

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY



BOOK EXCERPT

Giving Circles, Mutual Aid: Cures for the Loneliness Crisis

With philanthropy's logic models and impact measures, pursuit of charitable good is no longer a unifying force. Collective charity can restore our power to create belonging for all.

By *Hali Lee*

MARCH 5, 2025



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Philanthropy as it's practiced today has lost the thread. Somewhere along the way, we've relegated the human beings who ought to be center stage off to the wings, replaced by logic models, performance indicators, and so many spreadsheets. Somehow, we've lost our humanity, the yearning to belong, to have efficacy, love, opportunity, and dignity. We've lost the connections to our own cultural roots of generosity, community care, and giving back. We've lost the relationships and connections with one another.

There are many reasons so many Americans are [lonely and literally dying deaths of despair](#), among them the loss of civic spaces, civic clubs, decreasing participation in

faith and other fraternal/sororal communities, and, I would add, our country's relentless worshipping of individualism.

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Big Philanthropy isn't exactly Ebenezer Scrooge, the protagonist of Charles Dickens's novella *A Christmas Carol*, but he, too, can set himself apart on purpose. In one of the all-time great descriptions of an unhappy, lonely, old miser, Scrooge is described as "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and

sharp as flint ... secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.” Scrooge hates Christmas (a wasteful holiday for spendthrifts), but one fateful Christmas Eve, he is visited by the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future and is reborn as a charitable, generous, happier, more socially connected man.

Robert Putnam, Harvard political scientist and author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, [has been writing for decades](#) about the rise of social isolation and how bad it is for all of us. Since the 1970s, there’s been a precipitous decline in community groups like the Elks, Rotary, Masons, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, parent-teacher associations, local chapters of political parties, religious institutions, softball teams, union locals, town bands — plus people vote less, host fewer dinner parties, and are more likely to have unlisted phone numbers.

Churches, social clubs, men’s clubs, women’s associations, bridge clubs, and bowling leagues have all dipped in membership and participation. Traditional community groups and organizations have all but faded. We have Instagram and social media, and many of us live in densely populated cities in densely populated neighborhoods and high-rises, yet we feel and are more alone than ever.



KATE RUSSELL

Hali Lee

Humans are an intensely social species, yet we've lost the social thread. And this isolation takes a toll. [Loneliness is as deadly as smoking 15 cigarettes a day](#) and more lethal than drinking six alcoholic drinks a day.

Belonging is the antidote to loneliness, and [giving circles](#) — doing good in a group — are a great way to build belonging, engagement, and community. They add purpose, doing good together, and money to other groups that you might already belong to.

In fact, many giving circles start with groups that already exist, like a book group; adult soccer team; choir or knitting circle; mutual aid group; parenting, meditation, or dinner group; poker or mah-jongg or movie-night group. They naturally exist in their ecosystems, unlike the consultants of [Big Philanthropy who swooped into Newark in the 2010s to “save” the public school system](#). Or the team of brilliant technocrats who come in with solutions baked in some faraway oven with no local ingredients. It's hard (not impossible, but hard) to build belonging when you have little in common with the people you're swooping in on.

Though these social groups might naturally exist, there is something very potent about adding conversations about shared values and money into the mix. These added elements deepen the pre-existing relationships, adding in difficult conversations and vulnerabilities. Over time, the bonds strengthen into a committed collective.

Giving circles are not the only way to build belonging, but they're a really good way, and something any of us can do. You don't need to be wealthy to practice generosity (and build community) in this manner. Giving circles bring philanthropic practitioners closer to their communities and the people who inhabit them. Giving circles encourage the type of connection and closeness that Big Phil seems to try to keep at a remove. And giving circles can help knit us back together again.

'Solidarity, Not Charity'

Finding new ways to be in community is not always easy, but it's important to be open to chance everyday interactions, to be present, to try to show up for each other, to value the cultural aspects of charitable work, and to dig for and appreciate the connections between philanthropic practice and our cultures and heritages. And from here, it's a small step to turn that community into a force for good. Mutual aid groups and giving circles add intentionality to these spaces through action.

