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Connecting Passion and Purpose | charity: water Founder Scott Harrison

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The Veritas Forum

In March, we launched our Veritas Cities Forums in Seattle, a series of events designed to foster a vibrant public square that invites globally-engaged leaders to confront life's biggest questions and pursue self-examined lives. We were fortunate enough to hear from charity: water founder, Scott Harrison. He shared his personal journey along with the journey of charity: water, one of the leading charities addressing the global water crisis. Scott understands the power of story at both a personal and an organizational level. And the following interview represents a beautifully composed story that examines the complexities of stepping into a broken world, as a broken person, in order to seek restoration. We hope you enjoy it as much as we did.

Transcript

I think I've always kept my theology pretty simple. The verse that was just such a driver for me for years was, and James says, "To look after true religion is this, to look after widows and orphans in their distress, and to keep yourself by being polluted." I was over two. I mean for ten years.

I hadn't done a single thing for widows and orphans and I literally polluted the world for a living. So I kind of thought about, I get to live out my work by serving the poor, and I get to work on my personal values and, you know, unpalute myself. So let's start there.

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Scott understands the power of story at both a personal and an organizational level, and the following interview represents a beautifully composed story that examines the complexities of stepping into a broken world as a broken person in order to seek

restoration. We hope you enjoy it as much as we did. What I love about the format for tonight is that it lets us basically start with that story and then push past it.

And to hear more about a couple areas, one is just want to talk to you more tonight, Scott, about Charity Water and Charity more generally and generosity and philanthropy. We'll talk about that. And then also I think I want to talk to you about a bit more about your personal narrative and your purpose and how you see that.

So you've talked about this is an amazing story, and in many ways it mirrors how we think about in the startup world, like what that founding story is like. We'd love to hear from you about how stories have been, how storytelling has been a part of what Charity Water has been all about. How's everyone doing? I've had to see that video way too many times.

Storytelling is just such a part of our culture. We love telling stories. I mean, everyone we hire has an affinity for story.

I think we see stories in unlikely places than other organizations, so I'll give you an example. We used to drill live on our anniversary every single year, and I started this off on the first year when I donated my birthday and I wasn't sure if it would work. I said if I reach my goal, I will fly to Africa with a satellite unit and I'll drill the well that everybody paid for with the birthday donations.

And we kept doing that for a year after year. And then one of these years we found ourselves in the Central African Republic. And every, what we loved about that was every year we got to tell a completely new story of a new country, of a new partner, a new context for water.

So we find ourselves in the Central African Republic and we're with the Biaka Pygmies, which was really a really marginalized people group. The logging companies had cut down the trees and they'd fled the forests and actually become enslaved by the tall Central Africans. And we had a local partner there who was trying to bring them equality by giving them water in the Central African Wars.

So we're all the way in the middle of this village on the Congo border. It was maybe 16 hours drive from Bangee to capital. And the village has been waiting for water its entire life.

It was a failed attempt eight years previous and we're now going in and we're going to drill live and we're going to be the heroes. This well was crowd sourced by kids, you know, doing lemonade stands and birthdays. So we drill and there's no water.

It collapses. We get quicksand in this village. And we then drill all the way through the night again in another location.

Same thing, just quicksand. And we, the next day, leave the village. No better than we found it.

We were in the city of the city of Baca watching our drilling rigs leave. And I remember being there on the ground and there were a couple people on the team that said, well, you cannot broadcast that. I mean, you can't, you can't share what's going on.

I'm like, oh, no, we're going to share this. This is going to be the best story we've ever told in seven years. So we broadcast the failure and the disappointment of this community.

We were watching it, they're crying and the story spoke to the value really, which it's hard work. And not everything works all the time. And people want, people sometimes expect their charities to, you know, to be perfect.

Well, you know, as you know, it's not perfect. It'd be one other example of storytelling. We were just, we crowd sourced two drilling rigs in Ethiopia.

They cost a million dollars each. And our local partner there crashes the drilling rig. And doesn't tell us immediately because it's going to take them four weeks to repair the drilling rig and put it back in service.

And they were kind of embarrassed. So I find out about this, because we, as you do find out about it, that we have a drilling rig. You know, we've done this huge public campaign.

Ten thousand people paid for this drilling rig. And it's wheels. It's eight wheels are up in the sky.

