THE UNDIMINISHED FLAME

EDUCATION, GIVING,
AND THE QUEST FOR FAITH

Richard Gunderman
FOREWORD

On March 24, 2011, the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, a cornerstone program of the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, hosted the eighth Thomas H. Lake Lecture. This annual lecture features an original presentation by a scholar interested in the intersections of faith and giving or religion and philanthropy. Past speakers have covered topics ranging from law and the market to the role of charity in religious identity, and have explored all three major traditions—Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

This year, we were especially pleased to host Indiana University’s own distinguished faculty member, Richard Gunderman, M.D., Ph.D. Nine-time recipient of the Indiana University Trustees Teaching Award, Dr. Gunderman is professor of a wide range of disciplines, including Radiology, Pediatrics, Medical Education and Philanthropy. His leadership has been recognized by the Radiological Society of North America (2008 Outstanding Educator), and he has published eight books and over 280 scholarly articles on a range of topics, including his 2008 book on philanthropy, “We Make a Life By What We Give.”

A philosopher, Dr. Gunderman approaches his lecture as an inquiry into the value of modern education and the human investment it represents. Giving, he says, is not primarily about transferring money but about “enriching human life.” He sees education and giving as ultimately “matters of faith” as practitioners discover “the sacred in the everyday” of their work. As torchbearers, he argues, each generation owes the next its wisdom, knowledge imparted through meaningful exchanges—exchanges which may be subsumed by the press for numerical achievements. Rather than tying its success to production of the next workforce, the educational system may be better served by cultivating civic leaders and holistic thinkers. After all, Dr. Gunderman argues, the search for knowledge and connection gives our lives purpose; it serves as the “pilot light of human goodness.”

The Thomas H. Lake Lecture is made possible by a generous gift from Karen Lake Buttrey, whose legacy we honored at the event this year and who was awarded a Chancellor’s Medallion posthumously by the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Chancellor, Charles Bantz. The donation Karen made along
with her husband, Don Buttrey, and the Lilly Endowment, both honors the faithful philanthropic spirit of her parents, Tom and Marjorie Lake, and blesses the community with a space for neutral inquiry into the many meaningful relationships between faith and generosity.

Patrick Rooney
Executive Director
The Center on Philanthropy
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The Undiminished Flame:
Education, Giving, and the Quest for Faith

There is a flame that burns in each of us. It is the flame of knowing and giving, the pilot light of human goodness. Over the ages, it has been passed on from parent to child, from teacher to student. Should we fail to tend it, it can be extinguished in the short span of a single generation. For this brief time, we are privileged to serve as its bearers. It has been given to us to help spare our children and grandchildren from wandering in darkness and instead lead lives of illumination. We pass it on largely through stories, such as this one:

When it was almost time for Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!”

Introduction

This story is often called the cleansing of the temple. When does an article of clothing or a piece of furniture need to be cleansed? When it has become soiled.
How did the temple become soiled? Jesus says it was being turned into a market, a place of commercial transaction, dominated by buying and selling. This suggests that there is an important difference between a temple and a market. There is something going on in a temple, or at least there should be, that is fundamentally different from buying and selling. When buying and selling predominate, the temple becomes contaminated and needs to be purified.

What is a temple? The Latin word templum comes from a root that means to separate or divide. A temple is sacred ground, separated and divided off from ordinary terrain. In the book of Exodus, God tells Moses, “Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground.” Some ground is different from other ground, calling for a different frame of mind and manner of conduct. If we fail to recognize the nature of the ground on which we are standing, including the very foundation of our lives, we are likely to understand and act inappropriately.

We each have our temples. For some, it is the office. For others, it is the sports arena. For still others, it is the shopping center. And inside each of these temples is a god, or at least an idol. It may be the god of wealth, fame, power, or pleasure, but whatever concerns dominate our lives become our lord, our god. All of us, even those who reject all religious traditions, have placed our faith in something. There is no way to avoid it. Resolute skepticism and rabid opposition to faith can be no less idolatrous than religious zealotry. Whether we know it or not, we are staking everything—our whole lives—on a vision, however adequately articulated, of what life is about.

