

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

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The Case for Effusive Altruism
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THE CASE FOR EFFUSIVE ALTRUISM

BY ASHA CURRAN

Given the division, polarization, and other social and environmental challenges before us, it is tempting to give in to despair as we look toward the future. But hope is a strong force, both in the social sector and otherwise. Why do we hold on to hope and optimism despite the ongoing struggles we face today and are certain to face in the future? I believe the answer is simple. People are hopeful because they fundamentally believe—need to believe—that we are interconnected and interdependent, and that we have the potential to build a brighter, safer, and more meaningful present and future together.

And of all the values that drive a sense of interconnectedness, none is more universal or more powerful than generosity: Giving as an expression of mutuality, solidarity, and reciprocity, not as a benevolence that the haves show to the have-nots, but as something that is at the heart of a person's practices, relationships, and values. I hope that as a sector and as a global community we can embrace an effusive altruism—a heartfelt, joyful, people-led, and community-centered practice that is unshakably rooted in our capacity to care for one another.

Effusive altruism—or what we at GivingTuesday call “radical generosity”—is the simple idea that the well-being of a neighbor or a stranger is just as important as that of our own loved ones, and that our smallest daily actions can positively impact the lives of others, creating behavior change and even systemic change.¹ It's a movement of many, not few, and its power comes from a shared vision to improve lives now to ensure a better future for all. It involves building practices and norms guided by generosity and celebrating the giving that exists around the world in abundance—though not in the ways we usually pay attention to or use to create our social sector narratives.

GIVING INVOLVES MORE THAN MONEY

The giving of money to nonprofit organizations is important, and every year on GivingTuesday, we see an outpouring of support that is essential to their work. It is particularly needed today with individual giving declining in the United States at the very time when the need for financial support is so significant. But generosity is emphatically not solely expressed as giving money to nonprofits, any more than love is solely expressed in material gifts. Generosity is a value with countless manifestations such as providing support, time, advocacy, mentorship, attention, presence, and skills—anything that can be given away for the benefit of others.

These are the kinds of actions that people take every day that make a difference in the lives of others and in the well-being of communities. Even small, meaningful acts that take little time, such as letting someone know you're thinking of them, ensuring a sick friend has the support they need, or placing a potted plant on a new neighbor's doorstep, are an important part of generosity. These

care-filled gestures aren't reflected in standard data points about giving, but they do have a tangible effect on people's lives and the community they are a part of.

When we look at giving in that broader frame, generosity is actually thriving. Research from the GivingTuesday Data Commons Research report on giving globally in 2021 showed that people are highly and consistently motivated to give and that giving happens in a variety of ways that go far beyond monetary donations. In fact, almost everyone gives in some way, and the overwhelming majority of people do so repeatedly (85 percent of people surveyed globally gave, but only 5 percent of people who did so gave only money).²

Viewing generosity in the narrow context of monetary giving to nonprofit organizations misleads and constrains our imaginations and is actively counterproductive even for those interested solely in reversing donation trends. It makes giving transactional, hierarchical, cold, and uninspiring. It shifts power and agency to the few—the “experts” who decide which giving is good or bad, which is effective or not, which is data-driven rather than “emotional,”—and away from the many, the people with deep roots in their own communities who know what those communities need. It also undermines the agency of those vibrant communities, each with its own unique problems and solutions, expertise, and giving traditions.

So when we are told that the number of US households donating is decreasing, it's easy, yet completely unfair, to conclude that people's generosity is declining. And yet that myopic observation couldn't be further from the truth.

We've learned many lessons about what inspires generous behaviors and about how prevalent they are, and from these, I have identified several critical practices that make up effusive altruism, a practice that will help us create a future that is steeped in our shared humanity and the belief that generosity is essential to the human condition.

THE ESSENTIALS OF EFFUSIVE ALTRUISM

Agency. The possibility of a thriving and humane future depends on people having the power to create change in their own lives and communities. That means we can't have a select few deciding what everyone else needs. We also can't look at generosity as a simplistic binary interaction between those who have and those who need, a warped view that shuts millions of people out of the opportunity to be givers themselves and reduces them to faceless subjects in someone

else's projects. It is only when people have control over how, when, and where they deploy their assets—monetary and otherwise—that they can use their deep local roots, knowledge, and expertise to create solutions; that they can own their voice and realize their capacity to lead and create change; and that they can take pride in the limitless potential of their civic engagement. Effusive altruism puts the power of philanthropy in as many hands as possible.