Mutual aid groups are neighbors helping neighbors. They're another way to form community, and we've always come together in this way. Emphasizing a focus on "solidarity, not charity," mutual aid centers cooperation because, as [Mariame Kaba](#), an educator, activist, and organizer writes, "we recognize that our well-being, health, and dignity are all bound up in each other." Mutual aid groups tend to be quick, responsive, and flexible, finding and providing what people need rather than giving what donors want to give.

[There is a rich history of mutual aid groups in America](#), especially among people of color, queer, and immigrant communities. The [Free African Society](#) was started in 1787 in Philadelphia by two ministers, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. It was one of the first Black mutual aid societies in America, and it organized its members to offer relief to the sick, shelter orphans, and transport and bury the dead. Black mutual aid societies grew rapidly in the early 1800s. By 1830, there were 100 mutual aid societies in Philadelphia, 30 in Baltimore, and many more up and down the country from Boston to New Orleans.

David Ruggles, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, organized the [New York Committee of Vigilance](#) in 1835. He called it "practical abolition" to confront slave catchers, advocate for Black people in court, and generally provide assistance, succor, relief, advice, education, food, and housing for Black people, including, famously, Frederick Douglass. Vigilance committees sprang up in cities like Cleveland, Albany, Detroit, and Philadelphia, funded primarily by Black women who ran bake sales, sold

crafts, and pooled money. By the turn of the century, 15 percent of Black men and 52 percent of Black women in New York City belonged to a mutual aid society.

In the 1900s, immigrant groups across the country found protection, power, and solidarity by sticking together. They helped each other fight racism and nativism, find shelter, jobs, legal defense, personal loans, medical care, insurance, English-language classes, and even family and other connections. They also held social events to foster the community. Some of these included the [Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Society](#) in San Francisco, [Landsmanshaftn for Jewish immigrants](#) in New York City, and [Sociedades Mutualistas](#) for Mexican immigrants to the Southwest.

Famously, the Black Panthers started the [Free Breakfast for Children Program](#) in Oakland, Calif., in 1969. They created dozens of “survival” programs like free ambulance services, rides for elderly people to do errands, and community health clinics. The free breakfast program — cooking and serving breakfasts for local children in Oakland because of the overwhelming evidence that a healthy breakfast is beneficial for health and learning — is one of the most famous examples of mutual aid in modern times. The Black Panthers solicited donations from local restaurants and neighbors, and the program quickly expanded to 45 cities around the country, feeding 50,000 kids. The FBI shut it down by raiding cafeterias and, in one notorious incident, peeing on food to destroy it, but soon afterward started a federal free breakfast program. The Black Panthers Free Breakfast for Children Program remains the gold standard example of grassroots community organizing.

**HOW GIVING CIRCLES
UNLOCK GENEROSITY, STRENGTHEN
COMMUNITY, AND MAKE CHANGE**

**The Big
We**

HALILEE

“The Big We” by Hali Lee

In New York City’s East Harlem and Lower East Side neighborhoods, the [Young Lords](#), a group of young Puerto Rican activists, organized a Garbage Offensive in 1969. They’d been spearheading garbage cleanups every Sunday because the sanitation department neglected their neighborhoods to such a degree that they were overflowing with trash. Neighbors came out to help.

One day, angry that the city wouldn’t provide more brooms, they pushed the garbage into the middle of the street and set it ablaze. That got some attention from the media, and the city was forced to clean it up. The Young Lords’ other mutual aid efforts included free day care and breakfast programs, door-to-door TB testing, and, in one case, taking over a mobile-TB X-ray truck that was skipping their neighborhoods.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as more and more gay men began dying of AIDS, often stigmatized and alone, Tim Burak, a volunteer at a Seattle health clinic, proposed a “buddy network” where people could volunteer to help grocery-shop, do chores, drive, and provide home companionship for ill people. This turned into the [Chicken Soup Brigade](#), an all-volunteer group that grew to support over 450 men.

Mutual aid groups often bring all the T’s into their work: time, talent, treasure, testimony, and ties. My wonderful agent, Maggie, is in one in her neighborhood near Boston. What might it look like to step into this rich history of mutual aid societies, in your building, block, or neighborhood?

