



BY PETER GOETTLER

“How do we enable human flourishing?”

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Liberty: The Foundation of Philanthropy

I remember that in junior high school, many of my classrooms were adorned with those stock posters that teachers seem to love: generic photographs or landscape scenes with accompanying proverbs. Of course, “proverbs” is one word for the sayings these posters conveyed. “Kitschy” and “clichéd” are others. But to this day, a couple from my eighth-grade home-room remain in my memory. One said, “The secret of success is this: there is no secret of success.” This saying appealed to the budding, teenage liberty lover in 1976. (Heck, it appeals to the hardened, middle-aged liberty lover in 2019!) There are no shortcuts in life. Reason, talent, hard work, grit, perseverance, and determination. These are important ingredients to a successful—and meaningful—existence.

Another saying that has stayed with me has certainly (deservedly?) earned cliché status: “Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he eats for a lifetime.” But just because a phrase is well worn—or overused—doesn’t make it less true, or less wise. In fact, this idea has animated my family’s philanthropic giving over the years. When my wife, Cynthia, and I reached a stage of life at which we thought more seriously about giving, we decided to make organizations that promote and work for human freedom and limited government more than a sideline or a piece of our “political” giving, but rather our primary focus. That’s how we became involved with Cato. To us, supporting liberty has always been the equivalent of teaching someone to fish. And because so many of you reading this message are generous supporters of Cato, you likely agree.

How do we create the prosperity that reduces or eliminates material want and lifts people out of poverty? What is the framework that allows humans to be the very best, the most capable, and the most competent they can be? What are the conditions that spur accomplishment and achievement? How do individuals procure the meaning and satisfaction that come from providing for the people they love, or that accrue from confronting—and overcoming—the challenges life deals to each one of us? How do we encourage the ingenuity and creativity that foster the technological development that keeps people fed, productive, healthy, entertained, and safe? How do we, in short, enable human flourishing? The answer to all of these questions is the same: freedom. Preserve the natural rights of hu-

mans while limiting the state to the protection of these rights.

A tragedy of the expansive role of modern government is how it undermines the behaviors that represent both the “secret of success” and the way to “catch fish.” Human action is undermined by the utopian myth that government action can soften all the rough edges of life, and the results can be crippling for both individuals and society. As Herbert Spencer said, “The ultimate result of shielding men from the effects of folly is to fill the world with fools.” Just think of how the illusion of government-provided income and healthcare in retirement has undermined thrift, work ethic, and self-sufficiency in our times.

An equally important reason to prioritize liberty in our philanthropy is to protect the birthright of future generations. We are fortunate to have lived our lives in a relatively free country where we’ve had the liberty to imagine, build, and achieve our dreams. I never tire of saying that it will be a shameful legacy indeed if our children and grandchildren are denied these same opportunities, buried under mountains of debt and with burdens of government that make realizing their own dreams impossible. Many great entrepreneurs have said that they’d never have been able to build the enterprises they started decades ago in the face of today’s regulatory barriers. We must keep clearing the regulatory underbrush and reforming the administrative state so that the visionaries of tomorrow can thrive.

I hope you won’t find this note self-serving. Charity is a very personal matter. There are many factors that incentivize Americans’ generosity, and a variety of ideas that inform their giving. Sometimes people need to be given a fish right now or they’ll die. The direct charity that helps the indigent survive is crucial, and it provides immense satisfaction to the giver. I’m so proud to live in the most generous country ever. But without liberty, the prosperity that makes all philanthropy possible will die. So, liberty is not only a fitting objective of philanthropy, but perhaps the foundation of philanthropy itself. Thank you, as ever, for the generous support that makes Cato’s mission and work possible and for making liberty a cornerstone of your generosity.