

CHAPTER 1

GIVE

Did I Give Back Enough?



A close-up photograph of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore. He is wearing a dark red shirt, a light-colored tie, and glasses. He is speaking into two microphones at a podium. The background is dark with some blue lighting.

“Today more young Singaporeans are undertaking volunteering work, whether in causes they feel passionately about like protecting the environment, or in humanitarian work around the world.”

PM Lee Hsien Loong



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

Building a Giving Nation

Excerpt of speech by Mr Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister, at the official opening of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre's The Giving Place, 7 July 2008

Every society has to take care of its people, especially the vulnerable groups. Either the state has to do it, or it needs to be done through private initiatives. Market competition and self reliance help drive economic growth, which brings prosperity and progress. But taken to its extreme, the private model means “every man for himself”. The poor and needy will then be left to cope through their own efforts. They may be able to get by, but this cannot be the basis for building a nation.

On the other hand, if the government were to take upon itself responsibility for all these social needs, it will have to operate a system of high taxes and transfers, like

the European countries. This is an impersonal, bureaucratic model – help for those in need becomes a matter of social administration, not compassion; an entitlement, not something to be grateful for. It would erode the work ethic, leading to slower growth and a loss of economic vitality.

Philanthropy is a better approach. The US has a long history of philanthropic spirit. America's great capitalists of the 19th century, like Andrew Carnegie and John Rockefeller, amassed enormous wealth, but also gave generously. Carnegie had a dictum: “the man who dies rich dies disgraced”. Today's billionaires like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett are following in these footsteps, giving away the bulk of their wealth,

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and in the case of Gates, now overseeing this giving as a full time occupation. As another contemporary billionaire and philanthropist put it, they do not want to deprive their children of the pleasure of making their own money. Younger entrepreneurs are embracing the same ethos. For example when the founders of Google took their company public, they decided that a slice of its equity and profits would go to Google.org, a philanthropic arm. As a result of this spirit of giving, far more hospitals, libraries, universities and welfare services in America are funded by private donations than in other developed countries. Such philanthropic instincts have allowed America's "winner takes all" society to remain a cohesive one.

As a small island-nation with no natural resources, Singapore cannot afford to go the European way. We have to get our people to do their best, do well for themselves, and so help the whole country to progress. So we have gone for low taxes, low welfare, and self-reliance. Our system makes full use of the talent and entrepreneurial drive of our citizens. This has delivered growth and improved the lives of all citizens. But for this to be sustainable, our society has to remain cohesive and stable, and that means that those who have succeeded must feel the impulse to give back to society. The more they have gained from society, the greater their obligation to give back something to their fellow citizens. They must not allow society to be split between the haves and have-nots, and undermine the whole basis for able people to succeed and create wealth in Singapore.

We have not yet built up such a strong philanthropic tradition in Singapore. But many Singaporeans are donating generously to good causes. This started with our forefathers

who arrived here in the banks of the Singapore River decades ago, in search of a new world of opportunities. Those who went from rags to riches took it upon themselves to give back to society, and help the immigrants who came after them. They set up charitable foundations like the Lee Foundation and Shaw Foundation. Where there were no temples or mosques, they donated and raised resources to build them. Where schools were needed, they established them to enable the next generation to benefit from the education that they themselves had missed.

The present generation have continued to uphold this tradition of philanthropic giving. We have buildings and school faculties named after major donors or their foundations, like the Lee Kong Chian School of Business in SMU, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine in NUS, and Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. Singaporeans from all walks of life have also been donating to charities generously, and contributing their time and effort to do good works. Last year, charitable giving to Institutions of a Public Character or IPCs increased by more than 50% to \$820 million.

We are gradually becoming a giving nation, but there is potential to do much more. We need more Singaporeans to donate, according to their means and from their heart. This is especially crucial in this era of abundant economic opportunities, yet stagnating wages at the lower end, and widening income gaps. To respond to these trends, the more successful Singaporeans must pitch in to help the weaker ones. Collectively, these individual actions will make our society much more compassionate, and much more cohesive.

Like the American magnates and our own forefathers, we should also encourage successful Singaporeans to deploy

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a significant portion of their wealth to some larger purpose which they feel committed to, and endow charitable foundations which will continue to do good beyond their lifetimes. But setting up a foundation takes a major effort, so some may prefer to start on a more modest scale, outsourcing the hassle of paperwork and administration. Hence the idea of the Community Foundation of Singapore, whose purpose is to provide just such an option. The Community Foundation will offer personalised advice for high net worth individuals wishing to support worthy causes, and where feasible, pool funds from multiple donors so as to manage them more efficiently. The Government will contribute to the start-up and administrative costs of the Community Foundation during its initial years, with the aim of achieving purposeful and sustained community giving over time.

