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W
William Gaines Ellyson
a professional corporation

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F
The Virginia Building / Suite 401
One North Fifth Street / Richmond, Virginia 23219
F
(804) 780-0880 telephone / (804) 282-6367 fax / WGE@EllysonLaw.com

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I taped the Charlie Rose show last week – the interview with Warren Buffet and Bill Gates - and watched it twice.

I have come to think that what Buffet has done, and what Gates has started, might be an important historical event for this country.

Gates, the ultimate monopolist, capitalist and market economist – the market takes care of itself; leave it alone and everything will work itself out by the laws of supply and demand – has seen another light, and that light has attracted Buffet, and may attract others... maybe the whole country. It has certainly gotten my attention.

Through travel, Gates said, he came to realize that the “market” does not touch those with no means to participate in it. This sounds simple, but it is not supposed to work this way. It is supposed to work this way: when there is a need, a demand, the market rushes in to supply this demand.

If really poor societies need food and have no money, we send them food – we are used to this and various familiar programs show happy children receiving the benefits of our pennies-per-day contributions - but what about disease? Gates discovered that there are third world diseases that persist only in the third world – resistant forms of killing dysentery, for example. Other situations - overwhelming waves of malaria, stagnant water, no mosquito nets – are largely overlooked on the grounds that the people have chosen to live in a hostile environment and, if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.

Gates’ breakthrough – his epiphany – was to realize that the drug companies, the engines behind most research and development in drugs, don’t spend a lot of time and money on research for diseases that affect people who cannot pay for the drugs. The market economy affects only those who have the money to participate, and leaves out a vast number of disadvantaged populations.

Gates’ foundation’s principal is “all lives are equal” and he and his wife and now Buffet are setting out to do research and development for the disadvantaged, the lives that were born in the wrong place.

These are the two richest people on Earth, both fiercely capitalistic, market driven – Gates’ Microsoft has even been found to be a monopoly, an “evil capitalist plot” – yet here they are putting the vast majority of their assets in play for those who can do them no good on the theory that all lives are equal.

Buffet is exceptional in that he is putting his life’s work into the Gates’ foundation pot without a “naming event” – it will not be named the Gates-Buffet Foundation, for example. When Charlie Rose asked Buffet if he didn’t want libraries named after him as Carnegie did, Buffet said, no, he preferred “public library.”

It seems to me that his implications this event go beyond mere generosity – *empathy* is putting yourself in the shoes of others, a much wider concept than generosity.

The Greek word for this empathy is “*caritas*” which does not mean “charity.”