Money with Meaning

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Every now and then, someone who has lived deeply and sought to do hard things sits down and writes a book that systematically shares the body of what they've learned.

At one level, Alex Johnston's *Money with Meaning* is a book for people with the wealth and commitment to make a purposeful difference with their own philanthropy. And if even a small fraction of the 101,000 American families with $30 million or more in net worth apply Alex's advice, that would be vastly consequential. But that's too narrow a view of what Alex is up to.

On a recent Saturday afternoon, as I reached page 235, I found this question staring at me:

How do we meet the challenge of finding both joy and impact in the time and place we actually live in?

There's no door into the universal except through the particular. Start almost anywhere, reach deep enough, and the whole world opens. In 2015, I wrote a piece called My Unlikeliest Favorite Business Book about The Millionaire Real Estate Agent, a book that reaches deep into how to build a business selling real estate. It establishes as beautiful a model as I've ever seen to think about building almost any kind of business systematically. Alex walks through the door of individual philanthropy and reaches very deep indeed. *Money with Meaning* describes a model for how to build a life that brings

together joy and impact, personal expression, and the disciplined pursuit of excellence. As such, it deserves a wide audience for people who might skip the specialized parts about the ins and outs of LLCs versus Donor-Advised Funds, but who can nevertheless benefit from the book's exceptionally clear and specific advice about how to connect a personal vision, of any kind, all the way down to the level of what to do upon waking up on a given Tuesday morning.

In almost any field of endeavor—and giving is no exception—the most fundamental and often the hardest work is inner work. To "find both joy and impact in the time and place we actually live in" requires that we work to clarify the worldview that we're beginning with and let our work open us up to an expansion of the worldview. Our worldview shapes our answers to questions like:

- What are the specific problems that I feel called upon to contribute to solving?
- What counts as making a difference?
- What role should I play among those who are trying to do and support this work?

Alex teaches that there is no better context for introspection than to learn in action:

Instead of "I need to figure this out before I really gear up my giving," try this on: "I need to gear up my giving before I really figure this out." (85)

Giving creates such a magnificent opportunity to learn because it cuts a slice full through the human condition:

- Trying to figure out our own role
- While engaging with complex systems full of interconnected communities and institutions
- Determining what works, what doesn't work and why
- As we attempt to solve problems that neither we nor others can fully understand
- Experiencing the slow, messy, fraught links of transmission between the actions we take and their impact on the world

Alex has been building an arsenal of tools over the course of a long career working in philanthropy and social impact. He slows us down to share the fine points of different kinds of learnings, with the passion and patience of a coach breaking down a game tape. He distills a wide range of lessons from the frontiers of deep listening, negotiation, coaching, and personal and organizational change to help the reader see how the kinds of questions that come up between donors and actors in the field can yield insight, progress, and growth if they're approached with the right disciplines of heart and mind. Alex spans the full range from the nuts and bolts of technique:

- *You begin by asking the other person to identify all their concerns.*
- *You repeat them back for understanding.*
- *You check for more, ensuring you've got all their concerns out on the table.*
- *You share your own concerns.*
- *You do not comment on each other's concerns or argue about them. Concerns constitute subjective feelings, which aren't open for debate—they're not empirically right or wrong.*
- *The two of you look creatively at the whole pile of concerns and see what you can come up with that you can agree on as a satisfactory way to meet everyone's concerns.* (193-4, adapted from Ross Greene's Raising Human Beings)

… all the way to the higher reaches of the mindsets we can learn to cultivate:

What larger truth or whole is seeking expression through me? What larger systems am I part of, and what leverage do I have to transform these systems through my own actions and by coming together with others? What ripples can I help set in motion whose ultimate impact I can't even predict and perceive?…. How can I develop others? How can I best position others to address this challenge above and beyond anything I do myself? (221)

Part of what's so powerful about Alex's voice as a coach and teacher is the way that he helps us see what we're experiencing in the moment—something that falls short of our aspirations for impact and/or for meaning and satisfaction—and both zoom out (how does this connect to the longer arc of the journey we're on and the ways we might need to develop) and zoom in (how does this connect to our energy, our breath and the rhythms of our conversation) until the blockage is put into its proper relation to the largest and the smallest perspectives.

At the end of the book, Alex turns to an example of someone whose name I'd never heard:

Seventy years ago, Emil Schwarzhaupt helped shape the course of American history with just $4 million. This is how much money his foundation spent to aid the Civil Rights Movement and other citizen-led community movements in the twenty-five years following his death in 1950. One of the Schwarzhaupt Foundation's first major grantees was the Highlander Folk School. A key feature of their grant support was that it was open-ended. It was designed to allow the organization to experiment and develop unproven ideas. Just a few years later, Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks, John Lewis, and other leading lights of the Civil Rights Movement came to Highlander Folk School for training in nonviolent organizing. It was from there that "We Shall Overcome"—the iconic anthem of the movement—spread across the country and around the globe. (272)

I looked up Schwarzhaupt after I finished *Money with Meaning*, and learned that he was born in Germany in the 1890s and emigrated to Chicago where he worked for the Liquor Dealers Supply Company before going out on his own to trade in whiskey warehouse receipts. After prohibition, he and a partner acquired several whiskey brands, which they then turned around and sold to a larger concern in 1937. A note in the *Times* after his death describes how he began funding the purchase of animals for the Central Park Zoo after his walks there, and left money for the Zoo and dozens of other organizations, alongside giving by far the largest share of his estate to promote American Citizenship. His Foundation's active work spanned 25 years. Five years after the completion of that term and the sunset of the Foundation's grantmaking, the trustees funded a book, Education for Citizenship, that: "(1) describes the rationale on the basis of which the grant program was undertaken, (2) indicates something of how the Foundation's business was conducted and what it learned about its own operations and (3) describes in some detail the principal projects funded in order to allow the reader to see more clearly the basis for the conclusions arrived at about the various projects and the reasons for the variety of results reported."

That story felt like it encapsulated in miniature what I'd taken from reading Alex's book. There are many ways one might construct a life of giving. Perhaps the medium of giving is money, or perhaps it is our time and the labor of our hands or of our mind. Whatever the medium, our work is to give—as Schwarzhaupt did—with the best of our abilities, the fullest of our love, and the humility to

let the world teach us how to make our gift. In David Whyte's words, from "Sweet Darkness":

You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness

to learn
anything or anyone
that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.

Alex and I grew up together. My mother taught him in the fifth grade, at a little private school in Amherst, Massachusetts called The Common School. And his late mother Cheryl Johnston, taught me social studies in the ninth and eleventh grades. She gave us space to think and pushed us to think well. She graded our papers in green pen, with both rigor and imagination.

Yes, we must each learn for ourselves what we have to give the world and how to give it. But we can and must have teachers. It doesn't surprise me that Alex has grown into a great teacher—and a teacher of some of the most important lessons any of us can strive to learn.