

Giving Done Right, Season 6, Episode 1 - Jeff Atwood and Dr. Betsy Burton Are Giving Big and Fast

Jeff Atwood: The way you're directly affecting people's lives, giving them money and saying, "Hey, go live your best life. I'm not gonna tell you what to do 'cause how would I know your life better than you?" That is an immense amount of respect that people almost never get in this world.

Phil Buchanan: Welcome to Giving Done Right. I'm Phil Buchanan.

Over the years on this show, we've talked about giving with trust – whether to organizations or even directly to people in need. We have discussed MacKenzie Scott's massive, unrestricted gifts to organizations. And we have talked with leaders at organizations like GiveDirectly and UpTogether that make direct cash transfers to those in need.

Today, we will talk to *donors* who have been inspired by these arguments and who have prioritized giving with no strings attached to both organizations and individuals. Jeff Atwood and Dr. Betsy Burton have committed to give \$50 million, half their family wealth, over five years, with much of it going to their Rural Guaranteed Minimum Income initiative, and they're ahead of schedule. Motivated by their own stories, and frustrated by the deep income inequality in this country, Jeff and Betsy are moving money fast, citing Scott as an inspiration.

Jeff is the co-founder of both Stack Overflow and Discourse. Betsy is an accomplished scientist who's been inspired by the data on cash assistance to push back on stereotypes about who "deserves" help.

I have been fortunate to get to know them a little bit over the last year and have been inspired by their approach to giving, and by how they are living their lives in sharp and selfless contrast to so many in Silicon Valley who have made fortunes in technology.

Jeff and Betsy, welcome to the show.

Jeff Atwood: Well, thank you.

Betsy Burton: Thanks for having us.

Jeff Atwood: And I just wanna mention, Betsy shipped a cancer drug, the melanoma drug. And what was the other one Betsy?

Betsy Burton: The melanoma drug and one for a more benign tumor called TGCT.

Jeff Atwood: So I want on record that Betsy cures cancer, and I do nonsense on the internet. I want that in this podcast, please.

Phil Buchanan: Okay, that's good. It's now in the podcast, so that's good.

Jeff Atwood: Good, as it should be.

Phil Buchanan: I get the sense you didn't expect to have a ton of resources, right? That this was a surprise to you to find yourselves with more money than you could use to live for you and your family. Is that right? When did that realization set in, like, oh my gosh?

Betsy Burton: We'd kind of talked about, you know, well, eventually, you know, if Stack Overflow sold. You know, maybe we would have maybe, you know, X amount of money or something. But what we ended up getting was far beyond, I think, what we thought would be like the max. And so it came, and it was like, this is weird. Like, in a way, it still doesn't really even feel real to me. You know? It's just a number on a piece of paper. It's ... It doesn't totally feel real.

Phil Buchanan: Is it like a pure happy moment or also kind of a scary moment?

Jeff Atwood: It's both.

Betsy Burton: Mostly happy, but yeah, a little scary, too, 'cause it's a lot of responsibility.

Phil Buchanan: And were you kind of immediately, the two of you, on the same page that you wanted to give a lot of this away? Was that clear to you right from the jump?

Jeff Atwood: Well, let me take this one. Because of, you know, political stuff happening, I really was holding to see what's gonna happen. I just ... You can't predict too far in the future, but, you know, I think the purpose of money is to improve the world in some way. But I had to see what was gonna happen. And then once what happened happened, I felt fully unleashed.

Phil Buchanan: Are you saying you were waiting for the outcome of the most recent presidential election?

Jeff Atwood: Well, everything leading up to that too, just the changes. Like, what is happening here? And I just wanna leave this world better than I found it. It's pretty simple. I'm not trying to make anyone do anything. I just want, you know, to be better when I'm done than it was when we started. That's it. That's all I want. Not currently seeing that, Phil. So, working on it.

Phil Buchanan: No, it doesn't seem to be going in that direction, that's for sure. But you decided at some point, relatively recently, we're gonna give away basically half of our resources in five years.

Jeff Atwood: Yes, and I think the great thing about, I'm a blogger, if anyone even uses that word anymore, if anyone even writes paragraphs.

I know you do, Phil, but you're an outlier like me. The blog post *Stay Gold America* is the hardest piece of writing I have ever done, and it does outline a lot of the thinking that went into this. It was a whole family decision of like, what are we doing? Because it affects all of us.