I'm like, send the team now. Get me photo and video of the rig busted so I can send it to the ten thousand people. Because that's a story.

That speaks to the tenacity of our partners. They are not drilling wells by the paved roads. They took the rig into a remote area.

They probably should not have been on that road. And the road collapsed. So I was going to say we got there too late.

They'd already put it back in service. But I think we just think everything is a story we're telling that can speak to some value. In that case, tenacity, perseverance.

And the fact that like people here have been in accidents, you know, we get in car crashes. We have problems with machinery. Charities do too.

Well, I'd say this is of course the story of charity water itself. Right is an incredible story and two hundred fifty million dollars later and countless lives will actually counted lives

that you've impacted. And you know, there's a, has it always been this kind of rocket ship? So you talk about the challenging stories.

Have you had that like, you know, many startups go through like the existential moment, right? When you're like, oh my goodness, is this thing actually going to work? Actually, they go through it again and again and again. But are there, are there those moments, you know, not at the, you know, as you're drilling in Africa, but as you're sitting in Manhattan thinking about, is this thing actually going to work? Have you had those moments? Yeah. Well, the organization started in a very unlikely place, which was this loft in Soho, New York.

And I was living, you know, so nightclub promoters are not great at saving money. We are fantastic at spending money. As maybe you could tell by that video.

So when I went to Mercy Ships, you know, I'd sold everything that I owned. I remember putting up two thousand DVDs in a lot on eBay when they were actually worth something. And I paid Mercy Ships five hundred dollars a month to serve and gave pretty much every, I gave everything I had to them and the people I met around the way.

So I came back completely broke, found out that I was thirty thousand dollars in debt because my club partner had never disbanded the company and hadn't paid any taxes. So this is bad news. It's not a good time to start a charity.

So he said, I'll let you live on my walk-in closet floor because I feel bad that I don't have thirty thousand dollars to give you right now. And you can start the charity from the couch. So it starts in the most, when he was doing drugs at the time.

This is not how you want to start a non-profit. But we did. And we had a living room and I had a roof over my head and his clothes were everywhere.

That was the bedroom. And it just kind of exploded. I think from that first party, it was up and to the right.

I think a year and a half in we'd raised a few million dollars. So the hundred percent model was resonating with people. We heard so many people saying they were giving to charity for the first time in their life.

And that was what I was after. I wasn't after world vision donors or compassion donors or united way donors. I wasn't after kind of the people who were already giving in belief of the system.

I was after the 70 percent of people who were recently polled and thought charities waste money or badly waste money. So that was the demographic. So it worked really well.

Except when we started with a hundred percent model, people said, "Well, this is the dumbest thing we've ever heard of." Because only billionaires, Paul Tudor Jones started a charity called the Robinhood Foundation. He was a billionaire. And he had the money to bankroll the endowment and all the staff.

Now, you can't bootstrap a hundred percent model. You will go bankrupt. You will not be able to afford an office.

So I don't know why I just had this blind faith that this was meant to be. And I opened up two separate bank accounts with a hundred dollars in each of them. And things went great in the one bank account.

So a year and a half in, we had somehow scrapped together enough money for the overhead. There was no health insurance. There was no dental.

People were taking pay cuts to come and work with the organization. I think we had eight or nine employees at the time. And we were about to miss payroll and miss rent.

So we thought we'd squeezed every last overhead drop out of anyone we knew at the time. And yet, we had \$81,000 in the bank account that we couldn't touch that was allocated for the water projects. So what advice do you think I was getting at the time? For me, \$80,000.

You got to pay your people. These people had left successful careers and given up salary and benefits to be a part of the organization. So I guess it was a logical enough argument.

You could write an IOU to that account. Those wells could be built later. I thought, absolutely not.

If we took one penny of the public's money that was allocated for water projects, our integrity would be compromised. It would be a crack in the foundation. We might as well all resign in shame and flee the country.

I was that extreme about it. So I was going to unwind the charity. So I began preparing.

You don't go bankrupt. You just kind of dissolve the charity. So we were going to send out the \$880,000 to our partners, get as many of those water projects done as possible.

And then I guess I would cry business model failure. I was praying at the time, I remember, with very little faith, I thought absolutely nothing was going to happen. And at that moment, a complete stranger walks into our office for a meeting and we spent two hours together.

