CORPORATE GIVING

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This morning, as I have once a year for the past six years, I got up earlier than usual to go to a 7:30 AM fundraising breakfast for Bright Futures. I parked in a downtown garage, and emerged from my car to the echoing click of sensible but stylish high heeled shoes and a parade of women in tailored suits and pearls filing into the Westin. Last year it was the Sheraton, the year before that the Marriott. Bright Futures is moving up in the world.

I was there as a guest of my boss. She is the CEO of my company and a member of this worthy organization's Board of Directors. She is smart, passionate, and absolutely driven, approaching philanthropic fundraising as relentlessly and with as much personal investment as she brings to driving us towards our bookings, targets and revenue projections. And over the years, she has given me entrée into a sub-culture of high powered business women that I'd never previously been aware of. When I was young, I believed that feminism and capitalism were fundamentally irreconcilable. I thought that if you were serious about equality and humanism, about making the world one big nurturing and democratic home, you couldn't care about making money and would abhor the idea of being 'The Man.'

Clearly, I was mistaken.

As I stood in line to register, I looked at the tags pressed on the silk and wool and cashmere-clad chests of the women around me. The individuals' names meant nothing to me – it was the company identifiers in equally large font that marked this crowd. State Street Bank, Choat and Hall, Hale and Dorr, Fidelity Investments, Talbots, Crabtree and Evelyn, Digitas – every major financial institution, corporate law firm, advertising or marketing agency, and retailer catering to women was represented there. And the representatives were a tastefully presented bunch. Their make-up was subtle, the manicures pearly and not brash. While I saw the usual share of bouncy, unnaturally luminous hair that can only be acquired through the skillful combination of high end products, I also saw many women with hair that was unapologetically gray and coarse, women who I could imagine getting into jeans or sweatpants and shapeless jersey tops when they get home. And recognizing the inner slob in at least some of these Directors and Vice Presidents and Senior Vice Presidents of Human Resources and Marketing and Strategic Consulting, helped me relax a little at this event that I'd come to dread.

Last night I'd tried to beg out of it, telling my boss in an email that while I certainly would make my customary donation, I had "too much on my plate" to go to the breakfast. (While not my usual language, I felt that the plate metaphor – besides working well with "breakfast" -- sounded more managerial than the more direct statement that I had too much work to do.)

Her answer was swift and angry. “You’re the third person to bail out in the last twenty-four hours. I understand that you’re busy, but you’ve known about this event for months, and having three empty seats at a table I’m captaining doesn’t reflect well on anyone.”

I quickly relented.

Inside the ballroom, PowerPoint presentations on two enormous screens on either side of the dais displayed rotating images of black and brown and white children – on playgrounds, at story time, drinking milk, clutching a jump rope in their mittened hands as they were herded down the sidewalk. They were uniformly adorable with their gap-toothed grins, wide eyes and puffed out chests as they prepared to blow out candles, hurtle down a slide, or climb to the top of a snow bank.

I found my company table just as the lights dimmed. I removed the Breakfast brochure and goodie bag chock full of chotchkies from various corporate sponsors from my plate and sat down as the hall filled with the amplified sound of pre-school aged children singing “The Wheels on the Bus.” And this morning, as they did every year, these small but boisterous voices with their infantile R’s and active hands driving the bus as its wheels went “wound and wound,” instantly caused me to well up with barely contained tears. Something about their fierce pleasure in singing, their obliviousness in that moment to the fact that they were kids, that they were homeless, that their bold and happy voices were being broadcast to a ballroom of the penitent privileged, broke my heart this year as it did every year.

“They’re just so adorable,” murmured our corporate attorney to my right.

On my left, our Public Relations Director nodded her head emphatically. “My kids loved that song!”

Denise Jackson, a former celebrity city councilwoman and now an ordained minister, bounced onto the stage as the children’s voices receded to welcome us.

