"If you had a billion dollars to give, what would you do?" It's a great question that we often ask our interns. In this week's NY Times, best-selling author David Brooks articulated his response after being inspired by the recent letters of Giving Pledge signers.

And it seemed like a page straight out of the ServiceSpace handbook.

"Only loving relationships transform lives, and such relationships can be formed only in small groups. I’d seed 25-person collectives, a group of people who met once a week to share." Just like Awakin Circles. He spoke about local retreats, quite in the vein of Moved by Love. In fact, he even explicitly referenced the Hands, Head, Heart framework, as the "pressure points required for personal transformation." Brooks further added how "each collective would have a curriculum, a set of biographical and reflective readings, to help members come up with their own life philosophies, to help them master the intellectual [foundation of] virtues." Sounds very much like Laddership Circles. :)

His larger point is that we need to repair the social fabric, without which all other solutions are patch work. That's certainly been the ServiceSpace hypothesis since 1999.

I remember when Larry Brilliant won the first Ted Prize. He emailed some of his friends to solicit ideas. My suggestion to him essentially stated: "Spread smiles through distributed acts of kindness." A la Smile Cards. To which he smilingly replied, "I knew that you were going to say that. :)

Where the David Brooks approach diverges, though, is his last sentence: “Now, all I need is a hedge fund to get started.”

ServiceSpace found its billion without ever having a hedge fund. We just discovered it in other forms of capital.

That changes everything, in fact.

Financial capital affords us a kind of efficiency, but that speed is also its blind-side that biases towards one-dimensional transactions. Such an ecosystem of transactions necessarily strips away multi-dimensional relationships, and hence dramatically limits its potential for transformation.

On the Brooks article, a reader left an expressive side-bar comment: "You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs, and you can't make a fortune without breaking some legs." That sounds a bit harsh, but if "breaking some legs" is about moving from relationships to transaction, there’s certainly truth to it.
Just consider our primary metric of progress today: GDP. South African economist Lorenzo Fioramonti describes it this way: “We have this picture of the ideal GDP man. He’s an obese man driving his car, stuck in a traffic jam, eating a hamburger and holding onto the phone while he talks to his lawyer who’s actually taking care of his divorce. While he does that, he’s about to have a car accident and a heart attack. All these things are good things for GDP.”

Working with other forms of capital, however, is quite a challenge.

We go through extra-ordinary effort to grease the wheels of our financial currency -- banks, markets, derivatives, fiscal policies, and so much more. But do we have the equivalent machinery for amplifying time capital, or community capital or nature capital?

Far from it. If we did, we would be asking a very different set of questions. Like -- what is an education that amplifies, not just intellectual or even emotional quotient, but compassion quotient? In place of a traditional “accelerator” that guns for short-term scale, what is a decelerator that operates without an exit strategy? Instead of a typical venture fund, what is an alchemy fund that converts input of financial capital into output of non-marketized value?

We need new systems, but that alone isn’t enough. We also need to build new narratives.

Yuval Noah Harari, in his best-selling books Sapiens and Home Deus, talks about “inter-subjective” realities. If the chair you’re sitting on is objective reality, and the thoughts you are thinking are subjective reality, an inter-subjective reality emerges in the shared subjective experience of a network’s constituents. Like Europe or Google. They don’t actually exist anywhere except in our minds. Their existence is simply a shared -- and helpful -- fiction. And we are creatures bound by stories.

I’d imagine that Brooks, as a celebrated author, would certainly resonate with the power of a reshaping a collective narrative. If an investor were to give him a billion dollars to do so, what might he create? An ad-driven online content platform, of course. Ev Williams, co-founder of Twitter, aptly admitted recently, “Ads rewards attention and not value.” I translate that as: today’s content platforms reward sensationalism that propagates the machinery of consumption, not a sense of well-being. Unfortunately, lot of people see that challenge clearly, but we’re short on viable alternatives.

So then, how do we foster a new narrative, that, for instance, is rooted in cooperation over separation? How do we evolve new systems that catalyzes social change without discounting inner transformation? How do all these solutions avoid being swallowed by the market forces that reduce its value to algorithmic transactions?

ServiceSpace has been living into such “impossible” questions for a while. DailyGood has highlighted a positive story for the past 18 years, every single day, without ever showing an ad. Same with KarmaTube. In Oakland, Pancho has been creating social change without even having a personal bank account. In 23 places around the globe, Karma Kitchen restaurant pop-ups invite its diners to pay-forward for the person after them; most recently History Channel produced a viral video, which included the story of a rickshaw driver who similarly unlocked a gift ecology simply by shifting from transaction to trust. Wisdom Crafts is creating an online “labor of love” store that accepts payments of non-financial wealth. More broadly, we’ve written tens of millions of lines of code to build technology for such platforms.
The entire ServiceSpace ecosystem, which continues to touch millions around the globe, is entirely volunteer-run. “What do you do?” people often ask me. “I volunteer,” I reply. And their immediate counter-question is, “So what do you really do?” As in, what’s your paid job? Somehow paid is real, and labor of love is fluff. That’s an unconscious prejudice that many bring to their volunteer work. In ServiceSpace, we flip that. After almost two decades of cultivating that flip, we have seen that you can sustainably build institutional capacity with non-financial forms of capital.

This, of course, is not to negate the power of money. ServiceSpace also uses it. For instance, David Brooks mentions "a slush fund", which I think is a great idea for something like ‘generosity entrepreneurs’. But it has to stay in proportion, and subordinate, to other forms of capital. Our creative constraint has been to not fundraise. That invites us to trust in gratitude and emergence. It cultivates a field with rich relationships and deep roots below the surface.

What is your creative constraint to ensure a healthy and diverse portfolio of wealth? That’d be the billion dollar question I would hold. Then, everything is no longer a nail, since you have a lot more than a hammer. A blank canvas feels full with a very different kind of spaciousness.

The thing is, if I had billion dollars, I would probably do the same thing David Brooks is suggesting. I just wouldn’t start on it until I have cultivated a trillion "dollars" of other kinds of capital.

That, then, begs the question -- if you actually had that trillion, would you still care to setup that hedge fund? Brazilian millionaire, Ricardo Semler, doesn’t think so: "If you have a billion to give, it just means that you kept too much along the way."

Gandhi might agree. When he was unexpectedly assassinated in 1947, the world discovered that he owned a mere 9 possessions. Live from his funeral, CBS commentator Edwin Murrow relayed something like, “The object of this massive tribute died as he had always lived -- a man without any financial wealth, without private property, without official title or office. Mahatma Gandhi was not a commander of great armies nor ruler of vast lands. He could boast no scientific achievements or artistic gift. Yet men, governments and dignitaries from all over the world have joined hands today to pay homage to this little brown man in the loincloth who led his country to freedom."

Whenever I need to be reminded about the power of alternative capitals to change the world, I imagine the Giving Pledge people like Gandhi must’ve signed.