



GRESHAM COLLEGE
Founded 1597

Give and Take Transcript

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GIVE AND TAKE

Dame Stephanie Shirley

Gresham College and its lectures were founded in 1597 to bring new learning to the City of London, and today, its educational programme is disseminated electronically, and includes a number of voluntary sector activities to which I hope this talk makes a strategic contribution.

As an immigrant, I love this country with a passion perhaps only someone who has lost their human rights can feel. Britain has long been a destination for migrants, starting with the Celts from the Russian Steppes. Some were seeking refuge from persecution. Others, often categorised as scroungers, are seeking economic opportunities. The colour of migrant skin often plays a very significant part in their welcome or otherwise, and the story of immigration into Britain is a rich history of human compassion overcoming the hostility of politicians, the media, and indeed the State.

This is a personal story of my youth, business years, and philanthropic activities, mixed with observations slanted particularly to the City but sometimes much broader. I aim to say some things that you have not heard before. My theme revolves around the idea that there is no such thing as altruism; it is all a matter of give and take.

My childhood was very different. My Jewish father was a young judge in Germany during a time of horrendous discrimination, and shortly after my birth, he was fired by edict of the so-called Third Reich, and the bad times began with our family moving around Europe trying to find a safe place. I was too young to remember the worst.

My parents did a very brave and I think unusual thing. When I was five years old, they organised for me to come to England on a children's train, called Kindertransport, which is the German word for it, organised by the Quakers. There were ten such trains arriving in England. We were sent into the arms of strangers, organised by the Quakers, thinking we would never see our family again.

When I got here, nearly 70 years ago, I was formally classified as a 'friendly enemy alien'. Hitler had taken nationality away from Jewish families, so I arrived state-less, penniless, and of course without a word of English. Actually, that is not true. My father had taught us some useful phrases, so that I could say 'Slow combustion stove' and 'Vindscreen Viper', but I could not, forgive me, ask how to go to the bathroom, which would probably have been more useful.

Of course, pain allows you to grow, and it has sensitised me in ways that many people who have always been wealthy cannot imagine. I was lucky to be fostered by a childless couple in the Midlands of England, and their Christian ethic really permeates my life since then. I was lucky in those foster parents, and because only a tiny proportion of Jews survived those times, I was doubly lucky to be reunited with my birth parents after the War. But I learned very early on that tomorrow is always different, and I have learnt to make each day worthwhile.

My Jewish star is now in the Holocaust Museum at the Imperial War Museum, and Ruth, the doll that travelled with me on that two-and-a-half day journey is safe in the Bethnal Green Toy Museum. There is a wonderful statue at Liverpool Street Station, where most of us arrived, commemorating this largest ever migration of children up to the age of 16, and there is also a plaque in the House of Commons giving a public thank you to Britain for taking us in.

At the age of five, I was one of the youngest on my train, though there were some babes in arms and they were cared for by girls, 16 plus, who had volunteered to help bring the babies out but had agreed to go back thereafter, because they were not classed as children. Although I did not know it at the time, I now know that they went back really to almost certain death. I did not recognise what was going on then, so I am glad now to publicly record their heroism.

So I took succour from collected, individual strangers. My foster parents brought me up as they would their own. Their Christian ethic was that it is better to give than to receive, and what greater gift can anyone have than to give a child unconditional parental love?

Looking back through history, the 17th Century Thomas Coram found that he just could not stand by whilst young children lived

and died on the streets of London. The modern Coram family charity has its aims unchanged: better opportunities for children, and these opportunities include supported living for some of today's unaccompanied child refugees. An astonishing 3,000 children are thought to arrive on these shores without any family.

Moving on to my business life, this again was also very different. In my first job, at British Telecom, I went to evening classes at Sir John Cass College, now a part of the London Metropolitan University. It took years as an evening student to get my Maths degree. Sir John Cass, the man who gave enough to set up that College, also a school in Hackney, was a 17th Century City of London builder, politician and philanthropic giver.