Relationships at the Core

Giving circles, like religious communities and mutual aid groups, not only allow us to come together to do good but also act as a form of support in tough times, strengthening our ties to our community and to each other.

During the height of the Covid pandemic, many of us experienced loneliness of a whole other tenor and magnitude. There was also a surge of anti-Asian hate crimes in New York City. One of my [Asian Women Giving Circle](#) (AWGC) sisters was spat on, another was pushed onto a sidewalk, I was shoulder-shoved at a Trader Joe's. We all experienced the stares, the "get out" and "go home" looks and words, the "you don't belong here" sentiments. Our friend, renowned activist and photographer Corky Lee, had died of Covid. It was a dark time for many of us.

When the [Atlanta spa shootings](#) happened on March 16, 2021, the AWGC became something more for many of us. The police captain in Atlanta described the killer as having had "a really bad day." The entitlement was breathtaking. So was the patriarchal attempt to minimize the brutal murders. The murders of Asian American women spa workers was the perfect storm, the toxic collision of racism, misogyny, hate toward immigrants, social class, economic decisions, the sexual fetishizing of Asian women — all of it. We sisters of the AWGC, we got it.



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One of my AWGC sisters, Lu, remembered that time with me recently. She said, “I don’t know where I’d be if I didn’t have the giving circle. We could share honestly how afraid we were. How sad we were, especially amid the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and the reckoning of race, class, ethnicity. For me as an Asian, I had to step back and decenter myself. Others were more in need and were being marginalized like crazy. Then anti-Asian hate started happening more. In some progressive spaces, it can feel weird to center myself. The only place that felt right and welcoming, a first step to voice my own experience, was the Asian Women Giving

Circle. I cried on our Zoom call. I rarely cry. It started a thawing, a softening, the beginning of not being so afraid.”

The giving circle has become a place where Lu and all of us can practice being more free, more authentic because, as she said, “You all were modeling what it means to be in community, to show you’re in pain. I needed to see my own people do that, even cry. Especially older yous. There’s this notion of permission. I needed to see other members do it. I saw you talk about it and cry. I saw Melinda scream about it. I saw Nam with tears in her eyes. The social cues we seek out, as younger Asian people; we seek permission to do certain things. We assume you can’t do things, like in our households, that’s how we were raised. Oh, you can cry about this? We can show emotions. We can say the Atlanta shootings were wrong, racialized, gendered, xenophobic. All the intersections. Now I know how my identity feeds into my work, my purpose in philanthropy, my social justice work. Just by seeing you do it, I feel like I can do that, too. Let me try that here where it’s safe. Practice. Now I can try at work, with my friends.”

The beating heart of the Asian Women Giving Circle is the relationships we are building with one another. The beating heart of community activism is the relationships between and among the community members who are working together to improve their neighborhoods. The beating heart of doing philanthropy well is tending to the community and the relationships therein. Community can become giving circles, and giving circles can become community. Both have to do with building belonging.

Excerpted from “The Big We: How Giving Circles Unlock Generosity, Strengthen Community, and Make Change,” by Hali Lee. © 2025 by Hali Lee. Used with permission of the publisher, Sweet July Books, an imprint of Zando LLC.

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THE COMMONS

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Philanthropist Hali Lee is a co-founder of the Donors of Color Network, the first national network of wealthy people of color, and Philanthropy Together, a national collective-giving support organization. She also leads Radiant, a small philanthropy consulting practice.

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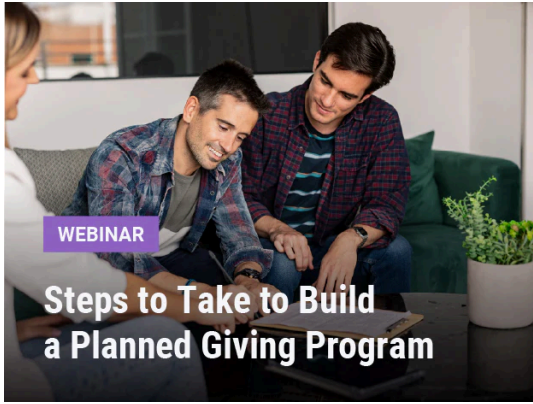
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