

News Gram

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"We're slimmed down for the summer!"

Philanthropy and Mania

by Irwin Savodnik, M.D., Ph.D.

THE WORLD OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY IS AN admixture of politics, economics and, yes, psychiatry. One can see how the first two factors figure in giving away one's money – tax benefits, peer pressure, belief in political and social causes, among others – but what in the world does psychiatry have to do with charitable donations? In a word, everything. The underlying psychology of philanthropic causes is the central factor in getting people to part with their money. We see this in the psychiatric syndrome of mania. In fact, some of the most philanthropic people are often manic people. How is that?

To understand this point, it's important to grasp what it is that makes people reach into their pockets and put cash on the line. Simply put, they do so because it makes them feel good.

If you ask someone why they donated \$10,000 to the Boys' Home or some eleemosynary institution, you're likely to get the following response: "Those kids are troubled and really need our help." That kind of answer is reasonable enough. It makes sense and we are apt to stop asking. If you persist, though, you may hear a different kind of reason. Here's a bit of such a conversation:

You: Why did you give such a large sum of money to the Boys' Home?

Giver: I told you. Those kids need help.

You: But why you and why did you give to them?

Giver: Oh, well, because I liked those people, those who asked me for the money.

You: What did you like about them?

Giver: First, there were three of them just to see me. They came to my home. I was expecting to meet them in a coffee shop or someplace like that.

You: What did that mean, that they came to your home?

Giver: Hard to say, really, but when I think of it, I guess they were paying me a compliment. They were telling me I was important.

You: Important?

Giver: Yes, important. I felt like the man of the hour. Initially, I had planned to give them a thousand dollars. By the time they left two hours later, they walked out with a check for \$10,000. And I felt great!

That the donor felt "great" is the most important element in the transaction. We all know that, under the right circumstances, giving feels good, even great. Professional fundraisers make their living on just this one point – making people feel esteemed, important and larger than they usually do.

Lest one think this view is cynical, it is well to keep in mind that most of our actions are for that reason. We take pride in raising our children, not drinking and driving and being honest. Of course, there are principals that underlie our decisions but it is hard to deny the

personal motivations that are a part of the whole process.

Psychiatrically, being philanthropic often elevates a person's self-esteem. That is, the value we place on ourselves as persons, the way we rank ourselves relative to each other and the emotions that surround these considerations are all part of what we may call the self-esteem system in each of us. Probably, the main reason we act philanthropically is to feel better about ourselves.

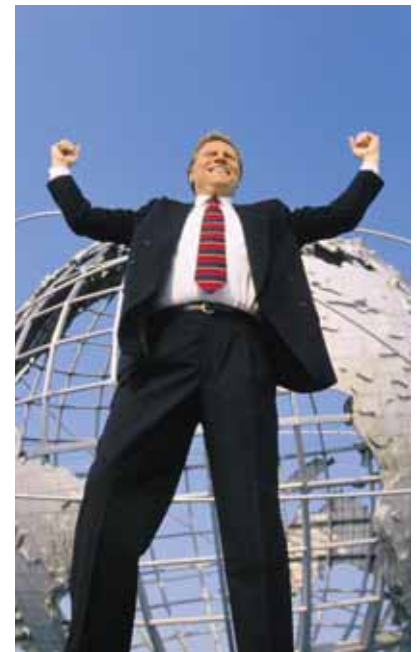
Nowhere is this phenomenon seen so dramatically as in the case of mania. Such individuals are commonly hyperactive, hypersexual and seemingly joyous as they eschew sleep, food and responsibility. Subjectively, they feel like the center of the universe. They're expansive, energetic, enthused and optimistic. In fact, they are exemplars – albeit, grotesquely exaggerated ones – of the philanthropic spirit. How is that so?

In mania, an individual's ego ideal – that part of him he aspires to be – is fused with his ego. He is no longer seeking *to become* what he values most deeply in life. He *is* that person. A poor man views himself as the wealthiest man on earth. A plain woman plans to enter the Miss America contest. An 80-pound weakling enters the weight-lifting competition, and so on. Common to all these examples is that subjectively, each person feels "high", great and special. In their minds, they are all they ever aspired to be. The experience is exhilarating.