Betsy Burton: In the *Stay Gold* blog post, you know, we outlined, was it nine nonprofits that we were gonna support with \$1 million donations, and then, you know, there was this commitment giving away half. And it was like, well, what do we wanna do? And in the writing of that blog post, a lot of things came up about wealth inequality and, like, all the different things happening in this country that make it harder for people to achieve the American dream. And so how do we address all of these different issues? There's so many different things. How do you have an impact? It basically just came down to give people money. You know, that seemed like the simplest, most straightforward way to make an impact, was literally just directly giving people money.

Phil Buchanan: And can you explain a little bit more about how are you doing that? Which organizations are you supporting that are then getting resources into the hands of people who need them?

Jeff Atwood: It was a two-phase process. The first was firefighting. You have major things going down, people in serious need. Fight the fires that you can fight. But at some point, you gotta do fire abatement. Why do we have so many fires? What are the conditions such that we're firefighting all the time? If you never stop firefighting, you'll never survive. So it became a two-part plan of, the first step was immediate \$1 million donations, and that was decided as we went. In fact, it was supposed to be seven, and then I added the eighth because every woman I talked to said, "Hey,

Planned Parenthood should be on this list." And I was like, "Yeah, you're right. It's now one more." So we tried to go for a bunch of groups that could all help move things forward in a sort of rapid way, like now. And not to be, you know, singling out any particular thing. It's, like, diverse bets on a lot of good things in the world. And Team Rubicon was a great one. They won the Nonprofit of the Year that year, and I gotta say, I, I felt like maybe I helped. Rubicon was number one in our list of such a great, clear good of veterans here in the US leading people, just helping people with natural disasters, with anything going on. And the rest were Children's Hunger Fund, I think we can all agree that children should have food, hopefully. PEN America, writing.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah.

Jeff Atwood: And later found out Joel Spolsky, my co-founder at Stack Overflow, had also donated to PEN America 'cause writing. You wanna change the world? Write. The Trevor Project, huge fan of that org, as is Mackenzie Scott. Some would say our favorite philanthropist, Mackenzie Scott, like, by a wide margin.

Phil Buchanan: This is how I found out about you because we had been doing this research on what happens to organizations that receive gifts from Mackenzie Scott. How do they use the money?

Jeff Atwood: And that report is great. Everyone listening read that report. It is outstanding.

Phil Buchanan: Thank you. So, you know, and it punctured a lot of myths that people have, and actually those myths are not dissimilar from the myths that people have about giving directly to people also. You know, they have the same sort of apprehension about, well, maybe they'll spend it unwisely. And, you know, what we saw was none of that, right? It's much more an exception.

Jeff Atwood: The data is very supportive of "this works." The only way it doesn't work is if you say, "My standard is it must work 100% of the time perfectly or else."

Phil Buchanan: Exactly.

Jeff Atwood: And I'm like, "Good luck with that."

Phil Buchanan: Right, and we're, we're really off on a, on a detour here.

Jeff Atwood: No, no, no. It's not a detour.

Phil Buchanan: But, like, one of the things that drives me crazy is when people extrapolate from one bad experience and make a rule that applies to the 99 out of 100 others who actually are acting responsibly. And I feel like this happens all the time in life and it certainly happens in philanthropy.

Jeff Atwood: I mean, let me just continue the list 'cause it was, it was just such a great collection of like-

Phil Buchanan: Yeah ...

Jeff Atwood: good things in the world. The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, that's specifically the legal arm, which was critical. And if you look at the history of civil rights, it was like, we need Black lawyers, and that's exactly what they did, and they did great things. But I'm a huge fan. Gary Whidbee of their org, and then Planned Parenthood, lovely org. Their leader, Alexis McGill Johnson, is outstanding. That's one of the few we met with, 'cause we would give, it was \$1 million each, and it was this weird dynamic where they come to us and go, "Okay, we have your million dollars. What are your demands?" And I'm like "None. No demands. Go kick butt." And, uh, the same call with Planned Parenthood, and I was like, "Okay, here's what I want you to do. Write an email to all the staff, and it says, 'This major donor wants you to go kick ass.' That's my only demand." And we also met with them because we were kinda starstruck, Betsy in particular with the org. That's it. She sent the mail press send, and that's, that's it. Go. So everybody got an email saying, "Go kick butt" from a major donor.

Phil Buchanan: I love it.

