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Karen Heller: Especially now, a time for charity



By Karen Heller
Inquirer Columnist

Charity begins at home, though Princeton ethicist Peter Singer argues it should travel much farther afield. When Americans give, we tend to follow our personal connections, funding academic, religious, and cultural institutions where we've formed attachments.

"I believe that despite the economic downturn, most of us have an abundance," Singer says. "By comparison, we live a life that's very luxurious."

Granted, these are hard times for Americans, but most of us know we'll eventually recover. The same can't be said for the world's extreme poor, the 1.4 billion who live on less than a \$1.25 a day, the price of a bottle of water.

The irony is that Americans have perfectly drinkable tap water, which cannot be said for the very poor elsewhere. America's poor children, while suffering, aren't dying at a rate of 27,000 a day from preventable, poverty-related disease.

Your money, Singer argues in his compelling new book *The Life You Can Save*, can go elsewhere and should. Global poverty could be eradicated in our lifetime, by 2025, economist Jeffrey Sachs contends, if we all gave more.

"We have a bad sense of priorities," Singer argues. "We should give more and consume less." His prescription? Contributing 5 percent of our income to the poor, more if we're wealthy. Singer donates 30 percent to Oxfam and other relief agencies.

Far and away

"I can see that people want to put money back in their local community," says Singer, who will appear next Tuesday at the Central Library. "What I'm concerned about is building a new stadium or a new concert hall in cities that are already the most affluent in the world. I don't see that as the best use of money."

If you're the least bit successful, your money can become more popular than you are, receiving more mail and requests. You can easily suffer donor fatigue.

People give for many reasons, some admirable, some not at all. Gifts sometimes say more about the donor than the recipient - reflected glory; otherwise there would never be an issue of naming rights.

Charity can make the spoiled more so, as they demand attention, media coverage, a lot of fuss.

Even donors of modest amounts might call attention to their gesture, buying T-shirts proclaiming their generosity, a vanity exercise and misguided philanthropy when *all* that money could go to Africa.

"It's true that the neediest charities don't get the most. It's not exactly Robin Hood," says Eileen Heisman, who heads the National Philanthropic Trust. "Our instinct is to give when there's a face attached. It's the philanthropy's job to put an interesting and compelling face to the charity." That's where George Clooney and Bono come in.

Do the right thing

People of less means sometimes give more proportionally than those of extraordinary wealth, who can appear more preoccupied with their mansions or animals than serving the less fortunate.

"There are some people who are not philanthropically inclined," says Jane Williams, a leading consultant of nonprofit organizations. "People are more likely to give when they come from a family with a history of giving."

That's another way in which charity begins at home. It's a question of where the gifts flow from there.

Peter Singer has never been to Africa - he'd like to visit - though it hardly matters.

In these times, when your savings are diminishing and money seems hard to come by, a small contribution to fight global poverty goes very far. At MillenniumPromise.org, a \$50 gift treats 2,500 people afflicted with parasites. A \$250 donation feeds 42 children. For a year.

That's a fantastic return on an investment and, as Singer notes, it feels good, too.