Besides charitable gifts and foundations, the practice of philanthropy also includes volunteer service. Indeed volunteerism plays an important role in creating a culture conducive to philanthropy. Surveys have shown that positive volunteer experiences in youth tend to lead to generous giving and volunteering later in life. Today more young Singaporeans are undertaking volunteering work, whether in causes they feel passionately about like protecting the environment, or in humanitarian work around the world. The NVPC is looking at ways to further promote volunteerism by creating convenient and flexible options for people to serve in community and non-profit organisations. As more Singaporeans put their resources and skills to use for a larger purpose and to serve a common good, we can build our own tradition of philanthropy and volunteerism, and keep our social fabric strong and vibrant.

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Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong

Building a Giving Nation

Excerpt of speech by Mr Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister, at the official opening of the Cricket Club, 2 February 2007

I hope that one day Singapore would earn the honour of being a “Giving Society”. A country known for our philanthropy. Philanthropy means more than just charity. Charity is normally associated with financial help for the needy. But philanthropy encompasses love of mankind and a selfless desire to help others.

To be a “Giving Society”, we need philanthropic leaders. These are people who raise funds for worthy causes and encourage others to be philanthropists. They themselves are generous donors. Bill and Melinda Gates are examples of philanthropic leaders. They established a foundation with their funds to sponsor worthy programmes on learning and health. President Bill Clinton is another example. He launched the Clinton Global Initiative to raise funds for HIV patients around the world.

Many wealthy Singaporeans have set up their own foundations to use their wealth to benefit society. I hope that more High Net-worth Individuals (HNI) would put aside at least half percent of their annual income to help others and worthwhile causes.



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Professor Shih Choon Fong, President of NUS from 2000 – 2008

Give Back? Invest Forward?

Arthur's question, "Have I given back enough?" is provocative, in a way which only Arthur can muster. The honest answer is "No, not enough." And "No, it is not possible to give enough." There is an adage expressing a universally shared value that no one can repay their parents for the gift of life. That being the case, it is not possible to give back enough. For me, having spent a good 30 years away from Singapore, returning home in the mid-1990s to take up an appointment at NUS was an opportunity to contribute to the country of my birth. At the same time, it enabled me to be with my ageing parents in their final years and be by their side when they passed on. I was only doing my duty. I was not giving back.

There are countless benefactors – known, unknown, and unknowable – who help us through life. I recognise that my own professional accomplishments have come about because people I know, and a whole lot of other people whose names I will never learn, made them possible. For instance, my PhD studies were supported by the generosity of many, including philanthropists and devoted alumni of Harvard. I have no idea who those generous individuals who gave so liberally were, and even if I did try to track them down, many of them would



likely to be no longer around. Giving back to them is simply not possible. It is as if the person from whom one has received a loan has disappeared or has no interest in being repaid. In my younger days, my mediocre O-level examination results meant I was not eligible for the pre-university track. I went to Singapore Polytechnic instead. While I was there, I had the good fortune to be introduced to a visiting professor from McGill University, Dr Raymond Yong.

He helped me gain admission and take up a research assistantship at McGill. A Lee Foundation travel and winter clothing grant also helped. I owe Dr Yong and the Lee Foundation a debt of gratitude for setting me on my way.

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The list does not end here. I can also think of a whole host of other people, many of them anonymous, who helped me go to North America – civil servants who processed and approved my visas, university officials who put together my financial aid package – to countless North Americans who helped this Singaporean boy settle in. I have come to understand what the Buddhist tradition means when it describes our lives as being woven in karmic webs, in this case, karmic webs of generosity.

Instead of thinking of it as giving back, I think of it also as investing forward. It is an idea that has been around for a while, the notion that when we give, we invest in the future. When giving to NUS, for example towards scholarships to support students at our Overseas Colleges, I am especially interested in helping those students who might resemble the younger me: someone who does not quite fit the mould, but who has potential and is eager to explore and experiment – intellectually, culturally and experientially. While I have no way to give back to those who gave towards my breakthroughs in life, it gives me great delight to be able to invest forward and help create opportunities for young

people to make their own breakthroughs.

Returning to the question of whether I or anyone else has given back enough, the answer must be “No, not enough.” We have to recognise that huge needs will always exist somewhere and the poor we will have with us always. It would not make sense to advocate giving until there is equality. Nor should it be giving to address the other person’s inadequacy or lack of industry. Rather, we should seek and seize opportunities to invest forward, with a keen eye on creating value, not unlike when making a business investment.

It is my personal belief that in life, one should live passionately, whether that is being passionate about studies, work or relationships. Likewise with giving back as well as investing forward. In giving back and investing forward with passion, I find my fulfilment. I trust too that for the recipient, it goes beyond just money. The true value of any gift may well be in the hope and belief that is invested in the person. In some small way, showing you care and believing in someone and thus encouraging them – I think that is more than enough.”