Often, when individuals give to charitable organizations, they think of themselves as good, caring, loving and involved. Their donations serve as evidence that they are like that. Giving brings them closer to their ego ideal and the result is an enlarged sense of self and a feeling of great importance.

The difference between philanthropy and mania in this regard is that the ordinary charitable person is generally realistic. He or she can afford to give the money they do. The manic, on the other hand, is at some distance from reality, which means their judgment does not promote their self-interest or reflect the constraints the world imposes on them. Often the results are disastrous.

For a reasonable person, giving to others should enhance his self-esteem. Usually, the cause is one that will benefit others who would otherwise be left out in the cold. In the end, giving is the right thing to do – and doing so *should* build our self-esteem. —IS



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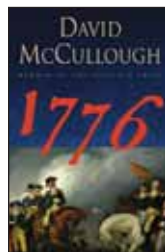
SAVODNIK'S PICKS

A Monthly Review of Dr. Savodnik's Favorite Books-On-Tape

1776

by David McCullough

Note: Beginning with this issue, the Review will include books not necessarily recorded yet. With the end of Books-On-Tape marketing to the general public, the major source of unabridged books in the United States has disappeared. Books-On-Tape does sell to libraries but no longer rents their books as they had done for many years. We mourn the loss of their service.



THAT THE AMERICAN Revolution was not a slam dunk for the Americans is one of the great understatements of history. The British, led by a supremely competent, experienced and disciplined officer corps, commanded some of the best trained troops in

the world. George Washington's retreat across the southern tier of New Jersey was a low point in that first year of war. From that frigid historical moment, Washington and his men marched from the western shores of the Delaware toward Trenton, where they would confront the British with all the rebellious wrath within their revolutionary souls.

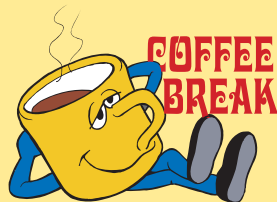
It is this latter tale of David McCullough's *1776* that draws the fateful year to its victorious culmination. Washington was far from the man portrayed in Gottlieb Leutze's famed painting, *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*. In that famous work, Washington is finely garbed in military attire, the new flag of America unfurled

and waving in the winter wind, with blocks of ice bunching up against the sides of his boat.

The war was to claim 25,000 lives, about one percent of the population, the equivalent of 3,000,000 men today. In virtually every respect, the British were superior to their colonial counterparts in training, equipment and nutrition. By almost any measure, they seemed destined to prevail in the nine-year struggle between the colonies and their mother country.

The retreat across the ice-covered waters of the Delaware was the pivotal point around which Washington's forces would move toward Trenton – and into a battle with the British that presaged the ultimate outcome of their struggle. Compared to the massive Battle of Brooklyn in the summer of that year, the conflict that followed was to be small by comparison. Small, yes. Critical, absolutely. It was to be the battle that taught the Americans it was possible to beat the British and demonstrated to their enemies that these were men whose strength came from an inner fire that would melt the wintry ice and despoil the British legions.

It was also the battle that announced to the world that a new entity, born in freedom, to be called the United States of America, was upon the world. McCullough appreciates the beauty and awesome historical stature of Washington's retreat and his redemption in Trenton. And he can write a story as few historians can. Bereft of academic snobbishness, his love of America's birth appears on every page of the book. For those who enjoyed *Truman* and *John Adams*, there is little choice but to open the pages of this book as soon as possible. For those who have yet to read his words, *1776* is a wonderful place to start. —IS



THE COFFEE BREAK QUIZ

Depression:

- A. Consists of aggression directed against the self
- B. is a brain disease
- C. is caused by an infection
- D. never disturbs sleep

ANSWER: A.

Depressed people direct their own aggressive rage against themselves, which results in a loss of energy, motivation, appetite, sex drive and the ability to enjoy life. Brain injury, infection and other forms of insult may alter affective expression and experience but are not the cause of "average" cases of depression. Depression commonly causes sleep problems.