I thought this guy didn't like me. Turned out later, he was just British. It was kind of dry.

It was confusing. He just didn't say much. He left that two hour meeting.

I remember being transparent in that meeting and saying, "Look, I have this vision to reinvent charity. We're reaching people who would never give, but yet I can't raise the overhead money fast enough." It's about to end. So he leaves the meeting and says, "Let me think about how to help." Two days later, I'm on my laptop.

I remember exactly where I was. It was after midnight. And I'm just stressed and I feel like I've let everyone down.

And I get an email from Michael and he says, "It was great meeting you. I've just wired a million dollars into your overhead account." So I log on to Commerce Bank at the time and there it is. One comma zero zero zero comma zero zero zero.

And I freak out. I start crying. I call our eight staff members.

It was one in the morning, one fifteen in the morning, one thirty in the morning. Wake everyone up. I'm like, "We got a million dollars." So we went from dead to 13 months of funding and what we needed was the extra time that runway to work out the business model.

And I think Michael, he's very close now. We've been to nine or ten countries together with his children. He's actually given fifteen million dollars since then over the last eight years.

So it wasn't a one and done. But in as much as it was the money at that moment, it was really that someone believed in me. I mean, it was the confidence that someone said, "You're on to something here.

You're about to blow it up, but you need more time." And that I think gave us the confidence to then go out and much more boldly ask families to pay for staff, overhead, rent, office, toner, copy machines. Yeah. So it wasn't.

And then it went up again. Like crazy. And I think 90 percent growth year over year on average, 160 percent.

And by the way, charitable giving over that time was down. This was the economic meltdown. So we were kind of our graph.

It was just up and to the right for eight consecutive years. So what's next? Right. So that's the graph from here.

And I don't mean what's next in terms of the dollars, but what's next for you as you think about the next five years, ten years, what charity water is? Well, I'll tell you, in our ninth year, so our eighth year, 2014, because this leads into what's next, we had our best year ever. It was one of those years where everything went right. Twitter IPO, the CTO

dropped a million dollars.

Senior executive at Apple came to ETH.com with me, gave a million dollars. A huge corporate foundation calls up, gives five million dollars. Donor in Virginia calls up, gives three million dollars on top of kind of the core organization.

So we give a million people clean water. We raise almost 50 million, 45 million dollars. And then, at this point, we have built an organization that starts at zero every January one.

So there's no sponsor child model. There's no kind of subscription product at all. It's just one time birthday.

People do one birthday and then they move on. So the world gets uglier for these people in 2015. Our donor in Virginia stock goes down 40%.

He goes from three million to zero. The corporate foundation announces they're laying off ten thousand employees. They go from five to zero.

And we start off the year, eight million dollars in the hole. We end about there. So we have our first year where charity water didn't grow.

That's all we do. Like, we always grow. I mean, I don't know anything else.

So I'm ready to fire myself. I call up the board. I have seven or eight board conversations.

I think it's time for me to bring on a professional CEO. I've taken it as far as I can. I'm going to stay with the organization.

I'll speak. I'll give me a cheap water buoy title. I don't know.

I'll figure out how to go innovate or still fundraise and spend time with our donors. But now it's time to bring on a professional. So this is going into Q4.

So the board is very supportive and says, "Okay, I sit down with my executive team and I'm like, get back to work." Literally. They're like, "It's Q4. We have to raise it." Absolutely not.

So they said, "There is no way you were opening up a CEO search in Q4. You're burned out. Let me take a month off with your family." So I took a month off and Janie, the year was outside of that missing chunk of money.

It was the most successful year on every other metric for the organization, from programs for sustainability, for innovation, the talent that we were able to acquire. So I take Janie Roy off and I'm thinking about what's next. I just got really bored taking a

month off.

California went there with the family and I really wanted to come back to work and solve some of these problems. So I came back and I never really looked back. I said, "Well, at least we need to finish out our decade.

We need to finish out our tenth year. I want to end 10 years strong and then maybe if I still feel this way, the following Janie Roy, we can open up a CEO search." So all that to say, it was an awesome year last year. I've never had more fun trying to address some of these challenges.

