

OPINION

Commentary and Letters

WILLIAM A. SCHAMBRA

'The Philanthropist' Rebuts Grant-Making Professionals

The Philanthropist is the "television program philanthropy loves to hate," notes Sean Stannard-Stockton, a blogger and *Chronicle of Philanthropy* columnist, succinctly capturing the foundation world's reaction to NBC's eight-part summer series.

Why? Because the program challenges the central premise of American philanthropy: that it is—and should be—turning into a profession.

When we meet the series' protagonist, Teddy Rist (James Purefoy), in the program's premiere, he is anything but a career philanthropist. After wrapping up a Nigerian oil deal, Mr. Rist, a globe-trotting, boozing, womanizing corporate mogul, is on his cellphone trying to extricate himself from the teeth of a hurricane by summoning help from his lofty contacts.

Then he spots a small boy huddled in a corner. When he asks the authorities to help the boy, they dismiss him as a mere "beggar."

So he rescues the boy himself. Though he fails even to learn the lad's name, he is haunted by the experience. The boy reminds him of his own son, who died just a year before.

Upon returning to corporate headquarters in New York City, he is assured that the charitable impulse the experience seems to have awakened will be handled efficiently and professionally by the corporation's foundation, and that he need trouble himself no further with unprofitable philanthropic thoughts.

But for Mr. Rist, that's not enough. He must do something immediately and personally, face to face, to help the boy's storm-devastated village. And so he's off on a series of harrowing Hollywood adventures to fulfill this mission.

One can imagine the corporate foundation's director, Olivia Maidstone (Neve Campbell), trying to cool Mr. Rist's newfound compassion by reciting an argument by Steve Gunderson, president of the Council on Foundations, that philanthropy just isn't done that way.

It requires instead, as Mr. Gunderson put it in a statement about the NBC series, "a thoughtfully constructed course of action, a sound business plan, a record of achievement, and skilled staff. The due diligence demanded of both the grantee and the program officers of the foundation involve long hours in meticulous preparation, months or years to implement solutions, and thoughtful, ongoing metrics to track results."

Clearly, the first item to be chopped into that flattened Nigerian village should be a professional grant writer.

But Mr. Gunderson's reaction helpfully highlights a central tension in modern American philanthropy. As much as it may pay lip service to everyday Americans volunteering wealth and effort to solve problems, philanthropy in fact desperately wants to become a full-fledged profession.

"Professionals profess," observed the sociologist Everett C. Hughes. "They profess to know better than others the nature of certain matters, and to know better than their clients what ails them or their affairs."

"Professionals claim the exclusive right to practice, as a vocation, the arts which they profess to know, and to give

Continued on Page 33

Continued from Page 31

the kind of advice derived from their special lines of knowledge. The professional is expected to think objectively and inquiringly about matters which may be, for laymen, subject to orthodoxy and sentiment which limit intellectual exploration."

Every trend in philanthropy over the past 40 years has pushed in the direction so ably described by Mr. Hughes.

The insistent mantra of foundation executives is that it's harder to give money away than to make it. Meticulous, professional guidance and counsel are required. Nonprofit groups

seeking support must submit extensive, detailed, long-term strategic plans, studded with benchmarks, milestones, and deliverables. Elaborate evaluations must be conducted to prove the program will make a difference over the long haul.

Foundation and nonprofit staff members are increasingly expected to have academic degrees in the management and measurement of complex social programs. Centers to provide that professional training are springing up at universities around the country, with one university now awarding a Ph.D. in philanthropy. The first peer-reviewed professional journal for foundation executives has just been started.

All of this is designed to promote "thinking objectively and inquiringly" about giving, which for mere laymen is far too often influenced by parochial "orthodoxy" or shallow "sentiment."

Teddy Rist's sin against establishment philanthropy is precisely that, moved by foolish "sentiment," he refuses to concede to the professional running his corporate philanthropy her "exclusive right to practice, as a vocation" the arts she professes to know, and explicitly rejects "the kind of advice derived from [her] special lines of knowledge."

Mr. Rist realizes that, however knowledgeable Ms. Maidstone may be, she does not feel the same sense of urgency that possesses him. He concludes that he must tackle the philanthropic deed himself.

This flies right in the face of everything philanthropy wants us to understand about its growing professionalization. Mr. Rist's mission instead fool-

Increasingly Career-Driven Grant Makers Can Learn From TV's 'Philanthropist'

ishly encourages everyday citizens to believe that they can themselves, directly and immediately and without professional direction, undertake charitable acts to improve the world.

Instead of scoffing at *The Philanthropist*, establishment philanthropy might pay attention to its underlying message. For all our insistence that giving has become ever more complex, demanding, sophisticated, and professionalized, simply hiring experts to do it for us may not be enough to satisfy the human charitable impulse.

That impulse may be triggered within an unlikely, uncharitable person like Mr. Rist only by bringing him face to face with a child whose suffering speaks directly to his own deepest personal wound. The loss of his son is the one place where Mr. Rist is completely vulnerable, completely broken.

No amount of wealth, liquor, or womanizing can conceal it. Nor can any amount of detached, philanthropic check writing heal it.

Mr. Rist's newly awakened charitable yearning is satisfied only when he at last brings aid to—and finally learns the name of—the one child who was able to break through the dense layers of his cynicism and self-regard.

Perhaps charity in general must always arise from and ultimately return to this sort of direct, face-to-face encounter with human brokenness and need, and the connection it builds across the most impenetrable of barriers.

Perhaps the elaborate institutional edifice of modern philanthropy ultimately rests upon this most personal and intimate of human bonds.

American philanthropy can heap contempt upon *The Philanthropist's* short-sighted, sentimentalized, amateurish understanding of charity. Or philanthropy can pause long enough to consider that, in its determined and single-minded drive toward professionalization, it may in fact be systematically cutting itself off from its own deepest wellsprings.

William A. Schambra is director of the Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal at the Hudson Institute, in Washington.

Instead of scoffing at *The Philanthropist*, establishment philanthropy might pay attention to its underlying message.



COURTESY OF NBC

JOIN THE DISCUSSION

On July 21, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* and Hudson Institute's Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal will host a discussion about the NBC television series *The Philanthropist*.

If you're in Washington, join us for a lunch conversation featuring:

- Tom Fontana, who helped create the series
- Steve Gunderson, president of the Council on Foundations
- Sean Stannard-Stockton, who writes the Tactical Philanthropy column online and for *The Chronicle's* print edition
- Ian Wilhelm, a *Chronicle* senior writer who has covered foundations for many years

Stacy Palmer, editor of the *Chronicle*, and William A. Schambra, director of the center, will co-moderate the session. For free registration and more details, go to <http://philanthropy.com/extras>. And if you'd like to send a question for Ms. Palmer to pose to the participants, send a message to editor@philanthropy.com.