Betsy Burton: You know, 'cause there was a lot of back and forth about what organizations to include, and we weren't trying to be inherently sort of political about it. It was just things that mattered to us, you know? It wasn't a political statement. It was just, these are things that we value in the world, and these are people supporting that.

Jeff Atwood: And there's a lot of ways to do good. I left out First Generation Investors, another great org, 'cause I had a lemonade stand as a kid. I ran a college painting business. I always thought I was entrepreneurial if you...that's such a major word, but it's true. Like, it's fun to do business-y things. I like it. I think you can do capitalism without destroying the world, in fact, if you do it properly. Selling and buying things is fun.

Phil Buchanan: So these eight organizations received these gifts. They were in some cases it sounds like surprised to realize that there were no strings attached, that you just wanted them to...

Jeff Atwood: Every single one was surprised there were no strings attached. Apparently that's not the norm, but it should be.

Phil Buchanan: But talk a little bit now about the guaranteed basic income element, this giving that is focused on rural America in particular and people living in poverty. Can you describe how you got to that and what that looks like?

Jeff Atwood: As I said, you can't firefight all the time. You gotta ask yourself, "Why are there so many fires?"

Phil Buchanan: Right.

Jeff Atwood: And how can we fix this systemically? And just from a math perspective, I wanna be clear, the \$50 million was just for the second half. All the other stuff was on top.

Phil Buchanan: What do you mean when you say the \$50 million was just for the second half?

Jeff Atwood: That is literally just for the second half. All the other money was on top of. And we actually added up all the money we've done. I had to hide it 'cause I was told it's showing off if you list all the donations. Fine. So I put it behind an expansion. It's actually been closer to \$70 million in total, and we're still doing a little bit, but I wanna concentrate on fire abatement, fixing systemic problems so that we don't have so many fires.

Betsy Burton: You know, like I said earlier, you know, we were like, "Okay, well, what do we do? If you wanna have this big impact, what is the best area?" And I think that that's something that is the scary part of getting a lot of money like that. Like, you feel like you should be helping, but it's like, well, where?

You know? And you have a million different options of things that you can do, and how do you choose? And I think there's paralysis in that, and I think there was even with us for a while. And so trying to figure out what's the best way to affect different issues that we're having, and it became, you know, direct cash transfers. And at least for me, a lot of the inspiration came from Michael Tubbs. And, you know, I remember hearing about the SEED Project years ago in Stockton, and just thinking like, "Well, that just makes so much sense, just giving people money and trusting them to know the right thing to do with it." And it always stuck in my head. And so when we started talking about a bigger impact project, guaranteed income became, you know, what we started researching. And then we found the big open research study that had been done, and that was amazing. I mean, just the data from that was so impressive. It was like, yeah, that really got us motivated to get moving on that.

Phil Buchanan: Can you say a little bit more about that research, Betsy? Like, what exactly did you learn when you looked at that?

Jeff Atwood: And I wanna interject. I got to work with an actual scientist to interpret the data, Dr. Betsy. And we did. We truly did. We were like... Just briefly, my perspective was thinking I had never seen a UBI or income study that had ever not worked. Thinking back, it's like, have I ever seen this not work? And the answer is no. And that was striking. So, Betsy, you talk about looking at the data, 'cause I loved having you there with that.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, and as you do that, I'd love to understand, like, what do we mean by work? Can you talk a little bit about-

Betsy Burton: Yeah, how do you measure that?

Phil Buchanan: what the definition is? Yeah.

Betsy Burton: We got their data report and, you know, just looking through it, it was... There's so much data and then, like, that appeals to the, you know, research and data nerd in me. 'Cause they were looking at, I think it was six counties in Texas and Illinois. It was rural, suburban, and urban. You know, it covered lots of different types of communities. And the overall effects on people, the biggest one I think that we always come back to is a decrease in substance use. When I talk to people about guaranteed income, a lot of times the response I get is, "Oh, well, people are just gonna spend it on, you know, alcohol and wasting the money and stuff." And it's like, no, you look at the data, and the opposite is true. You relieve stress in people's lives, you give them some hope, and maybe they don't have to seek that out as much as they used to. And it's such a counterintuitive thing to a lot of what I hear. That was one of the ones that really stuck out to us. People being able to spend more time with their children. And every measure seemed moving in the right direction, you know? It wasn't a cure-all, all of their problems in the world weren't solved. But maybe you boosted things up a little bit for them, and then, maybe they can help carry that forward.