And at the moment, I'm looking at the next 10 years, unless they fire me or drag me out screaming. So I'm really excited to continue growing the organization to help more people. Some of the technology that we've been inventing now can be used laterally, so outside of the organization.

So we're about to fly to Africa and take some very, very high level president meetings to talk about rolling out a sensor country wide where a country could map every single water point, not charity water points, not government water points, not UNICEF, every single water point. Because we open source the whole thing. So that stuff really excites me.

Well, you talk about technology and obviously you've used technology a lot. This is a town that thinks a lot about technology, whether it makes your personal computer work better or you can read anywhere that you want to be. Talk a little bit more about what role you think technology has played in charity water.

And then also what you think it will enable for you in the next 5-10 years. Yeah, it's a great question. I mean, it's a huge part of who we are.

And there's a culture of early adoption at the organization. There's a culture, innovation is a key value. And when we start, a lot of it was just good timing though.

So charity water started the same year as Google Earth. So Google had built this place where we could put every water point we would ever fund and live out our value of hyper transparency, very simply just through a GIS dataset. So that's true today guys.

Any of you could go to REI by a \$50 handheld GPS device and visit 24,000 water projects in 24 countries. That terrifies people, by the way, that we've put ourselves out there. Certainly not every single one is working, but we've put that whole dataset out there.

And when VR came around, so I saw very early VR stuff two years ago and said to myself, this is going to be used for porn and gaming, for sure. What if it could be used to evoke deep compassion and empathy? What if it could be used for humanitarian narrative storytelling? So I changed all of charity water's creative priorities that year. We

put a rig together with eight GoPros and a bunch of duct tape.

Kind of literally. And we worked with Chris Milk and his company, which he's changed the name of four or five times now. So I think it's within, is the latest.

And I wanted to document a 13 year old girl in Ethiopia getting clean water for the first time in her life. And a very specific vision for what this film would look like. It would cover the six days and it would, what I was so excited about with the technology was, in a distracted world, there's a moment of time.

And I don't know how long this window is, that people are going to be willing to let me strap a movie set to their face and put away their phone. Like you can't be on VR and have your phone. So total concentration.

So I was actually more interested in being able to intravenously deliver stories to people without distraction than actually anything else. So we shoot this film. It looked kind of terrible because it was shot on GoPro and there just wasn't any, none of the new cameras were out.

And we stitched the whole thing together and then we have this beautiful moment. Maybe the whole thing cost 100 grand. We got a grant.

We got it paid for. And then we had this beautiful moment where a donor walks into the office and great story. Guy at Google, good charities donated \$20,000 online after finding us.

Year and a half later it gets his photos and GPS of his water projects, calls up the office and says, "Well, I really like that experience. Now I'm going to give 200 grand." Now no one has met this guy. He just talks to someone on the phone.

So he gives \$200,000 and Nicole in our department says, "Well, maybe you should come in since you're on the East Coast and actually see that this place exists. Like it's a real charity." So he comes in and I meet him for half hour and I just thank him. He comes in to be thanked to see that it's real.

And I said, "On your way out, you should check out this VR film because \$150,000 of your money is going to bring clean water to 15 of these villages." So I don't see this but he walks out into the next room. He puts on the VR film that we have just made and he watches it and he takes the glasses down, weeping. He throws his wallet on the table and he writes another \$400,000 check.

40 more villages. We then took it to our gala and for years we've been trying to innovate in the gala space and we never did a sit down dinner. We hate the rubber chicken, the boring dinners.

You guys have probably been to these things and the power points that just go on forever and they're painful. So I said, "We're never going to do a sit down dinner." So as we got to our ninth year I said, "Maybe we should do a sit down dinner, but how can we innovate?" So I thought, "What if right after dinner we strapped 400 VR headsets on everybody and we press play in synchronicity?" And then the minute they came back from Ethiopia eight minutes later, we asked them all for money. [laughter] So we raised \$3 million.

It worked. So I think, yeah, this year we used technology at the same gala. It was really one of the ideas I'm most proud of.

We had the same, 400 people, it's in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for our sit down dinner. And I wanted to connect every single person coming to the gala with the story of a person living in a village without water. So we sent our creative team to Ethiopia.

We found a village with 400 people and we spent weeks documenting every single life in the village. There was a photo station. We had amazing photographers and lighting in the middle of the plains of Ethiopia.

