



BLACK WOMEN AND PHILANTHROPY BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX

On May 17, 20-05, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, incorporated, gave the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund a gift of one million dollars in honor of the first woman to serve as Director Counsel and sorority member Elaine Jones. The sorority chose the fifty-first anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education to formally present the money to Ted Shaw, the current leader of the LDEF. In accepting the contribution, Shaw talked about the work the LDEF is doing on both the reauthorization of the voting rights act and an upcoming case on felony disenfranchisement. Kemba Smith, the former debutante turned prison inmate because of mandatory drug laws was among those present at the press conference where the check was sent. Thanks to the LDEF's efforts, Bill Clinton pardoned the young woman, who was attending Hampton University when she was sentenced to 26 years in jail. Although she will attend law school this fall she cannot vote.

The Delta gift is a significant example of the kind of philanthropic efforts which African American women are capable of. In some ways a million dollars isn't a lot of money – it represents just five dollars for each of the 200,000 members of the sorority. On the other hand, it represents a "first" in civil rights philanthropy. How often do we hear of one African American organization turning that kind of money over to another, and in the name of an African American woman? To be sure, there are many shining examples of African American women's philanthropy. In 1995, for example, a Mississippi laundrywoman, Oseola McCarty, donated \$150, 000 to the University of Southern Mississippi for scholarships, an act that garnered national headlines, inspired awe, and earned her more than 300 awards, including a presidential citation. Few philanthropic gifts have been so moving – McCarty saved the pennies she earned hand-washing clothes at \$10 a bundle – to accumulate the fortune she gave away to "help somebody's child go to college". Though the McCarty story is inspiring, we more frequently are regaled with the stories of the rich and famous that give. For example, Bill and Camille Cosby gave Spelman College \$20 million in 1995, and recently, gave Bennett College for Women \$600,000. Oprah Winfrey gave \$2.5 million to the National Council of Negro Women in 2003, and, through her foundation, has given \$32 million to worthy causes, including millions to Morehouse, Jackson State University, and the college-prep organization, A Better Chance.

Most of us fit between Oprah and Oseola McCarty. We're not pulling down the millions, but we aren't washing clothes for a living either. And most of us, like those two women, want to make a difference and leave a legacy through our giving. Each of us has a responsibility to examine the giving that she does and the difference that she wants to make. African American women are certainly generous – especially to our churches and to our organizations – but some of us might want to consider a more systematic approach to our giving.

First question – do we give enough? If we are Christians, we have the biblical obligation to tithe, or to give a tenth back to our churches. Some folks play fast and loose with that concept, and others interpret the tenth as a contribution to any charity. So, rule of thumb, if you aren't giving back at least a tenth, you aren't doing your share.

Second question – how are your own finances? Broke folks really can't give freely. Contributions to charity ought not replace saving, pension fund investing, or other necessities, no matter how tempted you are to "step up", especially when a cause is a visible and important one.

Third question – have you budgeted for giving? Too often, especially at the end of the year – we are buried with solicitations and those among us who are tenderhearted find ourselves wanting to respond to good causes. Based on your income and tax status, you may want to donate as much as 15 to 20 percent of your income to church and charities. The key word here, though, is “budget” or plan for giving.

Finally – does your giving reflect your values? From Oseola McCarthy’s gift we learn that the sixth-grade dropout who retired from washing clothes at 84 passionately valued education. From Oprah’s gifts we learn that education, African American women’s concerns, and the development of girls are important to her. What do your gifts say about you? Do you give to the Black United Fund instead of the United Way because you want to support African American institutions? (You can designate the Black United Fund on your United Way giving card if you participate in a workplace-based campaign). Do you give to your alma mater, your sorority, the United Negro College Fund? Can your giving be more focused so that you make more of a difference? Delta Sigma Theta’s gift to the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund reminds us of the power of African American women’s giving. So do Oprah Winfrey and Oseola McCarty, women who could not be more different from each other. With so many unmet needs in health, education, and civil rights work, what is your giving legacy?

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