

Look at any list of donors and you are sure to find a familiar name: anonymous. Throughout the ages, anonymous giving has been greatly admired and deeply rooted in the practice of philanthropy. Maimonides, the 12th Century Jewish philosopher, is the most commonly cited among many influential thinkers who have argued that giving is most virtuous when it is done privately and selflessly. Even today, many donors want to keep their good works quiet out of modesty and humility,

There are also selfish — but no less compelling — reasons to conduct philanthropy anonymously. Some donors feel that public displays of philanthropy can bring unwanted attention to their wealth, thereby leaving family members vulnerable to threats to their personal security.

Some donors may even entertain the romantic notion of being a latter-day John Beresford Tipton, the unseen force in the old television program, “The Millionaire.” Each week, Tipton’s assistant, would deliver a tax-free check for \$1 million to an unsuspecting beneficiary. (Perhaps less well-remembered are the distressing consequences of Tipton’s essentially manipulative style of giving.)

On a more mundane level, some people believe that providing too much information about a foundation’s operations can lead to a flood of unsolicited proposals. By operating in secrecy, some donors feel that they can maintain better control of their giving, devoting themselves more fully to thinking about who to support and less to the task of turning everybody else down. Whatever your reason, if you want to carry out your philanthropy in total anonymity, using a foundation is not the way to do it. In the first place, it’s not legally possible, given the public reporting requirements of the federal government. But even more importantly, foundations function more effectively when they operate with some degree of public accountability.