And we are trying to photograph everyone in their most heroic state. Then there's a video editing station. There's an interview station.

So we come back with 400 stories. And then we load them all into 400 iPads. So everyone that comes into the gala in Black Tie is given an iPad with the name of their person and their name.

So it would say, you know, Scott is here for Tedesi. We matched up old men with old men in the village, pregnant women with pregnant women in the village, couples up with couples in the village. So everybody comes in and all the iPads are locked.

So we serve dinner and then after dinner we give everyone the password. And for the next few minutes they experience their person. And everybody is different.

Yours is different than your wife's and mine is different than my wife's. At the end of that I get up and say, you know, a lot of you came to give a lot more tonight. I know there's incredibly generous people in the room.

The tickets were a couple thousand dollars and the tables were expensive. But I said, would you give your person clean water because it's only going to cost \$30. And we hinted out these kindles, 400 kindles which were wired to a huge screen.

And all 400 faces were up in black and white. By the way, this was not easy to do. Speaking of technology.

So everyone has 400 personalized iPads and then the giving device goes out. And there's just a button that says I'll give \$30. And as you give \$30 the face of your person went from black and white to color.

So, of course everyone gives. (Laughter) Now it's 10.05 pm in New York City at this point. And we had this huge surprise.

And we weren't sure if it doesn't work. But I had sent the creative team back to that same village with the drilling rig and a ton of high-fi satellite equipment that like CNN and Fox uses. And I said to the audience, you're about to see what you just did.

So it's 6 in the morning and the sun is just coming up and we open up a live satellite feed. And the same 400 people are standing around the drilling rig. And the drilling rig has been drilling through the night and may get to watch water shooting out of the ground.

And people just lose it. People are weeping. They were... (Laughter) And then we handed the device out again and said, now give generously.

(Laughter) We raised \$3.1 million. (Laughter) So, you know, all that. The interesting thing about that and just the risk that that took, we did 10 satellite tests and five of them failed completely.

With equipment failure, sometimes we just couldn't connect to the satellites. So the tests that I had done in the Metropolitan Museum that afternoon was a complete done. There was no backup plan.

Imagine after all that, like standing on stage saying, and let's open up the feed to Ethiopia. And there's nothing there. And that was a total possibility.

But I think, you know, we... I really don't know what we would have said. And I don't know how much that would have cost us a million dollars, \$2 million. No idea, but you have to take risks.

Yeah. And sometimes they pay off, right? That's good. Sometimes they pay off.

So, one of the things I love about being with you here and, you know, before is just, it is clear that you are someone who lives out of, like, purpose, right? Like, you clearly have a passion and a purpose, you know, behind your life. But that started, obviously, with a, you know, being in a place where you didn't have purpose. And you hinted at it in the video.

Different purpose. Fair enough. Fair enough.

Fair enough. You hinted at it in the video. You said, well, there was this kind of long decline, you know, as you're going into a Punta del State, right? Before that, you had

gone through this long decline.

I'd just be interested to hear more. Because you went through that, but your friends, you know, presumably didn't, right? And so what was that like, right? As you're thinking about, you know, okay, I mean, I'm in a certain life with a certain purpose. And what was it that drove you to get to that place where you said, actually, something has to, the music has to stop? I think because of the way I was brought up, the whole decade was really a betrayal of my childhood, of the foundation.

I mean, it was, it's probably most similar to the prodigal son story. I mean, I gave everybody the finger and I went off and slept with the proverbial prostitutes and the, like, you know, and wound up in kind of like the pig pen, but not in the, you know, not a sense of broke, but just like, what a disgusting thing. What a disgusting mess I've made in my life.

I hate myself. I'm not honest. I do coke at 4am.

Like, I remember once, I remember this very vivid moment where I was, it was noon and I was still up. And I looked out, we were partying, you know, from the night before I was in Soho on a house in the street. And I look out of the window and people are going to lunch, like in suits.

And, you know, we'd been up from the night before and it just felt so disgusting, like so unhealthy. And, you know, so I, there was just this, like, I don't know, like, I was almost being eaten away by my own selfishness and, uh, hedonism. So this, this moment in Punta de Lesta, I think was a great moment because it didn't get any better than that.

