THE NEW PHILANTHROPISTS
The New Generosity
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Fred Matser

Fred Matser was thirty-seven when his life changed. The son of a businessman, and by that time a successful one himself, he was also a humanitarian at heart who yearned for wider horizons and the chance to serve humanity more directly. Triggered into action by his experiences at a Young Presidents' Organization conference, he moved with his family to Switzerland to fulfil a boyhood dream of working for the Red Cross, where he held the voluntary position of executive chairman of the Child Alive programme for three years. 'I had no need of money,' he says. 'I just wanted to help and empower others.' Since then he has founded or co-founded over fifteen foundations spanning
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Fred was the third child in a family of five, although, sadly, two of the brothers died. His father was an entrepreneur, a self-made and self-taught man who started the first independent property development business in the Netherlands. He was, says Fred, ‘a really great man’, a man of vision, highly intelligent and courageous who loved his work and was very altruistic, but who lived in the same modest house all his life. The family routine, as Fred recalls it, was simple, almost austere – eggs only on Sunday, just one slice of cheese on their bread, with the boys using the girls’ bathwater to bath in. Not a bad preparation for life, he now thinks. Indeed, he has clearly inherited many of his father’s attitudes and aptitudes, managing to be a successful businessman as well as an adventurous and visionary social entrepreneur, while still maintaining a fairly modest profile and way of life.

When Fred was nineteen his father, who was suffering badly from diabetes and Parkinson’s Disease, told his son that he would like him to be the one who took over the business. ‘I was flabbergasted,’ says Fred, ‘I was not the businessman. That was my younger brother, Paul. I wanted to study. I reluctantly agreed, however, on condition that after a year I could move out if I wanted to.’ But after the year was up he was too involved to be able to leave. At twenty-three he became secretary to the board, joined it at twenty-five and two years later, became chairman. His father died five years later. By then the business
had expanded to employ nearly 200 people, including staff in its subsidiary companies, developing and running shopping centres, housing estates, an insurance business and infrastructural works. By then, too, Fred had married and fathered three children, and was proud of running a profitable business with integrity and honesty, something not too common, he says, among his competitors at the time.

In 1980 came that fateful YPO conference where he saw Yuri Geller bend spoons and make broken clocks start ticking, ‘even the key to my front door was bent so that I could not use it any more,’ and where he met a psychic called Greta Woodrow who startled him by revealing things about him and his past that no one could have known. It was Fred’s first taste of the paranormal, of the world beyond our senses. ‘Am I in control of my own life?’ he began to wonder, ‘or is there something else that I don’t understand?’ Greta had warned him and many others that the world was facing a cataclysm and that he should consider moving to a faraway place like Australia or to a mountainous land. He was ready to move on anyway, but the fear of a cataclysm precipitated his move. After looking at Australia he chose Switzerland and the Red Cross.

Five million children under five die every year of dehydration caused by diarrhoea, he learnt, when he was asked to chair the Child Alive programme that the Red Cross was about to establish to tackle the problem. A very simple mixture of salt, sugar and water that can be administered by any member of the family will, in 90 per cent of cases, keep the sufferer alive. He and his team were asked to launch a worldwide rehydration programme using this formula. So often, he observes, business ignores the simple and the natural because the complicated solution will be more profitable. Launched on his new career, Fred found a successor to run the real estate business in Holland, going back just once a month to check on progress.

It was at this time that he began to have several of what might best be called out-of-body experiences and began to develop his philosophy of life and well-being. The finite world of time and space, he believes, is the expression of the infinite. The infinite is to do with our being rather than our doing. In his own life he has tried to combine the two and the chief purpose of his philanthropic endeavours is to give people more control over their health and personal development. Philanthropy that aims to solve people’s problems for them breeds dependency, he feels, and is not sustainable in the long run. Lasting improvement, he believes, only happens when individuals take a personal stake in the outcome and take on what he calls their own responsibility.

Some clues as to what drives him can be found in his still life. The stone, a crystal, symbolizes his connection to the infinite, to what lies beyond and above the material world. He uses the crystal in his regular meditations. The carving of two hands is a gift from his friend Jerry Jampolsky, who gave it to Fred when he returned from Israel, where he had been trying to work for peace. Fred keeps it in his bedroom. ‘I lie in bed and see the light shining through it. It symbolizes the male and the female, but also God and prayer, and it reminds me of my old friend and his lifelong work. It stands for friendship and peace.’

What about the hand-dynamo torch? ‘It comes from the war, when we weren’t allowed to have lights. So it reminds me of simple times and difficult times. It is also one of the wonders of a mechanical system. It is seventy years old but still works as long as you pump the handle. To get light you have to work it. To me it is like love; if it is to
last, you have to maintain it, to work at it. Love is something dynamic.'