A popular program on public television is called Antiques Roadshow. In it, experts travel to various parts of the country to appraise antiques brought in by local people. Many are cherished family heirlooms. In a typical segment, an owner reports what she knows about an item such as a clock, locket, or painting, to which the expert responds with a much more detailed account of its origin, quality, and rarity. The denouement comes when the appraiser offers a professional estimate of the item’s current market value, and the segment concludes as a dollar figure flashes across the screen. There is much to celebrate in the recognition that we often overlook the true worth of what we have, but something no less disturbing about the idea that a dollar figure could represent our most sought-after revelation.
We can make better or worse choices concerning the vision on which we stake our lives. The market is a place of buying and selling. The temple is a place of worship. To mistake a market for a temple is to confuse the lower with the higher. It is like trying to negotiate the value of something inherently priceless. How much would you take for one of your children? In effect, we find ourselves attempting to lead our lives upside down. The problem is not that the offer is too low or too high. Instead the very effort to establish an acceptable price betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the thing whose worth we are attempting to appraise. Perhaps by cleansing the temple Jesus is reminding us that we cannot lead full, authentic lives unless and until we distinguish false idols from true god.

**Education**

What if education, like worship, contains both higher and lower elements? What if some aspects of education can be conceived as a kind of buying and selling? Consider the university. It makes available products such as courses and degree programs, for which students pay tuition. To be sure, money alone does not purchase a grade or a degree, but without funding, the grades and degrees are unattainable. Likewise, faculty members and administrators earn salaries, without which they might be unwilling and unable to teach. In these respects, education closely resembles a commercial activity. This resemblance has grown stronger as business-minded people have come to play an increasingly dominate role on university boards of trustees. As such businesspeople would rightly point out, if the university’s revenues fail to exceed its costs, it will soon go out of business.

Yet the university is not just a business whose product happens to be education. At its best, it does more than merely generate revenue. The university is, or at least should be, a place devoted to the pursuit of knowledge. It is, or at least should be, a place where the pursuit of knowledge does not need to justify itself in terms of its commercial potential. The primary goal of a university is not to commercialize knowledge in order to make more money, but rather to discover and share knowledge. In doing so, of course, it should generally operate according to sound business practices.
Why would anyone pursue knowledge for its own sake? Presumably because we think there are purposes in life beyond making and spending money. The value of a great idea, a great book, and a great conversation cannot be rendered in dollars, and the attempt to do so betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and significance of knowing. The pursuit of knowledge is simply higher than the pursuit of money. After all, we are *Homo sapiens*, not *Homo economicus*.

Jesus was often called rabbi or teacher. He never accepted payment for his teaching. Nor did another great teacher, Socrates. In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates repeatedly contrasts his supremely noncommercial approach with that of his contemporaries, the sophists, who taught for a fee. Some of the best-known sophists were famous for their claim that they could teach students to win any argument, no matter which side they were on. The sophists, in other words, were producers of mercenaries, hired guns, who would be less devoted to the truth than the spoils of victory. They, too, saw knowledge as valuable, but only as a means of making money. If the sophists were with us today, they would readily appreciate the value of higher education. In fact, they would send their children to the best universities. They might even serve on their faculties. Why? Because knowledge is valuable, and education, especially at elite institutions, increases earning power. Some types of knowledge, such as how financial markets work, can even make us rich.

Why didn’t Jesus and Socrates accept payment for their teaching? They regarded subordinating the quest for knowledge to the pursuit of economic gain as a kind of prostitution. The same would apply to efforts to subordinate it to fame, power, and pleasure. In each case, we put something low before something high. This is the origin of the word prostitute, which originally meant “to stand before.” Commercializing the pursuit of knowledge is just as false as commercializing the trappings of human affection, the familiar connotation of prostitution. Some things, among them love and knowledge, simply cannot be bought and sold. Money may buy sex, and it may even buy an academic credential. Yet it is no ticket to what really matters. In attempting to spend our way to love or understanding we would really cut ourselves off from both.
Why do we go to college? And why should citizens invest in education? We should be careful how we answer this question. Today we tend to respond by saying that we need to be well educated so that we can maintain and improve our standard of living and hold our own in an increasingly competitive international economic environment. In short, we need an education to move refrigerators and color TVs. With the cost of university education skyrocketing and state and federal funds increasingly constrained, it would be foolish to ignore education’s economic impact. Yet we should take care lest the case for the pursuit of knowledge become a strictly commercial one. It is no use turning out savvier and savvier people if we lose sight of why knowledge really matters in the first place.

