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THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN THE BRENTWOOD TRIANGLE

Spiritual adviser? Moral guide? Trusted confessor? The COO of the California Community Foundation—which helps families, companies, and nonprofits define their philanthropy—finds that snapping people out of their philanthropic paralysis is an unexpected daily job

By John E. Kobara

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Almost every day clients tell me their story and confess their digressions. They tell me what they intended and how they feel they have strayed from their values and what their parents taught them. They regale me with colorful stories of the experiences that have led them off the path to define meaning and truth in their lives. They look to me and the California Community Foundation (CCF) for moral and spiritual confirmation and guidance on their passions and their futures.



CCF is steeped in philanthropic wisdom. Celebrating its 95th birthday in June, CCF is the 53rd-largest foundation in the United States. We are the “Switzerland” of philanthropy, a neutral, agnostic, and safe platform to develop, define, and experiment with philanthropy.

We advise thousands of high net-worth donors and their advisers annually. Unlike most foundations, we serve as philanthropic stewards for our fund holders, drive change in L.A. and beyond from our corpus, and establish alternatives to private foundations for wealthy families. We make 6,000 grants a year, averaging a total of \$175 million. Since 2004, we have received contributions and made grants of more than \$1 billion.

The economy and the state of the world have caused many of our donors to raise serious questions about their charitable habits and practices. Many of these generous and well-intended donors are lost in what I call the mysterious “Brentwood Triangle.”

“Where I live, you would never know there was a recession or hardship,” a savvy philanthropist who resides in the “Wood of Brent” told me. “Unlike New York, where the rich are confronted with the homeless and with the vulnerable every day, Brentwood is in a bubble. We want to help, but we are confused and guilt-ridden.”

L.A. is riddled with these “bubbles.” The realities of the downtrodden, the uninsured, the homeless, and the unemployed are out of sight but not out of mind. Bubble residents are each trapped in their own Brentwood Triangle, those geometric spaces bounded by guilt, confusion, and compassion. Brentwood Triangle symptoms include numbness, an overwhelming desire to help, and

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philanthropic paralysis.

These "BT" victims care and want to make change, but they are often stuck in habits of only giving to friends' causes or view charitable giving as a chore. They want to give more but are stymied by the choices, what they don't know, and the gnawing doubt that no gift will make a difference.

A national study titled "I'm Not Rockefeller," conducted by the University of Pennsylvania, drove home this dilemma for wealthy donors. High net worth philanthropists "did not want their giving activities to feel like work," the study touted, but "they wanted to make a difference in the issues important to them."

The reality is that giving away money is not easy if you want to do it well.

For donors looking to hone their giving, CCF provides a *passion diagnostic* to understand their distinct vision and goals. Many donors begin their philanthropy with loyalties to alma mater, medical centers, and faith-based places. Others have developed highly focused objectives of a problem that needs to be solved. As donors see how strategic philanthropy can result in substantive change, they become willing to explore their souls and hearts. The journey reveals a menu of interests and causes. By matching that menu with their money, donors find the joy of giving more authentic and impactful.

Escape from the BTs requires recognition that giving may define one's purpose as much as work and a career. But it takes time and space to contemplate. It comes with a commitment to make philanthropy a priority. And this educational and introspective process has to take place outside of recipient nonprofits. Candid conversations with family, financial advisers, confidants, mentors, other donors, and community foundations are safer places to test ideas and to seek answers to defining philanthropy.

As L.A. donors become involved philanthropists, the bubbles are bursting and the triangles disappearing. There has been a noticeable shift to focus on basic critical human needs here in Los Angeles. Increasingly, donors and their financial advisers are asking us questions about how to have more impact with their gifts: "How can I help the people who really need help?" "How can I help the 'new' needy?" "The most vulnerable families?" "Kids?" "And how do I know it will make a difference?"

At CCF, we have found that the following question gives pause and new answers: "What do you want to do with your money that is meaningful to you?"

Aligning philanthropy with passions, interests, and needs elevates the meaning and importance of that giving.

Fortunately, a number of the charitably minded residents of these bubbles are taking inventory. Everything from the current checkbook auto-pilot charitable giving habits to estate plans are being examined and rewritten. Guided by a process of self-discovery and values, these donors are beginning to see their way out of their own Brentwood Triangles. And the greatest result is the release of the pent-up joy of giving and the distribution of resources that benefit our fellow Angelenos who need our help.

The bottom line is: Wealthy people confess they have to give. Their need for more material things has passed. The needs in the community are too plentiful to be ignored. Giving away money is tough. I have found that my job as a philanthropic therapist is to give donors space, information, and freedom to listen to their hearts, and let them connect with the inevitable pleasure of giving.

A good philanthropic journey enables us to find ourselves and ultimately to lose ourselves.

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