Later, as I was planning for a family, I founded a software house which was as a 20th Century software cottage industry for women. I used to think it was my magnum opus, the great undertaking of my life. It made me one of the top women in the country, in wealth terms, because most wealthy women have inherited or married money. It is only relatively recently that there have been a number of us who have made our own. But the company could not have started smaller - it was literally with less than £100 in today's terms - and on our dining room table. I had no experience of running an organisation. What carried me through was the sheer guts of any leader who has to cope with failures, and I had many failures, to admit to mistakes and face up to them, pick myself up and move on.

In philanthropy of course, it is very difficult to make mistakes, because anything that we do is better than doing nothing.

Organisations that survive connect unbelievably closely with their customers and markets, and have a sense of direction, a vision, for where they are going, and it is always the calming blessings of teamwork that carry forward a vision. You cannot do anything on your own. All my working life, and again since my retirement, I have delegated the execution of my vision to others and gained personal strength from embracing the concept of empowerment. As with love, it is more about giving than taking. It is a question of having goals for your community, your profession and your country.

My software house eventually became very successful. There were two factors that largely account for its survival, yet alone success, and both those factors are to do with control. People tend to think that in the computer industry it is all about being clever-clever, but actually managerially, as far as I was concerned, it was a matter of controlling things. First, I realised my own limitations - I am an entrepreneur - and I brought in professional managers to take the group forward. Secondly, I decided to share ownership of the company as widely as possible. So let me now move to the company's employee share ownership, of which I am even more proud than I am of its commercial success.

We had had profit sharing pretty well from start-up, but I eventually decided that my dream company should entrust its destiny to its staff, because this was a passion with me. I wanted the staff to help me build the company, and I wanted them to share in the success of what they helped build. The chosen route was common ownership. John Lewis was my prime model, and frankly, those schemes that I studied for co-ownership all seemed to rely on a wealthy benefactor, which, at that time, I certainly was not, but over a decade I did manage to transfer 26% of the company to the staff at no cost to anyone but me. That was the start of the company's co-ownership.

Nothing stands still, and last October, the company was acquired by a French rival, Steria, and after 45 years' independence, its name disappeared, which is why I have hardly used it, and it became part of a bigger organisation, with complementary markets, and, most important, also a culture of trust and co-ownership.

There is no doubt that co-ownership was the right exit route for me. In the short term, I could have done financially much better, but I had never been happy with a fortune based on selling the company, and especially with a service company, where the only assets are people. Sharing ownership of a company with its staff is an excellent outcome for a family business.

Materialists believe that the only things that matter are those we can verify with our senses. The main goals in life are, correspondingly, wealth and power, since the more abstract goals are too difficult to measure. As a self-made millionaire, I know that economic sustenance is important, but not all-important. Social responsibility demands that we develop the spiritual dimension to life.

So what does a successful entrepreneur like me do after retirement? I go on trying to innovate, but as a social entrepreneur, not for profit. There is always confusion between charity and philanthropy. I would define them as charity being a matter of repairing some aspect of society; philanthropy is aimed to be preventative, to stop some of the ghastly things happening in the world. I do both, both charity and philanthropy, and I am putting just as much effort into learning to give away money wisely - which is rather difficult - than did for learning to make the money in the first place. So far, over 50 million has transmuted from

figures on a piece of paper to something more meaningful.

Let me now focus on the giving phase of my life, which there are several levels of, as I have shown with my co-ownership example. It is not just a question of money. Everyone has contacts, time, and skills to give.

I am proud to have been a past Master of the IT Livery Company. Livery companies originate in the City's craft guilds, and as one of the pioneers of the IT industry, I had been on the founding court. We actually stood aside to let number 99 go through so that we could have that wonderful number of being the 100th Livery Company.

The Mercers Company, as number 001, held out the hand of friendship to us, this upstart company. We were very conscious of being the new boy on the block. That became a much more balanced relationship between number one and number 100 because our technical and communication skills really helped the centuries-old livery tradition. The Mercers control massive assets which it largely uses for educational purposes, so it is very appropriate that numbers one and 100 should be working together on one of the new academies.

It was of course Dick Whittington, Sir Richard Whittington, three times Lord Mayor of London and the wealthiest merchant of his day, who left his fortune for charity and public purposes. That was 1423, and 600 years later his generosity is still giving help to people as part of the Mercers Livery Charitable Fund.