Parents, like universities, sometimes let things get out of hand. We allow the legitimate hope for our children’s worldly success to supplant our hope that they will lead lives of real human significance. A friend told me the story of a kindergartner whose ambitious parents had been plotting his future educational trajectory. They talked about what steps would be necessary to get him into the best primary and secondary schools, what Ivy League universities he would need to attend, and the top-ranked professional school from which he would eventually graduate. After listening with increasing frustration, the kindergartner finally blurted out, “But I don’t even want to go to medical school!” As this child reminds us, there is a profound difference between success and significance, and the truly wise put the latter first.

Under some circumstances, providing a good education can be good business, though we are never without examples of teachers and institutions that manage to do well financially, at least in the short term, while skimping on quality. In general, universities with strong reputations are likely to be rewarded by higher financial returns. But we cannot assay educational excellence merely by reviewing an institution’s financial statements. To suppose otherwise would be as absurd as titrating our love for our children according to their respective lifetime earnings. To assay educational excellence, we need to behold education in action.

We cannot make our children better human beings merely by giving them more money. We cannot enrich our own lives merely by fattening our wallets. People
use money for different purposes, some well and some ill. In some cases, pursuing, possessing, and spending more money does more harm than good, corrupting rather than enriching lives. This implies that we need to be careful in the way we handle money, ensuring that we do so in the appropriate way and for the appropriate reasons. But it means even more. It also implies that we need to keep money in its place. For if we allow its pursuit to dominate our lives, we will inevitably find ourselves impoverished. We will have turned a temple into a market, mistaking the lower for the higher and substituting false idols for true gods. In everything universities do, we should always subordinate the raising of money to the elevation of the human spirit.

**Giving**

Supposing that we can understand and assess giving merely by measuring the flow of wealth is no less misguided than supposing that we can justify and assay education in strictly economic terms. Giving is not primarily about transferring money. Giving is above all about enriching human life. Yet like any other human pursuit, the higher aspects of giving can be subverted by the lower. We can become so fixated on the amounts of money changing hands and the hands between which it is being exchanged that we soon lose sight of the aspirations of givers and receivers and the effects of generosity on each.

Someone can give or receive a lot of money and not benefit by it. The history of philanthropy is riddled with examples of gifts that produced more harm than good. In an essay known best as “*The Gospel of Wealth,*” Andrew Carnegie wrote that it would have been better if $950 out of every $1,000 given to charities had been dumped in the ocean, primarily because of the pernicious tendency of such gifts to foster dependency at the expense of self-sufficiency. But dependency isn’t the only danger.

Consider recent giving in the area of international health. In some cases, repeated visits from high-budget international aid organizations directed at a particular disease have coopted indigenous personnel and other resources from
meeting day-to-day needs and destabilized the local healthcare system. Well-funded programs that focused on laudable short-term targets have wreaked unforeseen long-term damage. To be sure, lots of money and resources changed hands. Yet despite good intentions, the resources ended up being used inefficiently and deleteriously. Merely multiplying by two or ten times the amount of money would do nothing to mitigate this harm. The amount is not the end, but a byproduct of something else. Of course, this does not stop the field of philanthropy from focusing on the money. Even academic and professional organizations whose mission is to study giving may end up spending most of their time and energy on fundraising. The refrain? Give us more money! When this happens, we find ourselves extolling the nobility of generosity but immersed in a kind of avarice.

Writing checks is but one way of giving. It is an important one, to be sure, and many great institutions and initiatives would not have been possible had large sums of money not been transferred. But there are other ways of sharing the best we have, many of which do not show up on the economist’s dashboard. Consider teachers whose dedication to their students’ learning far exceed their contractual obligations. Are they disqualified from generosity, since they are getting paid to teach? No, quite the reverse. Such teachers can and should be counted among the most generous people in our communities. They are enriching not only the minds but also the lives of their learners. Just as merely giving money does not make us generous, so getting paid does not preclude the possibility of performing our work in a true spirit of generosity. In both cases, money should yield to more important considerations.

