

Think **BIG**, Think **SMALL**

An Interview with Steve Kirsch and Wayne Muller

We talked with Steve Kirsch, co-founder of the Kirsch Foundation, and Wayne Muller, founder of Bread for the Journey, about their models of giving. Approaching philanthropy from very different backgrounds, one thinks big and one intentionally thinks small.

TWO MODELS for **GIVING**



Steve Kirsch

Think Big

Steve Kirsch, founder and CEO of Propel Software Corporation, considers his “asteroid project”—which funds efforts to detect and protect us against possible asteroid-Earth collisions—one of the most cost-effective charitable investments around. “We may not receive its results for 10,000 years, but is it really worth it,” he asks, “to save 20 million bucks yet be wiped out next week? It’s silly not to pay for the collision insurance.”

Kirsch also founded two other successful high-tech companies besides Propel, including Infoseek Corporation, which was purchased by Disney in 1999. To give some of the profits away, he and his wife Michele started their own \$75 million foundation (www.kirschfoundation.org). In 1999 they were named Outstanding Philanthropists by the Silicon Valley chapter of the National Society of Fundraising Executives. That same year, they were recognized by *Slate* magazine as the eighth largest charitable givers in America.

JESSE VAN MUYLWIJCK



Teamwork!

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Wayne Muller

Think Small

Bread for the Journey (BFJ, www.breadforthejourney.org) is a national philanthropic organization with fifteen local chapters, all run by volunteers. Its founder and president, Rev. Wayne Muller, is also a therapist, retreat leader, and author. He has published three books and writes regularly on business and spirituality for *Forbes* magazine. He also founded the Institute for Engaged Spirituality.

BFJ is a response to what Muller sees as a growing need for a simple, accessible, neighborhood-based model of philanthropy, “more intimate and responsive than already existing—and breathtakingly useful—community foundations.” BFJ volunteers pool their own resources and give money locally, to people with strength and vision who are excited about helping their communities. Such people exist everywhere, Muller says; all they lack is a small amount of money to get started and the confidence that they can carry out their vision. A typical BFJ example: A \$200 grant to buy clay allowed a person with a passion for making pots to teach others to make them, too. The pots were then planted with flowers, which were then sold to raise money to help abused women. Says Muller, “Our culture points toward big stuff. I like to be a voice in the wilderness saying that just as much energy should go toward small. If you do that, you’ll be astonished at what two or three people in a neighborhood can do to change the world.”

We asked both Kirsch and Muller what giving effectively means to them.

TWO MODELS for GIVING



STEVE KIRSCH: People have different goals for why they give. Some give because they enjoy the process—going through grant applications, meeting with potential recipients, deciding which group gets the money. For them, the journey is the reward. Others, like me, are focused on results. If you're focused on results you have a different metric.



WAYNE MULLER: I don't think about giving in terms of effectiveness...I think more in terms of surprise. I'm so humbly in awe of the way the world really operates—there are forces much greater than us at work. Some gifts are going to take wings, some hobble along, and some sputter, and I can never predict which will do which.

When I was chaplain at an AIDS clinic, I made weekly visits to the bedside of a gay man. The man was Greek Orthodox, and his priest would not come to visit him. We had long conversations about spirituality and how people view grace and suffering. After a year, the man said to me, "You know, I've been really glad you've come." I assumed it was because I was a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and could talk about these things—and then he said, "I haven't understood a single thing you've said about theology, but I really like the sound of your voice." (Muller laughs.) We think we're doing one thing, but in reality something else is really going on.

MTM: How does your organization do its funding?

KIRSCH: At our foundation, we do a combination of things. First, we set our goals. Our foundation has identified four or five major areas that we give to. Then we create programs to strategically achieve those goals. We evaluate grants in the context of our goals. We also institute programs ourselves. We get involved; for example, there is the medical program we fund. (Kirsch's project to fund cancer research is discussed on the Kirsch Foundation website: www.kirschfoundation.org.) We also pursue our goal in ways other than grant applications. For example, we occasionally invest in for-profit companies to achieve the goal, without expecting a return on investment. This allows the business to get started quickly. If we make money at it, that's a bonus, and we can reinvest it in a charitable project.

We always have outcomes. Typically, they are very long-term. So we have to have intermediate goals too. For example, for an

environmental project, we might have a long-term outcome of meeting state and federal clean air guidelines 50 years from now. Sub-goals would be passing certain pieces of legislation. Those kinds of sub-goals help us get to the final goal. Basically, we're applying the same sort of business logic that you use to run a business. You have goals you want to achieve and you figure out how to do it. It's about creating strategies to achieve the goals.