The City's livery movement, with its emphasis on education, charity and commerce, has its financial wealth rooted in the dim and distant past. I wanted to give the young IT company a contemporary slant, and to upgrade its charitable trust with some serious money. So after some months of anonymous research, the Foundation donated £5 million. The gift did not include the cost of press and publicity. For some extraordinary reason, such expenditure is not considered charitable, so I personally funded the launch, and that launch was done by Buzz Aldrin, in, of course, the Mercers' beautiful buildings in Ironmonger Lane.

One million of that five million gave the IT company a small working hall, the first new hall in the City of London for 50 years. Up to then, Mercers allowed us to use this College for all our meetings, and that is one of the things that makes tonight a very special occasion for me. The other four million went to the IT company's charitable trust. That has used its benefactions in two very interesting ways. Firstly, it gives structure to a variety of giving projects in the IT industry - it has become *the* IT charity; and secondly, to give philanthropic outlet for the time and energy that every single person has available. Freemen and liverymen are actively involved in giving IT advice to non-for-profit organisations, in giving an ailing school appropriate IT facilities and skills, indeed, in managing the academies with which it is associated. It gives some grants but this is rather outdone when one measures the members' time contributions. When using commercially defined consultancy rates, it shows a leverage of at least ten to one of the time contributions to the monetary grant contributions. A grant costing the charitable trust £10,000 is, with members' input, turned into a gift valued at £100,000. For example, since 2002, its IT for Communities project has delivered technical support to the benchmark value of 2.5 million, and that is a shining example of embedded in-kind giving.

The City always serves as an effective network, and the current Chairman of the IT Livery Company, together with another IT liveryman, who pointed me to my second, and it turned out to be my last, big gift to the IT industry. Let me now say how pleased I have been to sponsor the Oxford Internet Institute - this is a multi-disciplinary research institute - to concentrate on the non-technical aspects of the internet, so it is concerned with the social, economic, legal and ethical elements, and not the technical bits that everyone else seems to be concentrating on. Those aspects have always have always appealed to me much more than anything else..

Philanthropic giving is like good business. I focused on the two things I know and care about, and that is information technology, my chosen profession, and autism, a particularly nasty congenital condition which strikes at the very heart of what we mean by humanity. It was my late son's disorder, for there was a family side to all this.

Giles was our only child, a beautiful baby, and because of my traumatic childhood, I really had aimed to give him a quiet, secure life, and he was so contented as a baby that at first I thought we were doing rather well, but at eight months, I took him to the doctor because I had concerns about his lack of progress. He would be totally absorbed in some trivial thing, like the sticky label on a toy car rather than the toy itself. He was late in walking, late in talking, and then, like the changeling in the fairy story, he lost the little speech he had and never spoke again. He turned into a wild, unmanageable toddler, and then came the bombshell diagnosis that he was severely autistic. He became increasingly difficult, banging his head repetitively, sometimes lashing out at us. He needed constant attention and care. Like other parents of a child with autism, even those with less severe autism, the disorder came to dominate our lives, and to make matters worse, puberty hit early for Giles and he could not

take that at all. His epilepsy started at that stage, and he became really violent. Those were terrible, ghastly times.

Eventually, I cracked up, and Giles and I both finished up in hospital. I came out of mine after a month and was back at work within the year, but Giles stayed in a locked ward of one of the old sub-normality hospitals, the asylums, for 11 years. He was then 13, and until he was 16, he did at least attend the hospital school because it then had accepted that all children had to be educated.

But then, as the years passed, Giles lost most of his human rights, and against the advice of the hospital consultants, we decided to look after him again ourselves, this time with paid help because the company was starting to go well. Progress in de-institutionalising him was pretty slow, but in between his extreme and challenging behaviour, he could be a charming innocent, and that of course is the term that the Victorians use - an 'innocent'.

