

# The Guardian

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## Look who's being generous!

Public displays of philanthropy are often frowned upon. But should we care what motivates the giver?

By Peter Singer / The Guardian

Jesus said we should give alms in private rather than when others are watching. That fits with the commonsense idea that if people do good in public they may be motivated by a desire to gain a reputation for generosity. Perhaps when no one is looking they are not generous at all.

That thought may lead us to disdain the kind of philanthropy that leads to donors' names being prominently displayed on concert halls, art museums and college buildings. Often, names are stuck not only over the entire building, but on as many constituent parts of it as fundraisers and architects can manage.

According to evolutionary psychologists, such blatant displays of benevolence are the human equivalent of the male peacock's tail. Just as the peacock signals his strength and fitness by displaying his enormous tail – a sheer waste of resources from a practical point of view – costly public acts of benevolence signal to potential mates that one possesses enough resources to give so much away.

“ Silent giving will not change a culture that deems it sensible to spend all your money on yourself and your family, rather than to help those in greater need – even though helping others is likely to bring more fulfilment in the long run.”

From an ethical perspective, however, should we care so much about the purity of the motive? Surely what matters is that something was given to a good cause. We may well look askance at a lavish new concert hall, but not because the donor's name is chiselled into the marble facade. Rather, we should question whether, in a world in which 25,000 impoverished children die unnecessarily every day, another concert hall is what the world needs.

A substantial body of psychological research points against Jesus' advice. One of the most significant factors determining whether people give to charity is what others are doing. Those who make it known that they give to charity increase the likelihood that others will do the same. Perhaps we will eventually reach a tipping point at which giving a significant amount to help the world's poorest becomes sufficiently widespread to eliminate the majority of those 25,000 needless daily deaths.

That is what Chris and Anne

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Ellinger hope their website will achieve. The website tells the story of more than 50 members of the 50% League – people who have given away either 50% of their assets or 50% of their income in each of the last three years. Members of the league want to change expectations about what is a "normal" or "reasonable" amount to give.

They are a diverse group of people. Tom White ran a big construction company, and started giving millions to Paul Farmer's efforts to bring health services to Haiti's rural poor. Tom Hsieh and his wife, Bree, made a commitment to live on less than the national median income, currently \$46,000 a year. As Hsieh, who is 36, earned more, they gave away more, mostly to organisations helping the poor in developing countries.

Most donors see giving as personally rewarding. Hsieh says that whether or not his giving has saved the lives of others, it has saved his own: "I could easily have lived a life that was boring and inconsequential. Now I am graced with a life of service and meaning."

The 50% League sets the bar high – perhaps too high for most people. James Hong started hotornot.com, a website that allows people to rate how "hot" other people are. It made him rich. He has pledged to give away 10% of everything he earns over \$100,000. Hong's website invites others to do likewise. So far, more than 3,500 people have.

Hong sets the bar low. If you earn less than \$100,000, you don't have to give away anything at all, and if you earn, say, \$110,000, you would be required to give away only \$1,000 – less than 1% of your income. That is not generous at all. Many of those earning less than \$100,000 can also afford to give something. Still, Hong's formula is simple, and it starts to bite when earnings get really big. If you earn a million dollars a year, you have pledged to give \$90,000, or 9% of what you earn, which is more than most wealthy people give.

We need to get over our reluctance to speak openly about the good we do. Silent giving will not change a culture that deems it sensible to spend all your money on yourself and your family, rather than to help those in greater need – even though helping others is likely to bring more fulfilment in the long run. ■