



Is Your Philanthropy Suffering From The Gold Watch Syndrome?

We've all heard the story about the employee who, after working 30 years for a good company, was being honored at his retirement party. Like so many other retirees, he was presented with a fine gold watch as his colleagues applauded his accomplishments and looked to him for a speech. He had thought many times over the past few years about what he would say at this very event. Options abounded. He could rightfully take credit for what he had achieved for the company or he could inspire others to carry on with the same fire and tenacity that he had or he could simply say, "Thanks for being such great folks to work with!" But deep inside, regret was welling up in his soul as he held the gold watch in his hand. He thought to himself, "Is this it?" It wasn't the material perspective that bothered him, but rather the purpose for his life. He'd certainly been very satisfied with his job, and the company and his co-workers had been good to him. But all those years of toil, of extra hours spent at work above and beyond the call of duty, of youthful days gone by, of placing a higher priority on his work above any other thing ... and now what? Work is done but a sense of anxiety is beginning to build, and along with it, the question that begs: "What have I really *done* with my life?"

No one ever says at her retirement party, "I wish I had spent more time at the office. I wish I had worked more and worked harder. I wish I had been more focused on my goals at work." No, what people think at their retirement is, "I wish I had spent fewer extra hours at the office and more time watching my son's baseball games. More time helping my daughter learn her lines for the school play. More time working with the youth at church or taking a family mission trip to Honduras." It just all seemed like it would happen somehow, *someday*; that the time for these things would magically appear. But by the time retirement comes, we have lost critical years in the development of those around us and missed special opportunities that may have had our name written all over them.

That's how philanthropy is for many people. It's something we think about doing later, when all the dust of life has settled and we have "extra" time and money left over. In so doing, we miss out on some great opportunities to give! These opportunities are present in our lives *today*.

The most obvious and primary benefit of giving is meeting the needs of others. Our giving fulfills these needs and if we give now, the need is fulfilled now. The poor reach out to us, young and old alike require educational training and spiritual sustenance, scientific and medical advancements are just waiting to spring forth from years of research. Giving today not only fulfills today's needs, but also acts as a catalyst for tomorrow's giving that will be different because of today's experience.

Another obvious benefit of giving can be stated in the age-old truth, "It is better to give than to receive." When we postpone our giving to some future and often-unknown point in time, we postpone a large portion of fulfillment and purpose in our lives. It is something we anticipate, rather than enjoy today. In addition, if we determine intentionally to not give until a certain time, we become frustrated with the conditions of need that we are exposed to, wondering how badly things will deteriorate until we're ready to offer our support.

An oft-overlooked additional benefit of engaging in philanthropy today is the challenge it can bring to the giver. It stretches us to be ready to respond immediately when the need is made apparent or to call in others to help when the need is greater than our singular ability. We might have to re-examine our annual financial goals and consider ways to make room for a charitable gift that we hadn't anticipated. As we assess the deeper need, we may find that it is not just our treasure that can help others, but our time and talent as well. Will we commit to the long-term project? Will we roll up our sleeves and see that the job gets done? Will we accept the responsibility of a key position on a charitable organization's board of directors? Could we serve as mentors to new executives of grassroots nonprofits?

And finally, when we meet these challenges, our own personal and professional development is advanced. We discover strengths we didn't know we had. We fine-tune others which had perhaps been put on a shelf while entertaining other areas of growth. We find passion for the truly important things in life and discover we have more to offer than ever before. Our generosity overflows into other parts of our lives, increasing productivity and advancing us in spirit. And so the cycle continues.

There are many vehicles for putting your philanthropic goals to work. Talk to your advisor and discover which one is right for you.

So don't put off your philanthropy until some undetermined future time. Do it now. And by the way, you'll still receive that gold watch, but with no regrets!