



Can our generosity save capitalism and democracy?

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Based on all the political discourse and economic perils we seem to face today, is there any hope for America? Perhaps I am overly optimistic, but I think the answer is yes. In fact, the factors of our future success will be grounded on what has propelled us for the last 235 years. These factors include democracy, capitalism and philanthropy.

Instead of using the words philanthropy or charitable gifting, I prefer to think in terms of generosity which is arguably a trait all of us can demonstrate in one form or another. In her book, "The Greater Good," author Claire Gaudiani makes a compelling argument that Americans do not give because they are rich - but rather that they are rich because they give.

More importantly in today's environment is the fact that being generous supports the other two pillars of American society, democracy and capitalism. Both of these can be messy and less than perfect. Generosity by individuals can propel government to take quicker action than its bureaucracy would otherwise allow. Gaudiani uses as an example the GI Bill after World War II which was initially opposed by Congress. But, due to the efforts of the American Legion, it led to the education of a generation of war veterans who propelled the economic growth of the 1950s and '60s.

In regard to capitalism, one of the complaints often made is the concentration of wealth among a relatively small percentage of the population. Generous financial donations by wealthy patrons have reduced some of this concentration. Two of the wealthiest Americans, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, have pledged most of their fortunes to charity. For those who don't think capitalism and generosity are linked, imagine if all the achievements, buildings, and causes that are financed by private donors were to disappear. Would we be better off then?

It doesn't take millions of dollars to make a difference. You can consider a number of options available today that were not available to previous generations. Starting within our own community is the Racine Community Foundation (www.racinecf.org) which allows donors to start their own fund with as little as \$50 per month. Even smaller minimum amounts can be used for micro-loans through organizations such as Kiva (www.kiva.org) which allow people to lend \$25 to others around the world to finance short-term projects designed to enhance their standard of living.

If we're to make progress, it must be done from different directions. Too often the generosity of people is overlooked or taken for granted, but it must be acknowledged as the third component of a successful society.