Let me explain autism. It is a spectrum condition, varying in severity and impact. People with autism have difficulty in communicating, difficulty in forming relationships with others, and they find it hard to make sense of the world around them. To date, it is defined by behaviour, not biology: if you behave like this, you are autistic. It can, as with my Giles, go together with severe learning difficulties, behavioural problems, and be hard or even devastating for the people and families concerned. It can also go with high intellect - the sort of brain power that should be employed more often in the City; those staring-at-the-screen type jobs, where you do not have to be particularly sociable, but they are employable. It was first identified some fifty years ago, and with wider definition and better diagnosis, it is now one of the commonest developmental disorders, and perhaps that reflects the rise in non-social functioning and communication difficulties generally. Diagnosis is running at 1% of young children in the UK. Boys are four times more likely to have it than girls. We can wonder why that is but nobody really knows.

The Cloth-workers' Livery Company, the junior in the great twelve, has recently ring-fenced 1.25 million for autism, for a Chair in Autism Education at London University. This is for research into interventions, schooling, how to make things different. There is also another tranche earmarked for projects to ease autistic children's very difficult transition into adulthood.

My first big charitable project in autism, pre-dating Care in the Community, was Kingwood, and Giles was the first resident in the first home. Kingwood now supports 58 adults with autism and so-called challenging behaviour, some in their own homes, some in parental homes, and others in the original residential facilities that I gave. It only recently, some 17 years from start-up, became financially independent of me, so it is a salutary reminder that in giving, it is not enough to 'do good', as it has to be sustainable.

I have got actively involved with several schools with autism. Prior's Court has only pupils who are autistic. It has been the major one, both financially and in time and effort. It took 22 hectic months, from inspiration to actually opening the school, and five years of my life overall. It is the largest of my charitable projects.

I had been inspired into the Higashi Special School for Pupils with Autism by an Higashi school in the States, and in true business-like form, I commissioned a feasibility study as to where potential pupils with autism were living - which was pretty well everywhere - and where the schools were. The worst shortfall was in the Midlands, so that is where the property consultants started looking, and we eventually acquired a fifty-acre site, with a Queen Anne listed building, not in the Midlands, but near Newbury in Berkshire. Three times, I nearly gave up all hope of making that school happen: first, when the planned relationship with Higashi broke down; secondly, when we only had two pupils when we opened the school but already had 28 staff; and thirdly, when my Giles died in the middle of that project and I lost all momentum.

Although it is a relief not to have him survive us, we used to spend a lot of time together and we actually miss him terribly. In the years that I have learnt to live without Giles, without his need of me, autism has become my ongoing mission, a mission that makes sense of his life and perhaps also of mine, the life that was saved.

There are resources for autism, music for autism, all-party parliamentary groups for autism, parents' autism, campaign for education, allergy-induced autism, the economic aspects for autism, but whenever I have found a strategic gap in autism provision, I have tried to help. There is not a lot of pattern to them, though all have great quality, try to be a leader, they are doing new things, and each is aimed to be independent of me financially and managerially as soon as possible.

For example, in bilingual Wales it is particularly difficult for people with autism, where communication, or its lack, is so important. For this reason I founded and funded Autism Cymru, which has guided the Welsh Assembly to the world's first ever national strategy for autism. You might like to guess which is going to be the second? - Perhaps surprisingly, it is going to be Nigeria.

In 1999, the Shirley Foundation sponsored the world's first disability conference on the web, and that led to a portal site, Autism Connect. This has users coming from places really across the globe, from places so small and unheard of that I had to get an atlas out to find out where they were.

Now, many charities are distressingly amateur, and others are overwhelmingly professional, but there were clear distinctions with me wanting to do things differently. I am not unique, but I give capital as well as income. I tend towards funding the infrastructure, not just projects, where most people veer towards the projects. All of the work of the Shirley Foundation is really targeted to be pioneering - we never just do more of the same, no matter how worthy. Pioneering includes a lot of research work and trailblazing new charities. Pioneering and strategic projects are those that can and do fail - and if they were all successful, I would reckon we were not taking enough risk in putting that investment in - but if they are successful, they make a real difference.

My personal belief is that giving does need to be proactive, it needs to be ambitious, it needs to focus on results. It is not a business, but it needs to be businesslike. My aim is always to be professional, to be efficient, and above all, to be effective. There is a new charity in the City, New Philanthropy Capital, who analyse some of these issues and have been enormously helpful.

