

How can I positively impact this world?

By: Terry V. Eagan

As a psychiatrist, I am often asked by my patients, “How can I positively impact this world when there are so many difficulties everywhere I turn – so much ill will and destruction, so much tragedy, so many people suffering seemingly insurmountable odds?” Patients may feel hamstrung by their own internal psychological issues, by the enormous external hurdles we face as a population (e.g. the economy, political unrest, diseases of human suffering) or oftentimes both. Thankfully there are many answers to this question – but one in particular is to become involved in charitable pursuits, organizations or movements which can lighten a heavy heart and help shift perspective from one of uncertainty and turmoil to one of gratitude and peace. This in turn may illicit feelings deep inside of having a life that “really” matters – a core concern shared by most that walk this earth.

When we participate in charitable giving, we feel more connected to our world and therefore less isolated and fearful, less despairing that “things will never change” or “will likely only get worse.” This sense of connection to others helps reduce feelings of being “frozen,” helps challenge our constricted ideas and self-inflicted pessimism, and can open our imagination to possibilities and hopefulness. An act of generosity can expand awareness of gratitude for the abundance you already have. If we allow ourselves to experience gratitude for our own blessings and good fortune, and to appreciate the often overlooked and underappreciated bounty we have been given, then there is less time to spend focusing on the deficits and disappointments in our own lives. We may begin to feel we have something to offer to those less fortunate-- who may be suffering or perhaps even dying in these moments-- extending a part of ourselves for the good of the world at large. Helping meet the needs of others fosters an internal “knowing” that we are a “part of the solution” and that the union of our efforts will stimulate and support a healing trajectory which can reverberate worldwide.

At this year’s end, in these difficult economic times, many may conclude that they do not have much, if any, discretionary income to contribute. Charitable organizations likewise are reviewing their bottom lines – perhaps noticing a decline in contributions which may make it difficult or impossible to execute their mission. Sometimes individuals may mistakenly feel that their gift is “too small to matter” in any substantial way. To that I say, remember each of us giving even in small ways (be it the gift of money, time, service or prayer) provides tremendous benefit to those who depend most on “the kindness of strangers.” The intention and attitude behind the giving, in addition to the gift itself, is significant in many regards. Together they foster collaborative solutions and opportunities, helping to unify communities and their citizens for the good of all.

Occasionally we all may need reminding of the many different ways we can be charitable, perhaps beginning by simply supporting the charity whose mission speaks to our heart most poignantly (eg. shelters, YMCA, church or synagogue, AIDS organizations, etc.) If you have difficulty choosing between many wonderful organizations that inspire you, consider donating to an organization that distributes donations across many charities. Please be aware that many employers have a matching program for charitable donations made by their employees, therefore magnifying your gift. And should you find yourself unable to make a monetary contribution to a designated charity, consider giving the gift of your time in support of their efforts through fundraising or direct services.

Another consideration is, in lieu of receiving gifts you may not really need, encourage your loved ones to make a donation in your honor to a charity that you or they support. (How many CDs and knickknacks do you really need?) You just may feel warmed inside in such a way that the idea of being a “citizen of the world” takes on a whole new meaning, and that connection you have been searching for in your life is closer than you had ever imagined! Be reminded that “no strings attached” giving is contagious and that adults and children alike are watching and may feel inspired to give more generously as well.

In these difficult times fraught with so much flux and transition, it is beneficial to review the important lessons from our childhoods about loving others, sharing what we have with those in need, and actively participating in efforts to make the world a better place. This action demonstrates our commitment to living - I mean really living – full of passion and grace, and pronounces our confidence that through the act of giving, we will be blessed beyond measure.

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