“You’re here because you know that goodness is manifested in your deeds,” she said, allowing just a hint of black preacher cadence into her speech. “You’re here because you know that your caring, your action, your generosity make a substantial difference in the lives of those less fortunate.” She paused for the silent *Yeah* that this crowd might have felt but wasn’t schooled in uttering. “You’re here because words alone, mere expressions of concern are not enough. You’re here to make a difference, and just by being here, just by buying your seat at the table – a table with a lovely centerpiece generously donated by Crabtree and Evelyn – and I just learned that their name is pronounced ‘Eeevelyn’ -- you’ve already made a difference. So please, before we turn our attention to this morning’s speakers, give yourselves a hand.”

As warm and genuine as the Reverend Denise seemed to be, my applause was limp and brief. I felt embarrassed by this request.

Next came what I thought of as the Corporate Visibility portion of the program. The two chairwomen of this year's event – a role that seemed to be filled by a rotating duo from the organization's Board of Directors – talked about the scope of the problem we were here to address.

"In our state alone, at any given moment in time, one in 24 children is homeless. Over the course of a year, it's estimated that there are 84,000 homeless children," announced an auburn-haired Fund Manager. "We at Merrill-Lynch are determined to do our part in addressing this shameful problem and giving every resident of the Commonwealth a home they can call their own."

Her co-presenter, a graying lawyer who mentioned the name of her firm so swiftly and automatically that I couldn't make it out, took over to tell us about the worthy work of the organization we were here to support.

"Tonight over 1,200 families will be staying in publicly funded family shelter. Compared with low-income housed children, homeless children experience more health problems, developmental delays, increased anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, and lower educational achievement."

Her delivery was matter-of-fact, but with a hint of the indignation to come. She must do litigation, I thought. "Bright Futures helps these children learn how to play, to share, to read, and to enjoy exploring their worlds. They help parents learn how to be nurturing and involved in the growth and development of their children, and help them learn and grow through job training, GED and college courses."

The facts were appalling; the worthiness of the organization undeniable. But as always, my outrage was undercut by the sight of the enormous, goofy-looking corsages worn by the speakers and all of the Board members, as if we were at prom and this year's theme was *Homelessness*!

Even the organization's Executive Director – a committed, unpretentious, and hard working woman whose daughter had gone to school with mine – looked faintly ridiculous with the giant carnations engulfing her collar bone and encroaching on her pale neck.

I picked at my breakfast as she came to the dais. Cross-sections of kiwi and starfruit dotted with blackberries formed a happy face emoticon in one quadrant of the plate. The home fries were tepid, the frittata was cold, but the presentation was lovely.

As she wrapped up her thank-you's and acknowledgments ("We welcome State Legislator Maureen Williamson and First Lady Diane Wheeler, and we want to particularly acknowledge the generous contributions of …"), the wait staff-- a black-and-white uniformed army of largely Brazilian and Philippino men and women – fanned out and cleared the tables.

Denise stepped back up to the microphone. "I'd like to introduce you to one of the hundreds of mothers who has been helped by Bright Futures in the past year. Please give a warm welcome to Lucelia."

We clapped vigorously as a young Hispanic woman in a tailored navy pin-striped dress walked out of the wings. Denise put her arm around her, whispered something in her ear, then gently ushered her closer to the microphone and walked off stage. The applause tapered off and we waited for Lucelia to speak.

She cleared her throat. “Excuse me, I’m very nervous,” she began, then stopped.

“Take your time,” I heard Denise urge her from the wings.

“Let me try again,” she forced out in a quivering voice, then again fell silent, her fingers audibly clawing at the index cards she held in front of her. Her face, projected to the thousand-person audience on two 5’ x 7’ screens on either side of the stage, was damp, and her eyes were welling up with tears.

“You’re among friends,” someone yelled from the audience.

Lucelia looked down at her notes “I’m glad … I’m very glad …” She stopped again. Denise began walking out towards her, but stopped when Lucelia turned, held up her palm, nodded to herself, took a deep breath, and began again.

“I’m glad to be here,” she declared, and we all smiled and clapped encouragingly. Lucelia smiled with relief, and her enormous, pixelated brown eyes beamed out over the crowd.