Jeff Atwood: There were two really striking numbers. Betsy covered one, I'll cover the other. One was, like, a 20-plus percent reduction in opioid and alcohol, and I gotta escape from this world type of things, 'cause you created a world that they no longer need to escape from.

Phil Buchanan: Right.

Jeff Atwood: It makes perfect sense. Unless you believe people are all bad, which I can't live and hold that belief. And the second one was 20-plus percent of people

shared that money with other people in need. People who had basically nothing, because they knew struggle, and they knew other people struggling. They shared. That, in fact, is... and you know, is a much larger number than rich people share.

Phil Buchanan: That is remarkable.

Jeff Atwood: These people who had nothing, you give them money, and they share it.

Betsy Burton: That was amazing.

Jeff Atwood: That is a network effect that will go bottom up.

Betsy Burton: Cause then you're affecting your whole community around you, not just the people that are getting the money.

Jeff Atwood: Trickle-down does not work. Trickle-up works.

Phil Buchanan: Betsy and Jeff, the giving that you're doing through this guaranteed income work is in West Virginia and North Carolina primarily. Is that correct?

Betsy Burton: And Mississippi. Yeah, one county in each of those three states.

Phil Buchanan: And can you actually describe how it works?

Jeff Atwood: We, we went in thinking, we're not here to create new structures. I don't want any part of that. But what we wanted to do is identify organizations already doing great work, and either continue their work or elevate it further. The OpenResearch study, that's a sibling company of OpenAI. If you go back in time when those two companies were founded together, that arm of the company was like, "Let's research what happens if generative AI removes jobs. What about basic income?" This is a parallel effort, and we're continuing the work. That was a massive study, one of the largest studies in the world, the largest in the US by far. I think it's like second or third largest in the world. 60 million dollar template study. Template for the work that we're continuing, doing more studies, rural county studies III. Those counties GiveDirectly is the other entity.

So OpenResearch on the research side, I mean, they're incredible. Tia Arisia, who I work with, is... What she does on the weekend is drives around Georgia and talks to people in poverty. I can't believe this. It's just incredible. And so that's the research arm, and then the execution arm is GiveDirectly. GiveDirectly has been doing cash

transfer programs in the US and worldwide for quite a while now. Great work. Love everyone in that org. They have the most experience. They've done it in the US too.

Phil Buchanan: Which is more recent because I feel like people sort of associate them with global direct giving as opposed to domestic.

Jeff Atwood: That's true. It's a bit of a split-brain org at this moment because I love helping the world. But when your own house is on fire, you know, yes *and*, we can do all these things. And I think direct cash transfer is a net good anywhere as an approach, not just here. And our data is gonna go into ubidata.io. We're openly sharing the data with everyone so that we can all see how it works, and there's certainly different conditions on the ground in different places. Each county is different, and we're gonna adapt the playbook as we go. And it's done as, you know, science. We're trying to do it as scientifically as we can so that we can measure, as you said, outcomes. And it is a bit holistic cause you have these human stories that come out are incredible. They send them to me, and it's hard for me to look at them cause I cry. Like, the way you're directly affecting people's lives, giving them money and saying, "Hey, go live your best life. I'm not gonna tell you what to do 'cause how would I know your life better than you?" That is an immense amount of respect that people almost never get in this world.

Betsy Burton: And especially in these rural counties where the people there really feel like they've been abandoned, you know, and that nobody pays attention to them and their problems. And so for somebody to come in and say, "Hey, we do care about you and we wanna help you out," they feel obligated to do the right thing with that.

Jeff Atwood: I mean, the last time I saw my dad alive was in West Virginia implementing the program, and I knew that. I had to reorder the programs because I knew Dad wasn't long for this world, and part of the people in the program helped spread his ashes there, 'cause poverty is generational.

Phil Buchanan: Talk a little bit more about your dad because his story-

Jeff Atwood: How much crying do you want there to be, Phil? 'Cause you're on thin ice here, buddy.

Phil Buchanan: As much as you want.

Jeff Atwood: Yeah.

Phil Buchanan: Your family's story is part of the reason you've chosen to focus in the particular way that you have and in the regions that you have, as I understand it.

Jeff Atwood: Both of my parents grew up in pretty desperate poverty, yes. They did better by me, definitely. It was just a struggle 'cause of the alcoholism and some of the demons and stuff.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah.