The most real and vital thing happening in our schools and institutions of higher education today takes place not in boardrooms but in classrooms, where knowledge and wisdom are pursued and revealed. The most real and vital thing happening in philanthropy today takes place not in press conferences but on the front lines of sharing, where givers and receivers are transformed into face-to-face collaborators pursuing a shared vision of human enrichment. A visitor once asked Mother Teresa what he could do to promote world peace. Her answer: “Go home and love your family.”
Merely moving money around is insufficient. To borrow a simile from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, a mere money mover is like a physician who knows how to raise and lower the body’s temperature but not when and why it is appropriate to do so. The money can begin to seem an end in itself, rather than the means to some higher purpose. In too many contexts, whether business, education, or even fund-raising, to be sharp enough to get lots of money requires that we be dull enough to want it. Socrates regarded his own small religious sacrifices as in no way inferior to the magnificent gestures of the rich. People get rich in all sorts of ways, including the promotion of gambling, prostitution, and drug trafficking. To suppose that the amount of a gift is what matters most, Socrates argued, would be to accuse God of delighting more in the offerings of the wicked than those of the good.

There are other dangers in putting money first. When our first question about a gift is not to whom, or how, or why, but how much, we tend to find ourselves slipping into cynicism. Even as we bring in more and more money, we are plagued by a growing sense of hollowness. Instead of feeling progressively fuller inside, we feel emptier. We are plagued by a nagging sense of inauthenticity. We may mouth the platitudes of generosity, but we begin to sense selfishness at the root of every act of giving. In a curious way, we come to see genuine giving—our professional calling—as an impossibility.

Which is a better life? To get very good at pretending to be something we are not, or to strive with all our might to be as fully human as we can? What effect do we aspire to have on the lives of others? To extract from them as much as we possibly can, or to enrich their lives to the greatest extent possible? To make the choices stark, let us suppose that we could not only get away with the life of avarice but actually reap great rewards for it. The pretender may advance far and achieve great material success, but the human price is so immense that the truly wise could never conscience it.

Another problem with money is its tendency to frame the discussion in terms of ownership. Money can buy us many things, but when it comes to the most important things in human life, money is almost irrelevant. No one can buy or own what is most real and alive. This explains why the lives of misers—the Ebenezer
Scrooges of the world—are inherently lonely. Always grasping for more, their white-knuckle grip on what they have consigns them to a barren life of isolation. When it comes to what is most real and alive, we can only serve as its more or less faithful stewards, doing what we can during our brief span to reveal and share as much of it as possible. The preferred currency of truly generous people is not coin but conversation. Far more than money, words have real fecundity, the power to enrich lives by bringing good things into being.

Our goal for our children and grandchildren is not primarily that they should live comfortably or even well, if by well we mean the parameters by which economists usually assess a standard of living. Our real goal is that our children should learn and live with a deep sense of curiosity, a profound sense of beauty, real passion for the things that matter most, and great courage and devotion. We want then to become truly generous people, who give not in hopes of some reward but because they know that the best things in life, such as understanding and love, are made even better when shared. We want them to know that, far from being exhausted, such goods actually increase through the sharing – that in fact, it is only then that they come fully to life.

Here is a story about teaching and giving. A celebrated historian, a man who had won many prestigious awards for his writing, was invited to give an address at a great American university. In conjunction with his visit, the university’s former president, a highly distinguished scholar and leader in his own right, invited him to lunch. As the two were dining, the former president asked the historian whether as a college student he had majored in history.

“No,” the historian replied, “I was an English major. In fact, I did not take a single history course until senior year, my very last semester.”

“That must have been quite a course,” the former president replied.

The historian paused, looking off into the distance, “Actually, I do not remember much about it. I cannot even tell you the name of the instructor. He was not a faculty member, but a graduate student.”

“So the course didn’t make much of an impression on you?” prompted the former president.
“Actually, I was very inspired by something the instructor said on the first day of class,” the historian replied. “He told us, ‘We are going to be studying many different historical ages, events, and personages. As we do so, never forget that we are not just talking about names in books. We are talking about real, flesh-and-blood human beings, people as real as you and I.’”