“I’m no good at public speaking, so I never thought I’d be talking to a big room full of people,” she continued. Her voice was low and breathless. “But then I never dreamed I’d be homeless either. Three years ago, I was just like you. I had a job in the Medical Records department at St. EDeniseabeth’s Hospital. I lived with my husband who worked at a garage, and we had an apartment where my little boy Raffie had his own room.”

Just like you. I knew that the children of at least two women at this table had their own cars, and bedrooms that were probably the size of Lucelia’s entire apartment. And yet I believed that Lucelia believed her own words. She was, after all, a working woman with a home, just like all of us.

“But then my husband started to drink. A lot. He began to miss work so much that he lost his job, and then he drank even more. It was impossible to pay for our apartment on just my salary, and it wasn’t good for Raffie to see his father like this. So I took Raffie and we moved in with my mother-in-law – just me and Raffie, though my husband, we said he could visit now and then until he got himself together.”

Many of us nodded. This was a good plan, a sound course of action.

“But my mother-in-law’s place, it was even smaller than ours. And then her daughter needed to move in with her baby, and my mother-in-law, she’s a nice lady, but she told us we had to go. So I looked and looked for a place to move into, but you know, the rents in Boston are really high.”

Now the nods were emphatic. While the appreciation in property values was certainly nice for homeowners who'd gotten in early, the housing prices really were egregious.

"So finally I found a place in Everett for Raffie and me, but that didn't work out so well. By the time I'd drop him off at daycare and get to St. E's on a bus and the subway, I'd missed over an hour of work, which my boss wasn't too happy about, and between the cost of the babysitter and the T-pass and the bus fare, it didn't pay me to work."

"Here it comes," murmured someone at the table next to me, "the 'Why I'm on Welfare' story."

"But I wanted to work. I like to work. I just couldn't make ends meet without either living closer to my job or making more money. But I couldn't find no place, and even babysitting in town is crazy high. So then my boss said either you got to be here for your full shift or I'm sorry but I've got to find someone else, and I understood, I really did. So then I didn't know what to do – I was about to quit – but then I thought I'll live in the shelter if I have to. So we did. Me and Raffie, we moved to the shelter."

Her voice dropped, her pace slowed. "And that was tough. I mean the people that run it were nice enough. They tried. But you know, you had to watch your stuff all the time, and Raffie and me were in one little room and I still had to take him on the bus to my mother-in-law to babysit so I was late for work anyhow, and it wasn't going so good."

She paused and looked up, finally in her groove, and got to the punch line. "Bright Futures changed everything for me. With Raffie at the Play Center I could get to work on time. And he did great, you know? He …" she paused, looked down at her notes, then looked up and said with great pride, as if mastering a foreign language, "He flourished there. He'd come home – well not home, because we was still in the shelter so it wasn't home – and be singing songs and recognizing his letters and stuff that he didn't do before. Every day watching him was something new. It was like a little treat for me every night."

"My treat's a glass of red wine," someone at my table said. "Hers is better."

"With Raffie taken care of, after a few months I was able to transfer to another, better paying job at St. E's, and now I'm training to be an ultrasound technician."

A few people clapped in acknowledgment of Lucelia's career advancement.

"And best of all, me and another mother I met at the shelter – her little girl Lena is in daycare with Raffie – we was able to find an apartment in Dorchester that we could afford, right near the T – so we have a home again. Our own home. Thanks to all of you."

This was our cue. We stood, not a dry eye in the house, and clapped wildly as the Executive Director walked back on stage holding the hand of a skipping, waving, unawed little boy who briefly flirted with the massive audience, then charged into his mother's thigh, where he buried his head, then comically wagged his rear-end.

After Lucelia bestowed us with a radiant and relieved smile and picked up her son, after she was awarded a bouquet of flowers and embraced by the line of speakers who preceded her, Denise returned to the stage. She introduced a Human Relations manager from a downtown bank, "one of the hundreds of Play Center volunteers, people just like you who carve a couple of hours out of their busy week to spend time playing and reading to delightful children like Raffie."

Ah, someone else like me. Who knew I was so common, and in such a rarefied atmosphere?