Jeff Atwood: But they both loved me deeply. That was the best thing, you know? Such love. That was great. The alcoholism not so much, but the love was very good, and we got through that even. And so going there, yeah, I went there with my dad and his partner. We're driving around. I'm like, "This looks like a wasteland." Like, this is definitely an area we should be helping. Just reconnecting with him, him telling a story, driving by, "That's where my grandparents' house was, and we're gonna build a playground there." And I said, "Yeah, do that. Here's some money." And I said, "I want a plaque from John Atwood to Matoaka for children ages one to 99."

Phil Buchanan: I love it.

Jeff Atwood: And the rest just go with it.

Phil Buchanan: Was he surprised that you and Betsy had decided to do what you have decided to do? I mean, what was his reaction?

Jeff Atwood: I don't think anyone expects me to do... I don't do anything expected. Like, no one knows what's happening with me.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. Well, I mean, this is why we love you.

Jeff Atwood: So no, my dad didn't expect that.

Phil Buchanan: But it seems to me that you are operating, the two of you, with a mixture of sort of emotion and evidence base, right? There's an emotional piece and there's a sort of data-driven piece, which I think is great, and I really appreciate it. I'm curious whether living where you live, you know, you come across Silicon Valley types who might be enamored with the whole notion of effective altruism, because it seems to have a bit of a following out there, although I think it gets more attention than it deserves.

Jeff Atwood: That's so unfortunate that it has a following, Phil. Very unfortunate.

Phil Buchanan: You know, actually, but some of the GiveDirectly folks, right, are sort of connected to that world a little bit?

Jeff Atwood: A little bit being the very most important part of that phrase.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, yeah. And Paul Niehaus I think was great on our podcast in, like, sort of saying, "Yeah, you could call me that if you want, but I am not here to tell you," he said, "to beat up on people who are focused on poverty in the United States because your dollar could go further globally. I wanna beat up on the people who are not giving at all," is what he said. That said, and I like that answer, but that said, how do you think about that? I mean, have you had that conversation to say, well, we could have an even bigger impact on a life if we didn't give domestically, but instead, also through GiveDirectly, gave in some other part of the world? Is that a debate that you have had or a consideration?

Jeff Atwood: First, I like to think of it as not ineffective altruism I think that's a better way to phrase it, not ineffective altruism. That's what they should be thinking about, is how not to be ineffective. I would really, uh, anyone listening to this, not ineffective altruism. Think about it. Think about it. I think it's gonna catch on. And part of this is you can't represent love with a number. It's beyond the representational system. So when you get into everything as an efficiency game, you've already lost-

Phil Buchanan: Yeah,

Jeff Atwood: the love, which is the most important part. Life is not an Excel spreadsheet to be filled in, not ineffective altruists. That is not how things work.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, yeah. But you are data-driven and evidence-based, and Betsy, you are diving into the research studies. So since Jeff didn't really answer me, maybe I'll ask you. Like, do you-

Jeff Atwood: I did answer you. Phil, you're getting sassy with me now.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. Did you think, "Uh, maybe we should actually direct this giving to a part of the world where our dollar could go further"?

Betsy Burton: We didn't really, because a lot of this conversation came up because of the blog post Jeff had written after the 2024 election. You know, it was very, our thoughts at that time were very focused on these are the problems we see in the US, and how can we help address those issues? We were just at that time point, you know, really focused on what can we do to help our country? We didn't really

consider outside of that. And you know, there's already plenty of people doing good work there, too.

Jeff Atwood: That's beyond our weight class, Phil, frankly.

Phil Buchanan: And it makes sense. I mean, people, I think, are wired, you know, as human beings to be connected to communities and to their personal history, to people around them, and to care about the people who they're more proximate to. And that isn't to say that we should close our eyes to suffering in other parts of the world. Of course not.

Jeff Atwood: I mean, is it okay to root for the home team occasionally? Is it okay, Phil? Is it okay?

Phil Buchanan: Yes. Yes, it is.

Jeff Atwood: Thank you.

Phil Buchanan: Hang in there. We'll be right back

BREAK

Phil Buchanan: I wanna ask you about your family and your kids. You mentioned that you have three kids. How do you talk to them about philanthropy, and do they sort of do their own thing like kids do and don't pay much attention, or are they engaged and involved in any of these efforts?

