

philanthropy

How To Give Away a Million Dollars

Ideas from Nora Ephron, David Brooks, Jane Smiley, and others.

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*This year marks the [10th anniversary of the Slate 60](#), the magazine's annual listing of the 60 largest American donors to charity. As [David Plotz wrote earlier this year](#), the idea behind the list is to fuse American generosity and competitiveness. This week, we are focusing on philanthropy to coincide with a conference of [Slate 60 donors](#) that the magazine is co-sponsoring with the [Clinton School of Public Service at the University of Arkansas](#). To kick off the discussion, we asked writers, artists, academics, and other thoughtful people a question: If you had a million dollars to give, who would get it? Their answers are below. (Click [here](#) to read more from *Slate's* philanthropy series.)*

Anne Applebaum, columnist, *Washington Post* and *Slate*

Given that a million dollars isn't what it used to be—given that I can't cure AIDS or end terrorism with a million dollars—I'd prefer to give my money to a smaller charity that will use the money to good effect. My charity of choice is [Memorial](#), the Russian human rights organization. Unusually, they perform a dual role. Some of their employees are historians who are working in the archives, writing the history of Stalinism and terrorism in their country. Others promote human rights in Russia in the present.

In other words, it's a group that wants not only to learn the lessons of history, but to spread them further. A million dollars could help them survive—literally—in a country where it is neither easy nor safe to oppose the government.

Paul Berman, author, [Power and the Idealists](#)

If I had a million dollars, which I don't, I would give it to a little cluster of political and intellectual projects in Britain whose purpose is to renovate the liberal left with new ideas. The people working on these projects are best known for having produced a document called the Euston Manifesto, which was composed in a bar near the Euston station of the London metro. (If these people had a million dollars, they wouldn't have to compose their manifestos in bars—they would be able to rent a proper office for themselves.) Their online journal, [Democratiya](#), has become, by my lights, the liveliest and most stimulating new intellectual journal on political themes in the English-speaking world—certainly the liveliest new thing to appear on the English-speaking left in a good long time. Their project Engage has rather bravely taken up the challenge of arguing against the slightly demented anti-Zionism that appears to have apparently overrun whole regions of British intellectual life. And people from the same group put out a couple of vigorous blogs as well: [Harry's Place](#) and [Normblog](#).

Someone else with a million dollars to give away might wonder why it is so important to subsidize these tiny projects in Britain. My own judgment of world events leads me to think that not only are we facing horrendous disasters here and there, we are also failing to respond adequately even in our own analyses and arguments. We need a bit of fresh thinking. And here they are, the people who are thinking freshly: the little circle of British intellectuals and activists who composed the Euston Manifesto, who are putting out Democratiya, who are promoting Engage, and are running the various blogs. My money is on them.

David Brooks, columnist, *New York Times*

If I had a million bucks, I'd give it to the [Incarnation Center](#). This is the Connecticut summer camp I attended and worked at for 15 years as a boy, which was instrumental in my own growth and in the flourishing of dozens of my friends. It takes kids from all over the New York area—some rich and some very poor—and integrates them, and gives them a place where they can develop lasting bonds. It's a general-interest camp, the kind that is dying in this age of computer camps and other specialty institutions. It's a place where suburban teens sleep in tents and cook all their meals over an open fire. Mostly it's a place where children can step off the achievement treadmill and mature in the ways that really matter—meeting different sorts of people, confronting fear, facing hardship. It was also the source of a thousand stories that my friends and I retell decades later, inducing intense boredom in our spouses.

Christopher Buckley, author, *Florence of Arabia* and *Thank You for Smoking*

If I had a million dollars, I would give it to Donald Graham so that he could afford health insurance for all his employees. Don't you think that would be a worthy charity?

Lincoln Caplan, partner in SeaChange Capital Partners, a new nonprofit firm

What if my million could bring \$5 million more of federal and local money to the nation's outstanding charter schools in inner cities and let them reward the schools' top principals and teachers who help to dramatically improve the achievement of students—in those schools and many public schools as well?

I'd contribute to the Effective Practice Incentive Fund, created by New Leaders for New Schools. It's a nonprofit venture that was launched in 2001 and has trained 332 school leaders in New York City, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Memphis, Chicago, and the Bay area. In six years, it expects to be training one-fourth of the new principals needed in cities across the country. The new program supported by this fund goes well beyond training, though. Recognizing that principals and teachers must be at the center of efforts to improve achievement, it gives them a fresh set of tools and incentives to use them.

New Leaders seeks \$13.3 million in private funds, of which it had raised \$4.5 million as of Nov. 1, to match \$58 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Education. The grants come from the federal Teacher Incentive Fund, set up "to support programs that develop and implement performance-based teacher and principal compensation systems in high-need schools." The 1-to-5 leverage occurs because an additional \$8.6 million of other public funds has been committed for a total of \$66.6 million.

New Leaders isn't undiscovered: It has previously received grants from the Broad, Dell, and Gates foundations, among others; last year, *Fast Company* magazine rated it America's outstanding social enterprise. But New Leaders still needs \$8.8 million to complete the first phase of the Effective Practice Incentive Fund. My million would yield an immediate, high multiple.

The results of New Leaders exemplify what innovative philanthropists mean when they talk about the social benefits that come from requirements for performance. Some people are concerned that the success of programs like New Leaders is anti-democratic, because it relieves the public sector of responsibility for providing high-quality education. The nonprofit is demonstrating how the former can spur important reform in the latter.