"And confidentially," she said, leaning forward and drawing us all in to her conspiratorial secret, "many of them say these are the *best* couple of hours of their week."

Indeed, the grey-suited woman in her early thirties who took over the podium could barely contain herself as she talked about how rewarding it was to spend time with these children, to play a small but important part in their lives, to be greeted, as she was after missing a week due to illness, with cries of "where *were* you" from one especially affectionate toddler.

"For the first time in my life, I feel really needed," she said softly in closing. Sadly, I believed her.

Denise returned. "Now I know that you've got appointments and phone calls and meetings to make. But before we wrap up …" She held up her hand like a crossing guard, "… first I've got to ask you to take a look at the gorgeous, fragrant Crabtree and Eeeeeeevelyn centerpiece in the middle of your table and remember why we're here this morning. We are here to help this worthy organization with the gifts of our time and our influence and our lobbying and our dollars. Under that gorgeous centerpiece is a stack of pre-printed envelopes that make it easy for you to sign up to help in any and all of these ways. Table captains, will you please distribute the envelopes?"

Our table captain, my boss, was somewhere in the wings. We looked at one another in amused helplessness. Then I shrugged, took the stack of envelopes, and passed it around the table.

"Now I know that you've paid handsomely for the pleasure of being at this breakfast," Denise continued. "But I'm asking those of you who can to take out your checkbooks, to take out your credit cards, and give a little more. I'm not saying give 'till it hurts, because this kind of giving never hurts. It heals. It's good for the soul. So just do what you can – sign up as a volunteer, donate money, commit to bringing ten more people next year – and hand the envelopes back to

your table captain. Then, Table Captains, please blindly draw one of the envelopes from the pile, and the lucky winner will get to leave with the Crabtree and Evelyn goodie basket. Now I ask you: Does it get better than that?"

I hoped so.

Still, it was with a feeling approximating relief that I pulled out my credit card. I knew I'd love to volunteer at a Play Center, but later, when I was no longer working 50 hours a week. I knew I wouldn't bring ten people next year either, wouldn't ask them to do what I'd done so grudgingly this morning despite the importance of it. But giving money – I'd gotten good at that, gotten better each year in inverse proportion to my appetite for doing anything more direct or personally taxing. As my income had risen, my political and philanthropic energy had waned, only occasionally flaring from its chronic brown out, the surges mostly manifested through manic binges of check writing. I did it with the ease and privilege and impersonality of only those who could say to themselves, *It's only money.*

So when Denise once again incited us to give ourselves a round of applause for being so caring and committed, I felt sick. The rich frittata settled heavily in my stomach.

Then, of course, I won the centerpiece.

This perky basket of everything lavender – soaps, bath oils, fabric softeners, exfoliating cleansers – was now mine. Leaving it seemed rude; donating it to Bright Futures seemed somehow cruelly irrelevant.

"Does anyone else want this?" I asked lamely, but most of my tablemates were already picking up purses and preparing to bolt. I did the same, but paused out of courtesy to Denise, who was winding up to deliver a rousing finish.

"We thank you for being here today, for giving of yourself, and we hope we've inspired you to keep coming back, to keep lobbying and working and praying for the time when we no longer need to hold events like this one. But that's tomorrow. Today, right here, is a place where every moment counts."

I practically fled the ballroom amid the still hearty but distracted applause, lugging my purse, my coat, my goodie bag, and my ludicrous lavender basket down three escalators and one elevator to the sanctuary of my car. I wanted to be free from the fawning exhortations to feel good about myself when I so fundamentally did not. I wanted to be at work, where every moment was busy and none of them counted, but where at least this morning's form of self-aggrandizement had no time to flourish.

Back in my office, I finally looked in the goodie bag in quest of the tin box of mints that was so often included. I found an almost unbearably appropriate stress ball from Bank of America, a tightly packaged set of neon-colored post-its with the name of a law firm printed at the bottom of each, a handy USB stick from Coopers and Lybrand PLC, a business card case from a Human Resources

consulting firm, a ballpoint pen from Fidelity that had pleasing heft, and a spa-branded pedometer to show me how far and fast I'd walked away.