Betsy Burton: They're involved, you know, very heavily involved in writing the blog post. You know, they read several versions and suggested various things. And we're pretty open with them about what we're doing and giving them updates and everything. You know, they're teenagers, so they're a little inherently self-absorbed, but they do think outside themselves a fair amount. And part of it is for us too, you know, just being good role models for them and like, "Look," you know, "we have a responsibility to help take care of other people," and so really literally showing them a way to do that. That's always been important to us.

Jeff Atwood: I was gonna mention, they came... I did a talk at Cooper Union in New York City to launch the plan to fix systemically; the \$50 million part. Alex Venema did

the first half, and I did the second half, and they were all there, and that was a great point of pride. My daughter, Raisin, just a nickname, still has the seat assignment on her wall.

Phil Buchanan: I love it.

Jeff Atwood: This seat reserved for Margaret Atwood. And you know, I cannot be prouder as a dad than that.

Phil Buchanan: Clearly your kids have good role models for how to show up in this world, and I think you're also good role models for other folks who are finding themselves with resources that they didn't expect to have and wondering what to do with them. But a lot of those folks have been pretty disappointing to me. I'll just be honest. Like-

Jeff Atwood: Good

Phil Buchanan: the giving levels-

Jeff Atwood: Good

Phil Buchanan: have not been, you know, what I would hope. There's been a lot of retreat from donors who said they cared about things like racial equity or LGBTQ rights or any number of other issues that-

Jeff Atwood: Or democracy. Do they care about that? I'm curious.

Phil Buchanan: There's that. There's that one, too. And where are they now? Currently residing in the "where are they now file," uh, to quote Spinal Tap. So I wonder, I mean, you can't take on everything, right? You're doing your thing, but are you also trying to have influence on some of your tech-money brothers and sisters to inspire them that they can actually do something and they can live their values in a different way? Or what is your take on that? Because I imagine that's something you two talk about at times.

Jeff Atwood: The main thing, when I wrote *Stay Gold America*, and again, it's great having your sort of research notebook be a public artifact, so I can refer to, "What the hell was I thinking? How did I say it?" Right. And I looked at the Buffett pledge, the Gates and Buffett pledge. I was like, "This is really great." And then I researched it more. This is not great because it's missing a timeline. When will this happen? And I was very upset about that. And now this has since changed, which I think, I like to think people read that, 'cause I was pretty upfront about this is bad. Buffett was

gonna give the money to three of his very, very old children. Like, if you're gonna give the pledge, when? When are you gonna do it? If not now, then when? And I was so upset about that. This is an incomplete pledge. It's good, it's a start, but it's ultimately empty unless you give us a timeline. I was so upset about not having a timeline, and then I was not gonna go to an event that we were invited to 'cause like it doesn't matter. And then Gates Foundation announced they're gonna burn down the fund in 40 years. And I said, "That is it. That's what I wanted to happen."

Phil Buchanan: Mm-hmm.

Betsy Burton: I think it's 20 years, isn't it?

Jeff Atwood: Even better.

Betsy Burton: Yeah.

Jeff Atwood: Just having a schedule, it was fast. I was like, "This is exactly what was needed." And I'm hearing Buffett say that too now. He's starting to push faster to get the funds out. And that was my main piece of advice at your conference, was like, "Whatever you're doing, do it faster. Get the money working to do something faster."

Phil Buchanan: For the record, Betsy's right. It's 20 years, so, uh, they're gonna sunset at the end of 2045.

Jeff Atwood: That was not the case prior to me writing that. And I'm not saying I did it, but I'm saying if I had that effect, fantastic. That's what I wanted.

Betsy Burton: Well, and I don't know, you know, does some of it come down to, again, like that paralysis like we were talking about? That, you know, there's so many things, but it's hard to choose, and so you just don't do anything.

Jeff Atwood: Or you try to do everything and it's just really difficult.

Betsy Burton: You know, it's like all the money that's sitting in the DAFs, you know, not doing anything. Why do you have money just sitting there making money for banks? How is that helping anybody?

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. I mean, the sense of overwhelm is real right now, I think, for a lot of folks, and a sort of disconnection that happens or worries about the risk to themselves or whatever it is. And I, I've spent a lot of time trying to think about, like, how do we break through?

Jeff Atwood: Well, when is doing nothing the right answer for anything, Phil?

Phil Buchanan: Exactly. Right. Never.

Jeff Atwood: I'll just do nothing. How does that help? Help me out. How does that help?

