



MILKEN INSTITUTE

# The Power of Ideas

2017

Insights for Building  
Meaningful Lives

## Sheryl WuDunn

Executive, Writer, Lecturer,  
and Pulitzer Prize Winner

&

## Nicholas Kristof

Columnist and Pulitzer Prize Winner  
*The New York Times*



# A Path for Hopefulness: Empowering Others, and Empowering Yourself

Humans have a yearning to express our humanity by finding innovative and effective ways to give back. We crave meaning and purpose in life, and one way to find it is to connect to a cause larger than ourselves. The challenge at hand is to truly nurture a culture of altruism and empathy, seeking to imbue an instinct for social engagement. That is to say, it's not you or me, but we.

That is already beginning to happen, and the progress in expanding empathy over the past 250 years is stunning. The first large social movement on behalf of others—rather than demanding more for oneself—was the British antislavery movement that began in the 1780s, and the first international relief effort in response to global poverty came during the Irish potato famine of the 1840s.

Today, almost any university bulletin board will have a poster appealing on behalf of some faraway group, but in historical terms that is a recent phenomenon.

Talk about helping others can easily sink into soggy sentimentality, even sanctimony. But the most important counterpoint is that reaching out to try to help, especially when we do it as a social activity, isn't a Gandhi-style sacrifice. It's a source of fulfillment, even joy. Over the past couple of decades, a growing stack of evidence has shown that social behavior—including helping others—improves our mental and physical health and extends life expectancy. One study on mortality following 7,000 people found that the risk of death among men and women with the fewest social ties was more than twice as high as the risk for adults with the most social ties, independent of physical health. Maybe this deep-rooted social element in all of us explains our yearning for a life of meaning. We wonder about our purpose; we care about our legacy.

So think of giving back not as a dreary means to a tax deduction but as a chance to inject meaning, wonder, and fun into life. Social

## Sheryl WuDunn & Nicholas Kristof

organizations have emerged to help others through hosting dinners (Dining for Women) or partying at a bar (Beers for Books). There are countless other initiatives, for elementary school children, grandmothers, and everyone in between.

A generation ago, we didn't have much more than hunches to guide us in trying to make a difference and build a life of greater meaning and satisfaction. "Giving back" was then what we did in December, hunched over a checkbook and relying on our guesswork. In recent years, advances in neuroscience and economics—and a flowering of carefully monitored experiments—have given us much greater insight into what works to create opportunity worldwide, and much greater prospects for personal satisfaction from giving. A path is now appearing to show us how to have a positive impact on the world around us. This is a path of hopefulness, but also a path of fulfillment: typically, we start off by trying to empower others and end up empowering ourselves, too.

**“So think of giving back not as a dreary means to a tax deduction but as a chance to inject meaning, wonder, and fun into life.”**

*From the book:  
A PATH APPEARS by  
Nicholas D. Kristof  
and Sheryl WuDunn  
Copyright (c) 2014 by Nicholas  
D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn  
Used by arrangement with  
Vintage Books, an imprint of  
The Knopf Doubleday  
Publishing Group, a division of  
Penguin Random House LLC.  
All rights reserved.*