The historian again looked away. “That really impressed me. I have never forgotten it. In everything I have written, I have always tried to capture the sense that we are dealing with real people, who got up every morning and laid their heads down every night. They were flesh-and-blood human beings just like us, who bore children, buried their parents, and were in turn buried by their children. They gazed up at the very same sun, moon, and starry night sky that shine now above us.”

“That’s a beautiful story,” the former president replied. “To which I would add one coda. The graduate student who taught that course?”

“Yes?” said the historian.

“You’re looking at him.”

Now this is giving at its best. In the words of Henry Adams, “A teacher affects eternity. No one can say where his influence stops.” To be truly generous, we must know what generosity is truly for.

The Quest for Faith

Education and giving are ultimately matters of faith, and faith is not a matter of certainty so much as focus and dedication. What matters most is not our level of confidence in what we believe but the choices we make about how to invest our lives. As we have seen, each of us is leading a life dedicated to some vision of what it is all about. It might be getting and spending or it might be serving a transcendent purpose, but each of us is staking our lives on something. In either case, certainty is not the primary issue. Once we are certain of something, there is little reason to keep exploring it. The question is not ‘which questions have we settled once and for all?’ but ‘which questions are worth returning to again and again throughout our lives?’ Which questions are worth not only living with but living for? What is the question, the idea, the vision that our whole existence is being lived out to realize?
We should not teach what we do not believe in deeply and care passionately about. The same applies to what we give. Why? In teaching and giving we are not merely doing something. We are becoming something. In fact, we are engaged in a more or less continuous process of recreation. Into what are we transforming ourselves and those with whom we live and work? Are we becoming more fearful, frustrated, and embittered? Or are we becoming more curious, compassionate, and joyful? If we teach and give less than our best, then we will become something less than we should be. If we allow ourselves to care more and more about less and less, we will end up leading lesser lives.

The narrative of the cleansing of the temple with which we began is a story of sacrifice. What do we have to offer? What do we have that is worthy to be offered up to God? At one level, the cleansing of the temple calls for an end to animal sacrifices, summoning us instead to sanctify our minds and hearts. At another level, it is a call back to a different kind of temple and a different kind of pilgrimage.

One kind of temple, like the buildings of a university or a charitable foundation, is made up of bricks and mortar. Another resides in the minds and hearts of human beings. Are we polluting this human temple, or are we sanctifying it? The challenge may be likened to curing a potty mouth. You do so not by washing it out with soap and water but by cleansing the heart. If we fill the human temple with base things, then we are not purifying but contaminating it. On the other hand, if we fill it with what matters most, then we sanctify it and bring it fully to life.

The same can be said for our pilgrimage. One kind of pilgrimage requires us to pack our things and set off on a journey to distant lands. Another requires a map not of the land but of the human heart. God is not out there, but in here. Our mission is to seek out the divine in the mundane, to discover the sacred in the everyday unfolding of our life and work. The goal is not to abandon what we know in order to reach some sacred place, but to make the life we know a celebration of the sacred. When do we truly live and come fully to life? When what we are living for is most significant. The university wants to be a place dedicated to the pursuit and cultivation of the highest human potential. Every gift wants to bring out the best us. Learning and giving are not just about preparing people to live and work.
They are about revitalizing us, exercising fully our capacities to wonder, inquire, care, and celebrate.

Our community needs lots of things, including a more robust and resilient economy and a better educational system. We all know others who are hurting, for whom improvements in these areas would make a difference. But merely pouring in more money won’t cut it. It can’t because money is not what matters most. We need more than just well-paying jobs. Above all, we need wiser, more compassionate, and more dedicated human beings. Fixing or growing the economy will not make it happen. Nor can we buy such people in a store. We cannot even manufacture them in school or at home. In the final analysis, the best that we and our children and grandchildren can do is to attempt to become them. How do we do it? Through stories.

