

On Charity

Folks often use charitable giving as a way to do a good deed and at the same time improve their tax position. Charitable bequests at death can mitigate or eliminate estate taxes. Charitable gifts during life may be taken as deductions against income. Further, charitable giving does not necessarily mean that the donor loses any opportunity to benefit from the assets so allocated, for strategies such as utilization of charitable trusts can permit limited access to asset benefits so dedicated.

We often address such gifting options with our clients and assist them in designing such a plan. However, each encounter with the topic does not necessarily take place in the office.

We have all experienced it, as I did not too long ago. Upon leaving a store, a disheveled, perhaps somber and weathered man, asked if I had any change. I did not, but responded more quickly than I might have liked, "No," and kept walking. I might have given more thought to recycling a scrap of paper than I did that answer.

At home, solicitations depicting disfigured children, abused animals or any number of other often gut-wrenching images accompanied by a plea to save just one of them have a place on the counter where I drop the mail, keys and cell phone. Sometimes, the letters remain so placed until they become clutter and are tossed with greater ease than good character should perhaps permit.

I give to charities, but upon reflection, less than I might like. Sometimes, I am skeptical about certain elements of the solicitor/giver/recipient relationship. Be it a panhandler or a professional fundraiser, the request for charity can leave one conflicted. The fella on the street may not spend the money on a veggie-wrap, but should that matter? The scripted and polished approach employed by some of the larger charities sometimes seems inapposite to the end sought. Is it just a business?

I have spoken with some folks who appear to be reasonable and relatively compassionate, but when the idea of charitable giving arises, they essentially smirk and respond to the effect, "Are you kidding?" They have little confidence that the funds often reach the intended beneficiaries or in instances of personal solicitations, that same are used for any wholesome purpose.

It seems that for every reason to give, there is one not to do so. The more thought given to it, the more questions arise: religious or secular; human or fauna; environment or education. Do the donations just serve to underwrite inefficiencies, bad choices and flawed policy? Would so many folks be starving in Africa if the countries and governing authorities were not corrupt, inefficient and in a constant state of civil war? Yet, even if

the answer is in the negative, that does little to help the people who did not ask for or have the capacity to meaningfully affect their lot in life.

Part of the underlying problem with solicited giving, such as the types referenced, may be just that...the rules are made by someone else. Be it on a street corner the donor did not select or with a mailer and photograph of a sad-eyed witness to one's generosity or lack thereof, the rules are made by another. The targeted potential donor's facilitated discomfort may be baked into the encounter, with just the right amount likely yielding the greatest response. It is easy to feel confronted and cornered by a panhandler albeit out in the open, or manipulated by carefully crafted pleas including images likely selected with just the right cringe factor.

It may be that few of us are trained in the art of giving. Compare it to lessons learned in earning, saving, being competitive or organized. Charity may be a second tier life-lesson, an afterthought to the success for which many strive, the relish tray or desert at the banquet of what might be considered a successful life.

Charitable giving may not just result from being good-natured. Being charitable may arise in some from a spiritual awakening of sorts, but it is also perhaps developed to the point of being a laudable character trait by something so mundane as practice. If we wait to be moved, the world will be left waiting also.