

WHEN WILL I BE RICH ENOUGH TO GIVE?

Q The term “effective altruism” suggests that if you really want to do good in the world, you should go into finance and earn lots of money so you can do lots of good with it. But many don’t succeed at getting rich, or they believe they never get rich enough. Paul, you got rich and have done a lot of good even when giving was a burden—such as keeping this magazine afloat because you believe in its mission. What are your thoughts?

PAUL: I think about this often, because people see my charitable activities through Utopia Foundation or STEPi and say, “Gosh, Paul, someday when I’m rich like you I will be more philanthropic.” Such statements take me back a few decades.

When I was 19, I quit college to become the 87th member of a farm community working on a 370-acre farm in rural northern Michigan. Our goal was to save the world through education, simplicity, and right living. Soon after moving in,

Utopiafound.org is looking for volunteers to chat with or read to children in Africa and to transform lives. If you can’t afford to fly to Africa, there are refugees and local kids in your community that need connection and mentoring. **PAUL** will send you illustrated books to help—just ask. Go to stepiedu.com to see the books that are available, or email Paul at paul@paulhsutherland.com.



I quit my \$2,000-plus per month job selling life insurance to work full-time teaching *The Law of Success*, as well as coaching tennis and selling community-made crafts. I outfitted a humble \$700 van so I could sleep among the macramé, planters, and candles that I peddled to florists and gift shops. For all that work, I got room and board and \$125 a month. I was happy.

One Saturday night, all the community members went to town. I was not asked to go. I was younger and out of place among the Vietnam-hardened vets and college-smart twenty-somethings that made up most of the community. I would have rather gone to a movie anyway. So, I decided to spend the evening in the old migrant worker’s quarters that I shared with 16 other single men unpacking a box of belongings tucked under my cot.

I was fine with having no money and fine with staying home. But when I unpacked the box, I found an envelope that had gotten lost in the bottom, a \$20 inside it. It was “tithe” money, the part of my income I set aside for others. I tended to give away about half my income, whatever it was, so much that sometimes I had to carry forward the tax deduction to the next year. But when I saw the \$20 I smiled. I put the money in my pocket, shoved the box back under the bed, and went out and saw a movie. I felt the money was a sign, a gift from God.

I learned a lot about giving in that farm community: about who gave, and who didn’t.

For some people, cutting veggies for the community meals was too big a stretch when the sun was bright, the night was late, or when others would step up. Others felt they were not crafty enough to make candles or weave macramé, but they assured



Paul crashing an end-of-year preschool party with books near his home in South Africa.

me that someday they would feel comfortable enough with driving that they could help sell crafts for the community. I learned to quit asking the “maybe later” people for help. I learned that people who say *when* or *if* they get money, time, resources or skills that matter, *then* they will help—these are people living an indifferent, self-absorbed, and lazy illusion. Helping the world is not about money or skill or time. It’s a choice.

After about a year, I quit working for the community and went back to finance, and I was soon back to making a good income. Nevertheless, I lived modestly. I had one suit, one pair of dress shoes, and paid around \$400 a month to the community for room and board. I eventually left the community and built a company that made me wealthy, but I always kept giving.

So now, when people say, “Someday when I am rich [like you] then I can give,” I smile and say, “In Buddhism, a sincere smile is the biggest gift you can give someone.” Again, expressing philanthropy and compassion is simply a choice—the right choice for any number of reasons.

Effective altruism—doing philanthropy “right”—is harder. It takes work. The goal is to be non-enabling and thoughtful. We don’t want to give an alcoholic booze so he can stay high. We don’t want to gift locally just because it is easier to say “yes” to a neighbor for a new church steeple, dog kennel, cancer drive or scholarship fund so a kid can go to a “better” university, or get better cancer care when there are hundreds of millions of kids that don’t have a public school or the funds to go to private school, and have no doctor to see despite the fact that they are constantly sick from malnutrition and poor water. The key to making altruism effective is working on our own character. That means holding ourselves to a humble and moral standard, and making sure our life operating system is built on courage, continuous self-improvement, honesty, responsibility, justice, self-control, wisdom and love. That’s how stoics like Zeno and Sphaerus defined the “good life,” and the good life was never a destination, but a way of living. **S+H**

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