Alan Dershowitz, professor, Harvard Law School

I would use my million dollars to start the world's first and only genuine human rights organization that prioritizes its resources in accordance with the seriousness of the violations and not the ideological bias of the organization. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other current organizations do not do this. They devote less proportional attention to real genocides such as those in Darfur and other parts of Africa than to the imperfections of Israel. The victims of this obsessive and disproportional focus on Israel are African and other real victims of genocide. This must change, and I would devote my money to trying to change it.

William Easterly, professor of economics, New York University

Doing good by giving money away is a lot harder than it seems, as the sad record of official aid abundantly shows. I think aid should seek to help individuals rather than pursue the illusion of transforming other societies. I would give away \$1 million to fund scholarships for students from Africa to get bachelors' and graduate degrees in the world's best universities. Poor students would compete for scholarships based on merit, after which the scholarships just help students help themselves to develop their potential. The alumni can then hopefully form part of the next generation of political and business leaders in Africa.

Nora Ephron, author, [I Feel Bad About My Neck](#) and [Crazy Salad](#)

The Public Theater ... because there's nothing like free Shakespeare on a summer night in Central Park.

James Fallows, national correspondent, the *Atlantic*

A million dollars is really an awkward number. If you said, "What would you do with a billion dollars?" we could talk about setting up new research institutes or huge change-the-world undertakings. If you said, "What would you do with a thousand dollars?" I could name a specific charity worth getting a little more help. But a million dollars is in the gray zone—too much to feel good about blowing on just any old charity, too little to allow you really to change the world.

I'm tempted to say that I'd use the money to buy as many acres of forest land as possible in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brazil, the Congo, or elsewhere, because in the short run I fear that such ownership is the main way to keep the forests from being cut down. But I realize that on its own, that would probably yield parcels too small to make a difference. So, on reflection, I would probably divide the money between two organizations that have pioneered brilliant ways of matching entrepreneurship with good works of the environmental, medical, poverty-reducing, and democratizing variety, and that have delivered a lot of value per dollar spent. They are [Ashoka](#) and [Global Giving](#). Each represents an inventive new model of deciding which projects to support, and each appears to work. I'd probably hold back \$100,000 or so and give it to [Medecins sans Frontieres](#).

Michael Kinsley, former editor in chief, *Slate*

Like Warren Buffett, I would try to give my money to the Gates Foundation, on the assumption that they have the ability to give it away more intelligently than I could. I am very impressed with what I have seen of their management.

Harold Koh, dean, Yale Law School

I work for a law school and my wife is a lawyer for legal aid. I can honestly say that if we had a million dollars to give away, we would give it to those organizations. Preservation and enrichment of the rule of

law, and representation of those who lack access to the legal system, should be our highest priorities, particularly when legal-aid funding is under assault and legal rules are short-sightedly bent for the war on terror. We give our lives to these organizations, so why not our money?

Robert Pinsky, former poet laureate and *Slate* poetry editor

Music, dance, poetry, visual art are at the core of our power to learn.

On the other hand, my Washington years taught me that arts foundations are often wasteful, fad-driven, and full of baloney. I have become a bit skeptical about the usefulness of prizes, commissions, medals, laureateships, conferences, consultants, studies. Sometimes chairs, boards, round tables, panels, and similar furniture do good; sometimes they resemble the chaff that is driven before the wind.

So, my million dollars would go directly to some actual school or library.

An example: Boston Arts Academy, a Boston public high school—not a charter school, a straight-ahead public school—across the street from Fenway Park's outfield wall. The school uses art as a model and means for intellectual work. Studying an art—mastering a literal or figurative instrument—can help students focus their powers. Proficiency develops confidence in the ability to learn. The idea is not to train professional artists, but to use the worthy, engaging difficulties of art as a means toward accomplishment and concentration—in a word, learning.

The 400 students, mostly "minority," excel annually on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests. The school head, Linda Nathan, has written cogently against "the testing mania," but she sees to it that BAA students shine on the MCAS—absurd and costly though the test may be.

Admission to BAA is competitive. Ninety percent of the graduates go on to college: some to community colleges, some to Brown, Boston University, etc. Most students live far from the Kenmore Square campus. They spend considerable time on public transportation between school and home. Many have part-time jobs. BAA's atmosphere is extraordinary: People look one another in the eye; the social norm is casual good manners. The seedy, cheerful converted warehouse feels like a place where work gets done. Distinguished Boston musicians, dancers, writers volunteer time to the school—motivated partly by that atmosphere.

Along with its primary goal of education, BAA does a public service by respecting the arts as fundamental.

I might put my million into instruments, supplies, and music, art, dance, writing teachers for some needy school district. I might use some of the money to bring people from that district to visit Boston Arts Academy for a week or two, to see how it works.

Jane Smiley, author, [Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel](#) and [A Thousand Acres](#)

My partner is a more charitable person than I am, and he would donate the million to [Adopt a Minefield](#)—an international organization to clear land mines and provide survivor assistance. I am more punitive than he is, so I would reserve \$200,000 for a legal fund to prosecute and imprison the CEOs of corporations who manufacture land mines (and, later, hopefully, other weapons targeted at civilians, such as cluster bombs).

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