And I think I needed that glimpse of, this is how it plays out, because we were with richer people with, you know, I just realized that there would never be enough. There would never be enough girls, there would never be enough money, there would never be enough parties. Someone would always be richer, would always have a nicer house, would always have a nicer car, would have a plane, or a nicer plane if I ever got there.

And it was this endless pursuit of more, but the more it was just pure selfishness. It was only what we could do for ourselves. And, you know, my parents had been praying for 10 years, they had been really constant in my life and, uh, they had little old ladies at the church, like wearing, you know, holes in the carpet with their knees for many years.

And my dad had sent this, this book of kind of deep theology down on this trip with me and I, I never read anything he sent me, but I did. It was called The Pursuit of God, and I think, I remember reading it hung over, and I was reading the exact opposite of my life. So, you know, it was, it was a book written about the pursuit of holiness and integrity and virtue and understanding God and knowing God.

I mean, there was just something about the extremity, I think, of this, that I wanted it, I

mean, I wanted that, and that would have been coming home, because I had that growing up. So, I come back to New York and I'm just kind of bummed now, because I feel guilty about living with my girlfriend, and I feel guilty about doing drugs, and I feel guilty about, um, I hate all the church words, but, you know, it was something that really changed. I mean, there was a, there was a shift in conviction, um, and I just kind of struggled, and I flailed for five or six months, really, and then finally had this moment where I said, I'm out of here.

I rented a car, I drove north aimlessly, I drove through Vermont and Connecticut, and I was talking to God, I was drinking, I was reading the Bible, I mean, it was all very, very kind of, a lot at once, yeah. A lot at once, a lot at once, the Bible and the bottle of doers and the pack of cigarettes, and I wound up in, in Maine, at an internet, a dial up internet cafe on Moosehead Lake, and I remember that's where I filled out the applications, and said, I'm going to go. I'm going to give a year of the ten and see where that takes me, and it took me, you know, on this incredible journey, and I also, you know, I really quit everything.

I felt like I would have to, I would have to give up all the vices, and one fell swoop to fully live out the new story for my life, and I, and I, I kind of felt, again, this is a churchy word, but like, there would be, if I did it in a messy way, they would be graced for that, but I would only be hurting myself. Like, it would be much easier to just make a clean break and never smoke again, and never touch drugs again, and never look at porn again, and just like swear off everything in one go, and kind of allow myself to step into this new, and then it was just, it was amazing, and I was with these unbelievable Christian doctors who were living out their faith in the most authentic way. You know, Dr. Gary was a plastic surgeon in California, like the dude could be in Maldives vacationing at the Four Seasons with his family.

He's given now 30 years, so it was inspiring to be with those people, and I wanted to be like him. Yeah, so, love it. When, I'm sure you get this a lot, because I'm sure you have, you have this, you tell this story, and I'm sure that there are people who say, wow, like I may not be a nightclub promoter, but man, I understand what you're talking about in terms of feeling an emptiness, and then they say, I'm sure the next thing that you get is, okay, so do I need to go and spend \$500 a month and put myself on a ship and go down the west coast of Africa, like what do you say to people when they say, okay, what's the next step? I know this isn't it, and what's the next step? So, I actually think some people do.

Some people need to do that. And now being at it for so long, I know that that is a response that some people have had to our story and to other stories, and it's actually worked out well for them, because a lot of people are in jobs that they hate. I mean, a lot of people come up to me afterwards and I just hate my job, and I hate kind of the, I'm just a part of the American Dream, but I don't know that it's the American Dream

anymore, and someone's always going to have a bigger house.

I mean, they're on much more sane version of what I was chasing. So, I think some people need to get out, and maybe it's not go start a charity or go volunteer, but sometimes it is a nice break, the gap year at 34 or 56, to go and open yourself up to another experience, and maybe it's volunteering, maybe it's, I think for the people that don't need to do that. For me, it was very positional.

You're either serving others or you're serving yourself, and if you, you know, my entire life was set up to serve only me. Every decision that I made was run through the filter of, "Is this good for me?" And I think a lot of people live their lives that way. So, if you can shift that positionally to, "Is this good for others? Will this benefit the poor? Will it benefit the people in my life, my coworkers, my family?" In service, there's a real freedom.

And, you know, we, I mean, what we're really doing in charity water is the vision is to reinvent charity. I mean, the vision is all of this soft stuff around compassion and empathy and general, radical generosity. It's all movement stuff.

