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Opinion

Column: Philanthropy needs to be thoughtful to work



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Posted Feb 23, 2019 at 2:01 AM



RALEIGH — Although I write regularly about politics and public policy, my “day job,” so to speak, is to give money away. It’s not as easy as you might think.

Or, to be more precise, it may be easy to give money away — but it’s exceedingly difficult to give money away wisely. If donors are too prescriptive and heavy-handed with the recipients of their gifts, they may destroy what makes those recipients special and effectual.

On the other hand, simply giving money away year after year to the same individuals or organizations based on stated good intentions or friendly relations, without regard to the long-term consequences, can be not just wasteful but counterproductive. It can foster dependency, encourage indolence, and stifle innovation.

At the John William Pope Foundation, the grantmaker where I serve as president, we believe that thoughtful philanthropy plays an indispensable role in human progress. It ought to alleviate immediate needs and address immediate crises, to be sure. But philanthropy should also promote the virtues and practices that help human beings flourish, both individually and as part of communities.

The term “role” is an apt one. “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players,” Shakespeare’s character Jaques famously proclaims in *As You Like it*. “They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts.” While this speech has a sardonic edge, the idea that societies are like dramas full of individuals portraying distinct characters long predates the Bard, and need not be such a downer.

In free societies, a core operating assumption is that different social institutions, organized in very different ways, can and should coexist. Governments differ from businesses, which differ in turn from charities, churches, clubs, and families. As individuals, we interact with various institutions over the course of time. As we do so, our roles change — alternating back and forth from worker to shopper to voter to volunteer to parent. Our tasks change. Our responsibilities change. Even our goals change, to some degree.

Civilization advances as we get better at playing our social roles. We practice. We write better scripts for ourselves. We get better direction. And, sometimes, we realize we've been miscast and seek out new roles better suited to our strengths. The process is messy. It's challenging. It's imperfect. And it's essential.



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Pope Memorial Grant program. Each year, we award two \$100,000 grants, one in the arts and one in human services, to local projects that address community needs creatively and cooperatively.

Our arts grant this year is, quite literally, for a new stage. We are helping the University of Mount Olive redevelop a former drug store into a "black box" theatre and cultural center in downtown Mount Olive, North Carolina. It will house performances, concerts, classes, and other community events when it opens later this year.

Our human-services grant is also about learning and performing roles, but of a very different kind. Based in Forsyth County, ABC of North Carolina provides diagnostic, therapeutic, and educational services to people on the autism spectrum. Its new Joy W. Pope Life Skills Center will offer its patients the opportunity to visit branded "stores" — such as a grocery, a hair salon, a food stand, and a hotel room — so they can become acclimated to changing surroundings, practice social skills, and even gain experience for potential job opportunities.

"Self-reliance, self-confidence, and integrity are the keys to success," John Pope once remarked. His insight applies to all of us, no matter what circumstances we inherit, what capabilities we exhibit, and what roles we inhabit. To flourish, we need the social equivalent of rehearsal space. Philanthropy can supply it.

John Hood (@JohnHoodNC) is chairman of the John Locke Foundation and appears on "NC SPIN," broadcast statewide Fridays at 7:30 p.m. and Sundays at 12:30 p.m. on UNC-TV.



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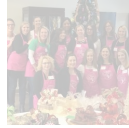
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