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, exactly. Right. But, like, how do you break through and connect people to, like, the opportunity that they have to actually make a difference in people's lives? And I mean, in that way, what you guys are doing is really inspiring. Yeah, I guess I'm wondering how do you think those of us who care about this stuff and wanna influence more people who have the sense of frustration that you described, Jeff, when you found out that a lot of folks who took the giving pledge aren't really giving a lot, or in some cases, they're giving it to a foundation that it then, in turn, isn't giving that much, right? Like, there's a lot of delay. What arguments do you think are most effective to break through to people? What would you say to people to inspire them to do more?

Jeff Atwood: I think for me it's just you can be an example of what you want the world to be. And can I just say how much I love Mackenzie Scott, greatest philanthropist of all time? Quote me on that, please. And trust-based giving, where it's like Y Combinator was this great idea by Paul Graham of energizing all these groups that were lightly vetted, not heavily, and just saying, "Here. Go. Go do." Some of those were breakout massive hits, and that's the strategy that people should be using is, like, do some basic vetting, trust that these orgs already have a track record of doing great stuff, maybe small teams. I would optimize for the smaller teams that are people just getting started or you're finding, not the incumbents, but the people coming up. And unleash them. And make a diverse set of trust-based gifts and say, "Go kick ass." And some of them really will, to a degree that will surprise a lot of people.

Phil Buchanan: What about you, Betsy? What would you add to that?

Betsy Burton: I think it's the same thing. Hopefully we can inspire people to give and to do it more quickly, but, like, how much money do you need? You know? What are you waiting for? That's part of, you know, what our role in this stuff is now, is that Jeff has this platform and can really communicate well to people about what we're doing and the positive effects. And so hopefully that will lead to more people stepping up.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. And one other thing, like, just to name it, that I think is going on, and we kind of alluded to this earlier, right? Is there is a lack of faith that organizations will make good use of the resources to do good work. And there is

often also a lack of faith at the direct giving level that looks exactly the same. They worry that somebody's gonna use it, sort of the opposite of what you describe-

Jeff Atwood: Right ...

Phil Buchanan: which is less substance use. People worry it's gonna be, you know, wasted on alcohol or whatever else. So the evidence suggests that actually, folks will make good use of resources, and that nonprofits, especially if you do some vetting, as MacKenzie Scott clearly does, will make good use of the resources to do things they wouldn't otherwise be able to do that benefit communities and people. But there is a deep-rooted skepticism about that, that I think is getting in the way, and a kind of paternalism that affects how people think about this. And so that's what I love about your example, is you're deliberately breaking out of that and saying, "No, we actually trust people to make good use of resources." And to me, that's not as common as what I would like to see.

Jeff Atwood: It's difficult for me to even understand that perspective, honestly. Like, everything's a miracle. There's two ways to live your life: as if nothing is a miracle, or as if everything's a miracle. And none of this should exist. None of this should be here. How is this even happening? So it's only happening because people want to live together. We're social animals. We default love each other. Every child is born full of joy, until we beat it out of them. That's what staying gold is all about, not doing that and embracing the joy that we have in life. And trust in other people is my default. I will trust you until you give me very good reason not to, and then I won't. Unless you get some therapy and come back to me. Yeah. How else do you live? I mean, that's, how do we even get here without love and trust? How? The evidence is all around you. Look around. Everything I see is a reason to be alive, with few exceptions.

Betsy Burton: I see, too, a lot of parallels between individuals who have a lot of money and are hesitant to give that away. You know, even in the nonprofit world where foundations or, you know, groups have a lot of money but are hesitant to spend that down.

I was involved in a very low stakes nonprofit here that I remember someone saying one time, you know, people were balking about spending money on something, and they said, "You know, our job is to spend this money down. That's the whole point is to use this money."

Jeff Atwood: Whoa, whoa, whoa. My number's gotta be really big, though. I need a big number.

Betsy Burton: And so how do you, how do you get... And I've seen this in multiple orgs now, too, but how do you get beyond those fears that what if we do it and we do it wrong? But you gotta take a risk and get out there and actually help people.

Jeff Atwood: And love and trust is the risk, and it's always worth it. I mean, come on. I literally can't understand this perspective. It's hard for me to talk about it because I don't understand it. Like, everyone I meet is just such a joy, you know? Everyone. Not just the rich people, everyone. In fact, the rich people are, as you noted, kind of a disappointment, to be frank. So step it up, rich people.

Betsy Burton: And its fun to help people.