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Celebration. While the amount of suffering and need is genuinely overwhelming, giving does not need to be solemn. The more joyful it is, the more inspiring, collective, and engaging it can be, the more people will be encouraged to join and give whatever they can share. In the face of the world's suffering and need, what is there to celebrate? Our capacity to make a difference together. Giving as a celebration—of each other, of resilience, and of possibility—without restraint, is one of the reasons to call this form of giving *effusive* altruism.

Collectivity. While it is essential that individuals have agency, what makes generosity powerful and even somewhat magical is that we do it together. Distributed, interconnected systems of people mirror some of the most functional, beautiful, and mysterious systems in nature—fungi, ant colonies, the extraordinary tapestry of tree roots, and the murmuration of starlings. In each of these systems, there is something about the whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. Scientists call this “emergence,” the idea that something happens between the parts of a system that then is a crucial part of what the whole does. People working collectively through their own generosity to improve the present and future is an essential part of effusive altruism.

Shared imagination. Social movements are based in the imaginative landscape that their participants inhabit together, conjuring a world that doesn't exist yet and doing the work to build it collectively. In their book *The Radical Imagination*, Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish write that “the radical imagination ... is about transforming our social lives and relationships, transforming who and what we imagine are valuable, and transforming ourselves. We do this by building alternative social structures and institutions in our own lives.... The radical imagination exists in collective practice only.” Creating a shared imagination and effusive altruism are inextricable. They both depend on the collective, envision a world made better through shared humanity, accountability, and agency, and look at the past, present, and future not as disjointed periods in time, but as deeply interconnected ones.

How each of us expresses our generosity is not something to be judged or compared. Every expression of generosity is a manifestation of the human instinct to be a part of something bigger than oneself, to contribute to good. All of us, both within and beyond the social sector, must begin to look at generosity differently and holistically. It is always abundant, comes in many forms, and is every bit as critical to the human condition as love, friendship, or any of our other most treasured values. We have the opportunity to rewrite the story of generosity and help more and more people see themselves as playing an essential role in strengthening their communities and participating in social good.

The world we want to see tomorrow, in 10 years, and even in 100 years is being built by all of us now in the billions of small actions all of us take every day. Let us remember that a better, safer, and more equitable future depends not only on each one of us, but on each one of us together. Let that be our ultimate source of hope and optimism for the present and the future. ●

Notes

- 1 Asha Curran, “Why We Need a Radical Generosity Revolution,” *Medium*, January 14, 2020.
- 2 “From Scarcity to Abundance: Mapping the Giving Ecosystem,” *GivingTuesday Data Commons*, 2021.

THE FUTURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING SOCIAL INNOVATION

BY WARREN NILSSON

The South African organizational development facilitator James Taylor has had a peculiar dream for many years: “We need to create a master's degree for organizations.” It's a strange thing to picture, entire organizations running off to school to study together. But this idea, or something like it, might be the most important thing we can do to accelerate social innovation.

Social innovation is a classroom. We are learning our way into the future. And since no one from the future is here to guide us, the social innovation movement has had to teach itself as it goes along. It has done so with great energy—hence the thousands of labs, workshops, summits, institutes, retreats, incubators, and fellowships that continue to shape it.

Despite this apparent variety, a single approach to learning has been dominant. Call it Leadership School. It has been generative, sparking frequent bursts of light. Yet many of us working in this space have a nagging sense it might be reaching its limits. The world's destructive old systems keep reasserting themselves with troubling ease. And we wonder if there is something inherent in Leadership School making it good at brief illumination but less fit for sustained transformation.

LEADERSHIP SCHOOL

Leadership School places its hope in individual changemakers, bringing them together to learn new ways of navigating complex systems. I have helped convene several such programs, and they can be revelatory. Join one and you find yourself among a cohort of passionate and gifted activists, social entrepreneurs, network builders, and executives. Your sense of the possible expands. You see your work through new eyes. You return to that work refreshed and hopeful.

But the longer journey turns out to be more complicated. Back home, the principles and “tools” you were taught prove slippery in real life. Few of your colleagues seem able to relate to what you have learned. And you find it extremely difficult to figure out just where to begin pushing, pulling, or coaxing the system into a new state. While you might make an inspired dent in the world from time to time, your overall experience can be frustrating and ultimately wearying. You may end up feeling lonelier than ever, forced to find support from your cohort mates or other scattered travelers rather than from the people you work with every day.

Is Leadership School teaching the wrong things? I don't think so. I think it's teaching the right things but to the wrong students. To understand this, first consider the nature of what is being taught.