’ a broad and deep concept that is certainly not just about money. Over a long time, philanthropy has come to suggest the act of giving money away, and a philanthropist, we think, is one who is extremely wealthy and has the means to give away large sums of money. Some might say that philanthropy has become a business in and of itself, with corporate structures and huge staffs to accomplish this generosity. The intentions are always good, and how could anyone question the idea of giving to and giving back to improve humanity and conditions on our earth?

What about *love of humanity* and the real meaning of the word ‘philanthropy?’ It is not a matter of how much money is assigned by staff members sent around the world to assess problems and to write reports about who needs more money, about who is hungrier, which village needs plumbing or where illness is most prevalent, although all of that is good, productive and can create meaningful change.

Large tax deductions, buildings named, awards given for the most generous person—though very real—do not define or measure philanthropy. They serve to remind us that generosity has some very real consequences beyond the results of working toward a more sustainable and healthy population and earth.

The holy books of the great religions all speak of generosity and teach that giving money to alleviate suffering, hunger and despair is a good and worthy thing. Generosity nurtures those who give and those who receive, which is why this is spoken of in our spiritual texts.

Philanthropy, however, is an even greater goal and represents a deeper yearning. The highest purpose of philanthropy is based in a profound, almost immeasurable concept of *love of humanity* and does not depend on coins, but rather on the need that each human feels to be a member of a greater community than oneself.

There are many avenues to satisfy this yearning and many steps to tread in pondering generosity and love of humanity.

As a member of this tapestry of global citizenry, how can we best reflect on the starting point of a love for humanity? In the first instance, how can we articulate our own love of humanity? Does this concept have meaning for each of us? How can we express our deepest need to be connected and to connect with each other as an expression of this love for humanity? Can we look in the eyes of the cripple lying on a street in Mumbai with appreciation and respect? Can we hear the cries of children in the refugee camps of Pakistan without turning away? Can we touch the hands of a woman suffering with AIDS for an hour or two? Can we suffer with the baby elephant orphaned and abandoned, wandering the savannahs of Tanzania after the mother’s tusks have been removed and she lies dying, alone and forgotten in the rush for money?

The idea that philanthropy is about the coinage of the realm is too intimidating and too easy. It is far more difficult, risky and challenging to truly love our fellow citizens as equals in this great global community. The time is now to make that commitment to be a philanthropist in this world gone mad with hatred and conflict that no amount of coins can or will change.

Mary Davidson’s experiences range from classroom teaching to fund-raising and alumni affairs. She travels to Africa frequently to improve the quality of life for those in poverty and was initiated into the Maasai community in 2009. She serves on the Staff and Board of Kosmos and several other organizations, including World Learning. Mary is committed to lifelong learning and her passions include music and theatre. She holds advanced degrees in Business and History and was employed by The Bank of New York for 25 years.

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students and public audiences, with the blessing of the Chinese censors. The film addresses the devastating practice of mountain top removal coal mining in West Virginia and clearly shows how the local people have organized to take on the industrial interests that are ruining their drinking water and health, as well as the glorious beauty of their land. At every screening, one of the first comments was, “It’s so much worse than that in China.” Amazing discussions ensued.

These films further a dialog in which *Kosmos* is a leading voice. This year, LETV will continue its part in that dialog, with public screenings, broadcast and the web, in both the US and China. It’s a small start, and an enormous dream, for our neighborhood here on Earth.

Martha Foster, founder and CEO of Living Earth Television, has worked with film festivals, museums, universities and PBS stations. She has graduate training in anthropology and in film and video production. A Kosmos Global Ambassador, she wrote for the Kosmos Fall/Winter 2010 issue about taking Kosmos and American documentary films to Burma (Myanmar).