

## Essay: Reclaiming Philanthropy

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by Kim Klein

The Minnesota Council on Foundations has a delightful video called "What Is Philanthropy?" The filmmaker asks people on the street, "What is philanthropy?" "The study of monkeys," says one person. "Stamp collecting," says another. But for those people a little closer to the true definition, the answer is often, "When rich people give away money." However, because families living on incomes of \$10,000 give away 4.6 percent of their income and families living on incomes of \$100,000 give away 1.1 percent, I think it is fair to claim that our poorest community members are our most philanthropic, and that we have ceded the word *philanthropy* and the glory that comes with it to the extremely wealthy.

As all social activists know, a critical part of claiming power is claiming the right to name ourselves. For me, coming of age during the Women's Movement, it was important to say, "I am a woman, I am not a girl," and to be clear that the word *mankind* did not include me despite claims to the contrary. *People with disabilities* has taken the place of *handicapped* or *disabled* as a more accurate reflection of what having a disability means. We see similar patterns in terminology related to race and sexual orientation.

The word *philanthropist* comes from two words that mean "love of people." At its heart, that is what philanthropy is about. Understanding that anyone who values giving away money is a philanthropist allows people to see themselves as agents of change. "I have some money to give" is very different from the much more common refrain, "I don't know anyone with money," or "I don't have any money."

We all can give something. When put together with enough other people, that amount of money may be enough to do the work we think must be done.

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