Two medical students were sitting in a crowded lecture hall. Into the room walked a man pushing his wheelchair-bound son, a teenager clearly suffering from a severe neurologic disability. The father began to tell of a discussion he had had with his wife the night before. The mother felt that over the years their son had contributed enough to the education of medical students, and the time had come to stop using him as a pin cushion. The father argued that it was important for future physicians to learn first hand what it had been like to see a son slide inexorably toward disability and death.

As the father’s tale unfolded over the course of an hour, one of the medical students in the second row sat transfixed, tears occasionally welling up in his eyes. Another student, seated in the front row, realized within five minutes that such material could never be tested on any exam. Failing to pay attention during this hour could never threaten his grade. Instead he chose to spend the hour studying. He took out his notes, donned his earphones, and completely ignored the father’s story.

What do you suppose happened to those two medical students? The one who sat engrossed in the father’s story, tears welling in his eyes, is now training in a very good internal residency program. He will be a fine physician. And the other, the one who tuned out the father’s story in order to study for an upcoming exam? He graduated at the top of his class. He is now training in one of the most prestigious
programs in one of the most competitive fields in the profession of medicine. Which student was the more successful? Which would you choose as your child’s doctor?

We all want to be successful, but we must never forget that success is not the real goal. It is a byproduct of the pursuit of something more important. Unless we are careful, we can stop asking the vital questions and get stuck in a rut of mistaking wealth, fame, power, and pleasure for the things in life that really matter. We can end up putting our faith in the little things and completely overlook what matters most. This is a call, a summons to some serious temple cleansing.

The Undiminished Flame

There is a flame that burns in each of us. It is the flame of knowing and giving, the pilot light of human goodness. Over the ages, it has been passed on from parent to child, from teacher to student. Should we fail to tend it, it can be extinguished in a single generation. For this brief time, we are privileged to serve as its bearers. It has been given to us to help spare our children and grandchildren from wandering in darkness and instead lead lives of illumination.

If we are to acquit ourselves admirably on this stage of humanity, we must keep this flame alight. We must see to it that it is passed on undiminished, perhaps even burning a bit more brightly than when our parents and teachers entrusted it to us. There is nothing worthier on which we can stake our lives. To answer this call, and to keep this flame burning brightly, we must be prepared to invest not only all that we have but all that we are and all that we aspire to become in education, giving, and the quest for faith.
Richard Gunderman

Richard Gunderman is Professor of Radiology, Pediatrics, Medical Education, Philosophy, Liberal Arts, Philanthropy and in the Honors College at Indiana University, where he also serves as Vice Chair of Radiology. He is also a Fellow of the Tobias Center for Leadership Excellence and serves on the Board of Governors of the Institute for Advanced Study, the Kinsey Institute, and the Alpha Omega Alpha National Honor Medical Society. He received his AB Summa Cum Laude from Wabash College, MD and PhD (Committee on Social Thought) from the University of Chicago, and MPH from Indiana University. He is a nine-time recipient of the Indiana University Trustees Teaching Award, and has also received the Wayne Booth Award, the Robert Shellhamer Award for the Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, the School of Medicine Faculty Teaching Award, the Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the Herman Frederic Lieber Memorial All-University Award for Teaching Excellence. He was named the 2008 Outstanding Educator by the Radiological Society of North America and received the American Roentgen Ray Society Berlin Professionalism award in 2011. He is the author of over 280 scholarly articles and has published eight books, including Achieving Excellence in Medical Education (Springer, 2006), We Make a Life by What We Give (Indiana University, 2008), and Leadership in Healthcare (Springer, 2009). He is president-elect of the faculty at Indiana University School of Medicine. He and his wife, Laura, have four children.
The Center on Philanthropy's Lake Institute on Faith & Giving is dedicated to helping people of faith, regardless of their religious persuasion, think creatively and reflectively on the relationship between their faith and their giving. The Institute engages in research, provides resources that will educate and help people better understand giving as a reflection of their faith, and creates venues for civic conversation on this subject.

The Lake Institute on Faith & Giving honors the legacy of Thomas and Marjorie Lake. Thomas H. Lake served as president and chairman of the Lilly Endowment Inc. for more than 20 years, accepting that leadership role after 30 years at Eli Lilly & Company, following his retirement as president of the company. The Lake Institute honors Mr. and Mrs. Lake and their many contributions through leadership in philanthropy.