Water just happens to be a really good way to help people practically, to eliminate some of the suffering in the world. And it's also universal, and everybody can agree on it. But what we're really after is trying to move people and to shift them and get them addicted to giving.

They get them addicted to giving of their time, of their talent, of their money. The more you give, the more you want to give. It's really true.

But some people just never allow themselves that experience. They're so busy giving of themselves, giving to themselves. When you started charity water, you were single, right? You'd come back.

You were single. And since then, you, of course, as you highlighted in the video, right? So you, it's now you and your wife. And now your baby on the way is now a baby in your house, right? And how does that, how has that made you think about or rethink about your priorities? Like, how do you think about your priorities now? There's a lot there.

I mean, first of all, you immediately start thinking about the lives that your kids are going to live. I did a birthday campaign for Jackson. He had no choice.

He kind of, you know, he came into the world and I was really intentional about instead of gifts, you know, what of his life being born into a middle class family, where he would never have to drink dirty water as long as he lived. And he probably would never have to go hungry or not have a roof over his head or be trafficked or any of these things facing a billion people worldwide. And I wanted his life, you know, from the moment he was born to start impacting other people's lives and to actually create a legacy for him.

So it's interesting. I raise a lot with my birthdays every year and we know a lot of donors at this point, but that idea was so catalytic. His birth campaign raised a quarter of a million dollars.

So many people just gave. They love the idea to welcome a child and have that birth. He helped 7,800 people in Niger get clean water.

So I'm thinking of taking him one day when he's old enough to understand to meet those people. Many of them who would have had kids, you know, the same age, they're growing up now with clean water. So I'm thinking so much more about that.

The travels changed. I mean, before Jackson was born, I did 96 flights that year. So that's like a plane every three and a half days.

I've cut that way back. I try and bring them with me a lot. I live, you know, I've optimized my whole life in New York City around the family when I'm there.

So we live in a 940 square foot one bedroom with two kids, but it's eight blocks from the office. I could have a house. I mean, they pay me enough.

I could go an hour outside in New York and have a four bedroom house with a yard. But then I would have to get up at six in the morning and commute in for an hour and a half every day. And then I'd be home at seven.

So when I'm home, I would much, much rather, you know, be home. And I see the kids in the morning and at night. And we just have a tiny little apartment.

So that's kind of the trade off. So there's a lot of, you know, there are a lot of those little things. And then you see kids differently as a dad, you know, as I'm walking through these villages, you know, you imagine your child is that child.

I was with a mom in Niger last year in the Sahel Desert and she told me that she lost eight children. And she named them all and she gave me all their ages. And two survived and she'd fallen down the well with one of the two.

So one of the children was disabled. And, you know, that means more to you as a parent. I mean, I can't imagine the pain of losing one child.

Imagine doing that eight times. How she was even talking to me. I just, I can't even imagine that kind of grief.

So that's different as a parent than just the idea of being a parent. Sure. And that love that obviously, you know, we feel as parents.

I mean, it opens you up in a completely new capacity. Yeah. So we're going to open it up for questions from others here in a minute.

But I have like one or two other questions first. And one of them is, so we're here in Seattle, right? And the odds then are really good that there are a lot of people who are sitting here who may not even know a Christian or if they do, they actually don't know anyone who they consider credible, right? If they do. And I'd just be interested to hear like, how would you, as someone who at least I think is credible, like, how would you describe your faith and what it means? I think I would start by saying that I was very intentional 10 years ago about separating my personal faith from the organization.

And, you know, I had a much bigger, so I felt like I would be able to live my personal faith and values out through the organization, but I didn't want it to be exclusionary. And I didn't want you to have to do what I did on a Sunday to either work at the organization or give to the organization or be a beneficiary of the organization or believe what I believe. So I kind of keep theology.

I mean, I had a radical encounter. I mean, everything in my life changed when I came back to my very Christian faith. I think I've always kept my theology pretty simple.

The verse that was just such a driver for me for years was, in James, he says, "To look after true religion is this, to look after widows and orphans in their distress and to keep yourself by being polluted." I was over two. I mean, for 10 years. I hadn't done a single thing for widows and orphans and I literally polluted the world for a living.