The shoe has significance for Fred on several levels. First of all, it is the connection with his children. He had their little shoes silvered – a Dutch tradition. Secondly, it is his connection with the earth. To him it is astonishing that a man’s feet can carry all his body, thanks to the power of gravity. We take it for granted but it is a constant reminder that there are forces more powerful and more permanent than human life. The wedding ring is for love and for Chris, his second wife, whom he married in 2000 and who, he says, is his true love. Finally, the flower, a hyacinth, he chose for its smell more than its looks. ‘My mother always gave me a hyacinth on my birthday, so the flower brings back memories, happy memories.’

In 1978 Fred set up a small office for asset management, mostly for himself and part of his family, but also for a few outsiders. It employs six people and Fred himself gives at most half a day a week to it. The rest of his time and a great deal of his money is devoted to empowering people through his foundations. ‘Our experience is that small projects that work directly with the people on the ground who can take responsibility are more effective than giving the money to large organizations with many layers.’

This principle has guided the strategy for his philanthropy through his many different foundations and projects. Harmony and balance, he says, according to the dynamic, cyclical laws of nature, are the keys to all his work. We have to live in harmony with our fellow men and with nature, he believes, but the first essential must be to live in harmony with oneself and, therefore, to have ‘responsibility’ for one’s own actions and development.

One example is the CIE Fund, which he set up in 1996 to stimulate self-reliance and to support individuals and groups in their efforts to initiate significant life changes. The fund seeks to kindle fires, to provide co-funding that will support people who have inspiring project ideas as well as the necessary skills to implement them.

In 1989, as one of his early initiatives, he set up an integral healthcare centre in Hilversum, in the Netherlands, in a building that was renovated according to the principles of organic architecture. Its treatments include complementary medicines and the paranormal alongside traditional doctors. It operates on the principle that the patient should be in charge of their own healing, with the professionals acting as advisors.

The Anders Beleven Foundation, or ‘Experience Differently’, was established by Fred and three other partners to organize festive programmes for hospitals and nursing homes. The programmes aim to promote health instead of focusing on disease. They concentrate on the immune system of a person in the belief that nature itself can be a healer. Artists, musicians, masseurs, storytellers and even clowns are brought in to stimulate the immune systems of the patients and to invigorate their sense of well-being. They work with the whole person, Fred emphasizes, instead of concentrating only on the sick parts. He tells the story of the old man who had been given up by the hospital staff as too withdrawn to be helped. One of the artists, a young woman who sings with a tape recorder pinned to her chest, asked the staff if she could sing to the man. They told her it would be useless but she could try. She sat beside him and started to sing – and the old man started to cry. She had released him from his prison. It is stories such as this that give Fred hope and fuel his generosity.
‘We have also set up programmes for elementary schoolchildren to re-establish trust in their feelings and intuition, taking them walking blindfolded in the woods, for example, so that they can learn to trust their intuition and sense of smell until they find, after a day, that they can walk in the forest without hitting a tree. They get very excited when this happens.’

A lot of his philanthropy is concentrated in the Netherlands, but Fred has always had an interest in the wider world. In 1994, during the war in Bosnia, the Winter Olympics in Norway reminded him that the Games had taken place in Sarajevo ten years earlier. Who, he wondered, was thinking about the people of that city in their war? ‘The idea came to me that I should gather together as many gold medal winners as possible and bring them to Sarajevo. After many negotiations with the United Nations and other bodies, I got a plane from the Dutch Ministry of Defence and flew in thirteen gold medal winners from all over the world. We made the statement that we had not forgotten the people of Sarajevo.’ Afterwards, lengthy discussions led eventually, in 2003, to the erection of a Peace Flame House in Tuzla, a lovely building, he says, based, once more, on organic architecture with a 100-capacity auditorium and rooms for therapy.

Then there was the joint project that he engineered with Mikhail Gorbachev. Hearing that the Russian government wanted help to build a transplant clinic for children and was appealing for half of the $2 million cost, he pledged half a million dollars from his own resources. Having met the former Soviet president at a breakfast function in New York and later, at Gorbachev’s invitation, in Moscow, Fred persuaded him to match it from his speaking tour earnings in the US.

Fred has gone on to invest in micro-credit systems in Uganda and the Philippines in conjunction with Muhammad Yunus and is, along with others, currently looking at Jeffrey Sachs’s Millennium Villages Project. As far as possible, he says, he tries to work with other partners because it brings forth more joy to do things together.

Fred is now sixty, but his energy seems undiminished after more than twenty years of seeking to inspire and empower others. Just as well, since the world is full of places and people who need his work.

Still Life

Crystal – the infinite
Two hands – peace, harmony between opposites
Torch – light and love
Shoe – the Earth and gravity
Ring – love and family
Hyacinth – early memories