

Foreverland

Wealth, alone, can't buy immortality

“In any society where there is competition for social attention and cultural dominance, there will be a drive for secular immortality.”

—Professor Elizabeth C. Hirschman, Rutgers University's School of Business

Comments?

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Not long ago, in a column on the presidential contender John McCain, *The New York Times'* Op-Ed page columnist David Brooks wrote of “an ancient sense of honor, which is different from fame and consists of the desire to be worthy of the esteem of posterity.” That impulse may be ancient but it isn't atavistic—and it rears its handsome head most wonderfully, if all too rarely, in some of the loftiest spheres of human endeavor—heroic, artistic, athletic, political, and philanthropic achievement. The phrase which best describes the esteem of posterity—that rare distinction of having one's name live on and be well-remembered forever—is “secular immortality.”

I first encountered the fact, if not the phrase, when

I was 10 and my father took the family to the Library of Congress to show us his name—he'd written some books—noted and filed for all to reference in the massive card catalog near the majestic Main Reading Room (yes, Virginia, they kept records on paper then). I was awed and I think I subconsciously resolved to become a writer that day. Though the library at Alexandria and its papyrus scrolls exist no more, I still feel fairly certain that in the heart of the District of Columbia the name Milton Gross will endure (and mine, too, for that matter).

Washington was an appropriate spot for the occurrence of that initial encounter with perpetual glory. Secular immortality has, of course, motivated the American experiment from its earliest days. In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt wrote that the Founding Fathers had to deny they were motivated by their quest for secular immortality because “it was nothing less than the weight of the entire Christian tradition which prevented them from owning up to the rather obvious fact that they were enjoying what they were doing far beyond the call of duty.” But of course, as Douglass Adair put it in his famous essay, *Fame and the Founding Fathers*, Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, et al. were actually “passionately selfish and self-interested.”

Vainglory, you might say, is us. Only its scale changes. From the faces on Mount Rushmore to names on cards mapping the book inventory of the Library of Congress, the pursuit of secular immortality has been a driving force in American culture. The linkage

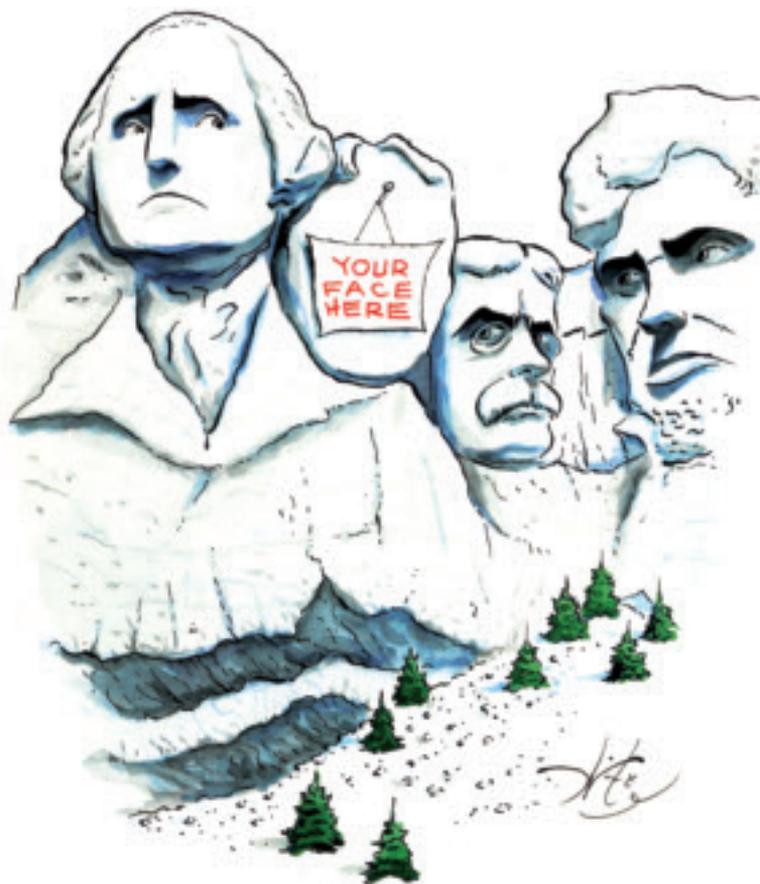


ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL WITTE

between fame and honor may no longer be as exclusive as it once was. (Like it or not, Andy Warhol had both, whereas his demon offspring, the celeburtards cavorting in *Us Weekly*, are happy to scramble for the former). But that linkage between fame and honor persists, and nowhere is that enduring relationship better displayed than on the stage of philanthropy.

Once upon a time, charity was a matter between a man and his God or a man and his church, and immortality was only on offer in Heaven. Indeed, heavenly immortality was thought to have substantive value, whereas fame was considered both fleeting and anathema. What good was fame after death? Such ambition, such posthumous pride, such pining for glory was empty, pointless vanity, potentially destructive (for it could inspire envy and violence), and even downright sinful.

Professor Elizabeth C. Hirschman of Rutgers University's School of Business point outs that Calvinists equated material wealth with one's value as a human being, and as another great political philosopher, Tina Brown, once remarked, "All is vanities and nothing is fair." The fact is that vain posturing—aka the quest for secular immortality—while sometimes just empty display, can also (to put it as simply as possible) do real, tangible good and inspire others to do the same.

That, I'd argue, was steel magnate Andrew Carnegie's greatest contribution to civilization, greater even than Carnegie Hall, Carnegie Mellon University, or the 2,509 local libraries he paid for around the world. He made the Carnegie name an immortal gold standard to which others could aspire. Ditto John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who used his father's humongous fortune to remake his family's reputation, obliterating its literally oily, rapacious industrial-era image in a single generation of public-spirited beneficence. Men like these—and Warren Buffett and Bill Gates today—set the bar high quite consciously.

"Carnegie, Mellon, Rockefeller, Duke, Stanford, Vanderbilt (all) competed for that recognition," says Hirschman. "They lived long enough to realize that they would die, their companies could be sold, their descendants might not be successful. But if they founded a great university, then they were forever. I

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stand two buildings, bookends that epitomize the best and worst manifestations of the desire to be admired. At the corner of 57th Street and Seventh Avenue sits Carnegie Hall, that monument to incomparable generosity. And at the corner of 56th Street and Fifth Avenue sits Trump Tower, a brassy monument to unbridled egomania. It's pretty certain that as long as there's a New York City, there will be a Carnegie Hall. But buildings are here today, gone tomorrow, as Donald Trump well knows, having earned himself a ton of grief while taking down the Art Deco *bas relief*-clad building that once housed the Bonwit Teller department store to put up his eponymous erection.

What really matters is not how many buildings you construct, or even how tall and shiny they are. It's the glory that you give to the many, not the light that you shine on yourself, that really counts. And it takes a long time—literally forever—before secular achievement ages like fine wine into inextinguishable immortality. A random act of selfless kindness or courage (think Rosa Parks), magnified by time, might be all it takes to be remembered long after the Britneys and the Lohans and even The Donald are forgotten.

Sure, it helps if you have a big bag of cash, but that's hardly the only game in town. Philanthropy—the best and most lasting kind—isn't just about writing a check; it's about making a difference. ▲

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\$2,045

What the majority of U.S. households give on average to charity, according to a study released in December by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University.