Over the years, my giving has become more and more strategic, and I travel purposefully to very more interesting places in this country and overseas and feel more fulfilled as a giver than I ever did in the years spent making money. My company took 25 years before it ever paid a dividend, but some people have made their wealth overnight or over a year, and they want their giving to make a difference on those sorts of timescales. Because giving is, to me, a social and cultural activity, not merely a financial activity, I never just write a cheque. Doing so sort of demeans both me and the receiver. Giving money alone is not the answer. Certainly, it can be a compassionate act of detachment. I try to make it a committed act of love, and starting with that hands-on support service for my son, autism is now the focus of my life, giving is what I do - it connects me to the future.

After a number of projects, perhaps it was inevitable that I should finish up with research. I chair Autism Speaks, which leads a number of projects looking at the causes of autism - not trying to make things better, trying to find out what it is, as distinct from what it looks like. Research is costly, so if anyone knows any squillionaires to spare, please introduce me!

I did think Autism Speaks would be my swansong, but I am just starting to also work with the World Health Organisation to improve conditions for vulnerable children across Europe, and my target is to phase out those inhuman caged beds within four years.

Let me try and generalise: the global economy shapes us to appreciate both people and things for their market values, so what drives the giving spirit? Most of us are taught, as children, to share and to give, and I think that this becomes important and more significant in our lives as we get older, when the intangibles in life are really more important than the tangible; than the measurable. The gradual understanding that the world and everything and everyone in it are interconnected fuels the longing to help and to share the riches in life. Some mega-wealthy people want to limit the amount that their heirs inherit. I have no heirs, so I am free to give all my money away.

Money is wonderfully effective, but if we are not to patronise the beneficiaries of its benevolence, the passion and human touch must also be there. I try always to remember how awful it was to accept charity and be expected to be grateful, such as being grateful for not having died in the Holocaust, as a million children did die. So I work hard to give without demeaning people, without patronising them, and although I mainly give in a businesslike and strategic way, it is always with a warm heart and with a warm hand, because what is the point of writing gifts only in my last will and testament? I want to do it in my lifetime. It is giving an expression of private beliefs.

Perhaps the motives hardly matter, because the fact that people give is the birthright and defining characteristic of the human race. Sikhs believe in life in three equal dimensions, one of which is sharing one's time, talents and earnings with the less fortunate. The Quaker Society of Friends always gives anonymously, and I have tried to persuade them to change that. Muslims give in charity to individuals rather than to charitable organisations, and like many strict Jews, they think of giving as a duty rather than an option. Giving somebody to help their self-sufficiency is viewed as more valuable than giving which might engender a dependency culture. It is justice in an unfair world.

John Stuart Mills said, 'Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way,' and that is how it has been with me. I have done what was in me to

do. I am so lucky to have something worthwhile to get up for every morning, and the more money I give away, frankly, the richer my life seems to become.

In conclusion, giving is learned early, perhaps as part of family tradition. Devout people give dutifully to satisfy divine will. Enlightened self-interest is when we give to others, and so help ourselves, indirectly. Perhaps this can be as insurance, such as helping the aged for possible future benefit ourselves. This enlightened self-interest, combined with the altruistic 'It's the right thing to do,' makes giving feel good for me. That is a scientific fact, because brain scans show that the pleasure centres of the brain are stimulated when we act unselfishly - you can actually see that. I have said how my life of service is some sort of repayment or assuagement of survival guilt.

Recent research shows that corporate giving not only helps staff recruitment, morale, and staff retention, but is directly good for business. The positive branding also leads to improved sales, new customers and more loyal customers who buy more. Though, as the Enron scandal showed us, the corporate responsibilities need to be fully embedded in the organisation.

Another example of enlightened self-interest comes with reputation, achieving, as Sir Thomas Gresham put it in his will, 'fame and good report in this transitory world.' So the giving spectrum moves from no reward whatsoever, through acknowledgement, prestige, and for me, a lot of fun, to tangible returns and a sniff of immortality. Giving back is recognised as a mega-trend of the 21st Century, and I hope that, by telling you my personal story, to have spread new learning in a way that Sir Thomas Gresham would have approved.

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