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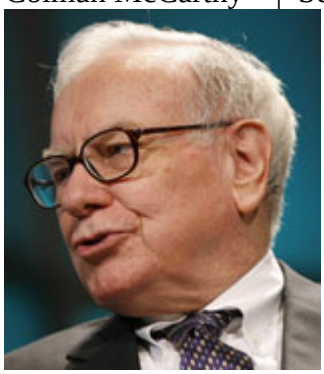
There's a difference between charity and justice

Colman McCarthy | Sep. 2, 2010



Warren Buffett (Reuters/Mario Anzuoni)

America?s boardrooms, hives of capitalism where money is the honey, are the last places you?d think an idea by Ralph Nader, the arch-skeptic of corporate power, would be embraced. Alas, it has come to pass. The unlikely idea? Share your wealth, Big Guys.

In 732 pages of well-crafted prose that combines fact and fable, Nader titled his book *Only the Super-Rich Can Save Us!* Published last year by Seven Stories Press, a New York house where works by Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn and others of a progressive bent are marketed, the title is from an imagined scene following the September 2005 Hurricane Katrina calamity in New Orleans. Warren Buffett, the megabillionaire from Omaha, Neb., had come with truckloads of food, water, tents, medicine, and other basics for the homeless and hungry.

In the prologue, Nader describes the moment: ?Coming upon a family of a dozen or so adults and children huddled about a crude campfire, Warren reassured them and consoled them. He took their hands, hugged their trembling children, and looked into their eyes. The old-timers noticed that there were no reporters, no photographers, no television crews. A composed elderly grandmother cupped his hands in hers and cried out, ?Only the super-rich can save us!? ?

What follows is Nader?s fictional vision of how Warren Buffett, months after New Orleans, persuaded 16 others of the well-heeled to give away large parts of their oceanic fortunes for the public good. Last month, what Nader had called in his novel ?a practical utopia,? became reality.

Buffett, along with Bill Gates, announced that more than three dozen billionaires -- from old-money philanthropists like David Rockefeller to nouveaus like Michael Bloomberg, Ted Turner and Ross Perot -- had joined the Giving Pledge. Buffett had communicated with as many as 80 potential givers. A sampling of the letters is on the Web site givingpledge.org.

As he puts the squeeze on his fellow captains of commerce, what credentials Warren Buffett is his pledge of giving away 99 percent of his own wealth -- at $40 billion, give or take a few depending on the Dow. Short of becoming a Franciscan mendicant, that?s about as close to taking a vow of poverty any billionaire can get.

Many pledgers who had been raking it in during their prime years have devoted their 60s and 70s to un-stashing their cash to their favorite causes or nonprofits. In 1997 Ted Turner, who is as rich in ideas in preventing nuclear war and preserving the environment as he is in dollars, gave $1 billion to the United Nations Foundation. Two years ago, Kenneth Langone, cofounder of Home Depot, gave $200 million to the New York University Medical Center, which followed large unrestricted donations to Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, the New York University business school, and Roman Catholic groups.

It?s likely that the divesting billionaires will continue to pay accountants, brokers, tax lawyers, financial advisers, secretaries, chauffeurs, cooks and household help to rein them away from life?s ordinary irks. Good for them to be freed up, plus providing jobs for their assorted cornermen.

But billionaires are still akin to hundredaires and thousandaires: No one gets a pass from meeting the daily moral challenges to live justly, to decrease violence and increase peace. George B. Kaiser, who is the Tulsa, Okla., chairman of BOK Financial Corporation and whose family fled Nazi Germany in 1938, wrote to Buffett: ?I suppose I arrived at my charitable commitment largely through guilt. I recognized early on that my good fortune was not due to superior personal character or initiative so much as it was dumb luck. I was blessed to be born in an advanced society with caring parents. ... As I looked around at those who did not have these advantages, it became clear to me that I had a moral obligation to direct my resources to help to right that balance.?

The generosity of the wealthy is admirable but a difference exists between charity and justice. Money to charity eases the problem; money to justice destroys the problem. Charity money intervenes after the problem. Justice money goes to prevention.

The Giving Pledge is expected to haul in $600 billion. How much of that bullion ends up funding justice-based reforms can?t be known for now. If most or all of it, then the super-rich truly will save us.

[Colman McCarthy directs the Center for Teaching Peace in Washington D.C. and teaches courses on nonviolence at four universities and two high schools.]

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