I have very little contact with my grantees. The way we operate is we say, "Let's go cure cancer," and then we set basic milestones. The project passes Phase One, Phase Two, and Phase Three clinical trials. Beyond that you're micromanaging. It's difficult to be expert in all fields, so we let the management of goals be at the discretion of grantees. We try to pick world-class grantees—we place a high emphasis on that. We set the goals and evaluate the grantees on the basis of their ability to achieve those goals. Our goal is to cure cancer, so we ask, "Do these people have a good chance of curing cancer?" We check their background and approach. We give them money for three years and see how they do. So it's not that we require them to meet all the milestones we set along the way. And it's not necessarily that we check performance against expected outcomes either. Let's say they cure tuberculosis, instead of cancer. That's O.K. with me!

MULLER: The way funding works at Bread for the Journey is, when someone calls us requesting money, we meet them for a walk in the park or a cup of tea. If we fall a little bit in love with them, we give them money. Having consulted with Kellogg's and other large foundations, my observation is that foundations often use paperwork out of fear of making a mistake. In general, people are so worried they're going to give money to the wrong place that they frontload the paper. In my experience, you get pretty much the same result, whichever way you do it—some things take off and some don't. So why not simplify the process?

For us, philanthropy is about relationships, love and kindness. We give our grantees money only once, but that doesn't mean we stop giving in the relationship. We put them in touch with other funders; we help them get 501(c)3 status. The point of being at ground level is that we can be in relationship with people, but the relationship is not always about money. That makes it too small. It's also important in BFJ that we not feel pressure to raise money, because we want people in our chapters to have fun. All our chapters are run by volunteers who do this in addition to their full-time jobs. When they have money, they give it away; and when they don't, they wait for it to come.

One of my presumptions is that an act of generosity is an act

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that benefits everybody. When giving and receiving are done really well, the line between giver and receiver begins to dissolve a little. When you see someone throw their arms around someone else in a great big hug, who is giving and who is receiving? It's a silly question. Both benefit.

Ultimately, philanthropy is about deep nourishment for all beings. I wrote *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* in response to seeing that a lot of people in the world who are trying to do good are doing good badly, myself included. We are all subject to the impulse to rush, and to the idea that bigger and more is better. At a certain point, that becomes simply not healing. So when we reach for what we would heal, we create suffering. We knock things over. There are thousands of stories of the World Bank, AID, and IMF sticking money in a place because they thought they had to hurry up and do something. They didn't take the time to know what it's like to live there and know what's truly and good and holy. The more quietly and mindfully we do this work, the better all beings will benefit, and the better we'll feel.

MTM: What advice would you give to donors who have \$10,000-\$500,000 per year to give away?

KIRSCH: My advice is no different from what I would tell people with more money. The only difference would be the number of focus areas. In this case, it would be to focus your giving to one to three areas that you have a passion for, decide on specific goals in those areas, and then start pursuing strategies to achieve those goals.

MULLER: Find out where the strengths are in your community. The need is everywhere. The question is, "Where's the grace, the light, the juice?" Sometimes you'll read about someone in the newspaper. You'll read or hear about a need at the YMCA, for example. It's not that hard. Just keep your ear to the ground. You don't have to be obvious about it. Get a few people you love together and talk about what you've seen in the community. It can be an excuse to get together.

When you give this way, you begin to read the newspaper differently. It's much more about listening. All of a sudden it's not "those people" and "us," it's all "us." It doesn't take a tremendous amount of time and it's fun; you're hanging around people you like to be with. You can all be generous together.

I would also say to think small. Think about ways to do less better. In the Christian tradition, Jesus talked about small things. He said, "Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed." Small things done well are really the things that move the world.

MTM: Is bigger better in philanthropy?

KIRSCH: Bigger gives you the opportunity to be more effective. It doesn't ensure results, but it definitely gives you a lot of advantages. There is an advantage to scale. The larger the capital you have, the more efficient you can be. We have a full-time person in charge of the medical grants, for example.

MULLER: In the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, they're always talking about who's got the biggest endowment. What does it matter if Bill Gates is surpassed by Hewlett Packard? That's silly, but it makes the front pages. I'd like to see on the other side of the front page, "How small can we get?" I often ask people, "What's the smallest thing that anyone did for you that changed your life?"

There are places for large interventions, like doing research on cancer or AIDS treatments. But at the same time, it's not a good presumption that bigger is more effective. The presumption that real change happens from the top down is being challenged everywhere. For example, a bank in Bangladesh lent individuals \$50 to \$100 to start small businesses. That micro credit work ultimately changed the whole country's economy. One thousand tiny kindnesses rising from the ground up change the world more reliably than one initiative from the top down. There is a place for both. ■

—Interviewed by Pamela Gerloff



"It's a check for a hundred thousand dollars. Do you like it?"