

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Effective altruism

On Tuesday, we discussed donating to charity, focused on Pottstown.

But the neediest people don't live in Pottstown, or even in the United States, for that matter.

If we want to do the most possible to relieve poverty and suffering among our fellow human beings, we need to look abroad.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

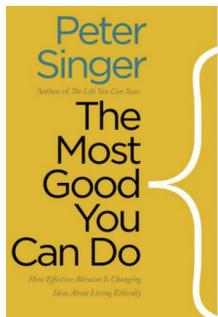
Worldwide, the wealthiest 20 percent of humans (which includes Americans) consume nearly 80 percent of the world's resources. The poorest 20 percent consume less than 2 percent of world resources. That level of poverty is hard to fathom.

Peter Singer, professor of ethics at Princeton University, is the best-known proponent of a movement called "effective altruism," which he discusses in his book, "The Most Good You Can Do" (which I highly recommend).

Individuals provide 73 percent of the charitable giving in the United States. Most of these donors, Singer says, give money based on their emotional responses to images of the people, animals or forests that the charity is helping.

"Effective altruists donate to charities that, instead of making an emotional appeal to prospective donors, can demonstrate that they will use donations to save lives and reduce suffering in a way that is highly cost-effective."

Because a little bit of money goes a long way in third world countries, "effective altruists do not discount suffering because it occurs far away or in another country or afflicts people of a different race or religion."



For example, in 1998 Ted Turner gave a third of his wealth, \$1 billion, to the United Nations to expand proven health programs focused on the world's biggest fatal diseases, which overwhelmingly kill children in developing countries.

Since 2000, Singer reports, 1.1 billion children have been given a combined vaccine that prevents measles and rubella. The vaccine now reaches 84 percent of the world's children. An estimated 13.8 million deaths have been averted, at a cost of \$80 per life saved. That's effective altruism!

But perhaps the most amazing story in Singer's book involves Zell Kravinsky, who lives modestly with his wife and four children in Jenkintown, here in Montgomery County.

An academic with an armload of degrees, Kravinsky amassed a \$45 million fortune in real estate and then gave it away, mostly to public health organizations.



About 10 years ago, he arranged with Albert Einstein Medical Center to donate a kidney to a stranger, a 30-year-old black woman in Philadelphia who had to take the bus for dialysis treatments every other day and faced an early death.

Few of us are willing to give away all our money or donate a kidney to a stranger, but we can be inspired, perhaps, to at least donate blood and devote more of our income to others.

I am dismayed at studies showing that the wealthier people become, the less empathetic they are to the less fortunate.

IRS statistics show that people with six-figure incomes only donate about 2 percent of it to charity. What do they do with the rest?

My wife and I are conflicted about giving to local causes, which we do, when there is so much need elsewhere. So we've willed our estate (hoping there is one when we both are gone) to third-world relief.

If a lot of people do a little bit more, we can make a big difference.