Jeff Atwood: It is great fun. I met a woman when I went with my mom to North Carolina to launch that program. She was a waitress in the town that my mom grew up. And so we were down there, and we ate at that restaurant, and I asked for her to be the server, and she said, "Hi, I met you when you were..." She was actually in the program. She got selected. And I left her a giant tip, and my mom's like, "They're gonna steal the money." I'm like, "Mom, they're not gonna steal the money. I don't wanna be here when this happens. This is performative. We gotta go." And she's like fighting me, "He's gonna steal the money." "No one's gonna steal this money. This is a tip for the woman they know." So that was funny, too, but that's a direct interaction where I saw someone directly being helped, a mom, a waitress. And it felt so good.

Betsy Burton: When I went to the launch in Mississippi, and it was amazing seeing... You know, they had this little reception, and there were all these local organizations that had coordinated with GiveDirectly to find people in the community and help facilitate finding people to be in the program, and they're all so excited. And so it's like, you know, you have these really tiny orgs in these little towns, but they're directly affecting people, and so you're giving them hope and excitement for, you know, what could happen in their community, too, and it's exciting seeing organizations like that.

Jeff Atwood: Same thing in North Carolina. We're empowering the local orgs. We're not there to create new power structures. We're gonna lift up and build up what's there. And hearing these people stand in front of me going, "I feel hope for the first time in a long time." Phil, I was having a real hard time keeping it together, man.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, yeah.

Jeff Atwood: Kind of like now, actually, but, uh, to have that effect and see it. It's like this is a thing that's worth being alive for.

Phil Buchanan: And I love that you're doing this in a way that works with and builds on the local, often small local organizations that exist in every community. Because I think there's this tendency to, again, the assumptions people make about nonprofits, about people, there's a tendency to equate, you know, smallness with ineffectiveness or inefficiency when I think it's

Jeff Atwood: I think it's the other way. The big orgs are not effective.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. So that the smallness is the reason that they're trusted. It's the reason that people will go to the organization because they know it's of the community, and that community knowledge then allows them to be more effective than if they just, you know, dropped in from on high.

Betsy Burton: Right.

Jeff Atwood: Absolutely.

Betsy Burton: And that was something that was important to us from the start, too, 'cause we didn't wanna be, you know, Bay Area people coming in and telling these communities what to do. It's like, no, there's already people in that community that people trust that are already doing things, so find ways to work with them. And GiveDirectly does an amazing job of going into the communities and connecting with these orgs and really helping them help the entire project.

Jeff Atwood: Because they're not in it for the money. They wanna live and have a salary, but they're in it to see this happiness and bring joy to other people and better lives. That's worth a lot. What can you pay someone that's worth that?

Phil Buchanan: I learned about the two of you when I read an article in which you pointed to MacKenzie Scott as somebody who had inspired you. And because we had done this research, we had also had a lot of conversations internally about why aren't more people trying to learn some lessons from MacKenzie Scott. Emulate her, not at the scale because nobody has those kinds of resources. But-

Jeff Atwood: I wish I did.

Phil Buchanan: But yeah, of course. But there are ways-

Jeff Atwood: Because I would be giving a lot of it out.

Phil Buchanan: there are ways to take what we can learn from what she's done and apply them at smaller levels. And I am so glad that I met the two of you because I

really just have so much respect for what you're doing. I think it's inspiring. I love the way that you are sort of leading with your head and your heart, both. I love what you're doing, and I appreciate you taking the time to come on the show and share so openly and honestly about the joy of giving and helping people who just really want a fair opportunity.

Jeff Atwood: The giving is not the point. The reflected happiness of other people-

Phil Buchanan: Love

Jeff Atwood: that is like a drug to me. Yeah. It's really good. And I wanna thank Betsy because she volunteered at the Alameda Food Bank years and years ago, and that started me thinking about philanthropy in general. Because the food bank, that's the absolute base of all giving in my opinion. Yeah. The local food banks. If you're gonna give to anything, give to that. And we've been heavily involved with the food bank. Betsy's on the board now, which I'm very proud of. Betsy was the inspiration for really all this.

Phil Buchanan: Jeff, thank you, and Betsy, thank you.

Betsy Burton: Thanks, Phil.

Jeff Atwood: Thanks, Phil.

Phil Buchanan: There are a ton of resources about effective giving on The Center for Effective Philanthropy's website, cep.org, as well as givingdoneright.org, where you'll find all of our episodes and show notes. You can also send us a note at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

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