So I kind of thought about, I get to live out my work by serving the poor and I get to work on my personal values and, you know, unpalute myself. So let's start there. And, I mean, I could tell you guys there have been miracles.

I mean, there have been things that we have prayed for that, like, I mean, almost fallen out of the sky. So my faith over the last 10 years would look like this. And I mean, I, you know, from, I mean, there are stories that are more radical than a stranger walking in and giving a million dollars.

But I wanted to create a very big tent and I get so excited when Muslim school kids during Ramadan send in \$60,000 from Dubai. And when Jewish synagogues write letters saying, "This is the first non-Jewish organization we have ever supported in the history, you should know that." But the values are so important, you know, and their shared values. So maybe 15% of the people with charity water would do what I do on a Sunday, maybe 20.

And that's like, that's so exciting to me. So I get to live, you know, a faith that is the most important thing in my life out, but I don't need to, the organization doesn't have any agenda other than to help people get clean water. And in what I believe about heaven, like nobody is drinking that disgusting water in heaven.

No kids are walking five hours with 40 pounds of dirty water on their back. So that's kind

of enough for me in the work. And then, you know, how I live my life, I better live out the faith that I profess in my family and the way that I am as a dad and as a husband and the way that I lead.

And that's important to me too. Yeah, good. Good.

Well, why don't we go ahead, I'm sure there are a bunch of questions out here in the audience and want to make sure we have time for those. So if you have one, if you raise your hand, I'm sure we'll get a microphone to you. I just got a pressure.

Question for you, when you're looking to spend money on something that's not a clean water well, like your VR headset story, which is awesome, how do you make that decision about how much to, what to spring for, how much to spend on something that, you know, may or may not work and it's a marketing thing and how fast and far to push that. We're really cheap. So the 100% model allows us to be cheap.

So with this two bank account model, you know, a VR film these days cost about a million dollars. I think we did ours for under 100 grand and I didn't want to pay for it. So I got someone else to pay for it.

Our office in New York, we just moved into 22,000 square feet in prime real estate in Tribeca, where we have an unbelievable lease because I took the landlord to Ethiopia and I wanted him to catch the vision. And then I didn't want to pay at \$1.7 million for our build out. So I had the landlord bring in the construction crew and the plumbers and I gave them a presentation.

And then they started donating their fees and then the architect donated back his fees and then I called Samsung and they donated \$50,000 to TVs for the office. We called WeWork and they started donating furniture for the office and \$1.2 million of the \$1.7 was donated. So we still, even in our size, are asking, I mean, we ask for software that would cost us \$1,000 a year for free, which is cheap.

But I like paying people really well. So we have a 401k, which we match. I mean, we pay above market for nonprofits in New York City.

So I'd rather that the money go to people as we have it. And we've been very fortunate that these 117 families that support all the overhead have actually been growing and the interest in funding the unsexy stuff has been growing. So, you know, my first thing is like, if I want to do something like that, my CFO says there's never money for this stuff.

So he'll say, we'll go and find the money if you want to do it. And we do. That's great.

Thank you. And if you ask, I mean, think of all the foundations in the world that would have loved to fund our VR film. Right? If you look at it that way, everybody wants to be a part of experimenting with something new that could make an impact.

And companies want to give. You know, asking Samsung for TVs is so much more interesting than money. You know, asking software companies to donate their software is more interesting than money.

I mean, people are, they put their entire lives into what they make. And if the thing that they make can be used in the service of others, you're doing them a favor. You know, you're allowing their company to have a part of your mission.

What do you think the next big technology is for sharing stories? That's a great question. Um, I actually don't know. I really don't know.

What I'm worried about is that we're getting so distracted and fragmented at the moment. I used to be able to make three minute YouTube videos and move people to action. And it just doesn't work anymore.

I mean, that's why we made that thing 20 minutes. And, you know, a lot of people won't watch it online. But I'm actually moving kind of the other way.

I think public speaking, I think getting people in a room, I think creating a sense of community and in person experiential museums, exhibitions, things that people can touch and I don't know, I don't know, but I don't think it's anything that's out there right now. And I don't know that it's technology that's driving stories. I don't know that it's, you know, a new pair of glasses from Snapchat or AI or any of that stuff.

I think people, I think people miss like sitting around a campfire listening to people tell stories. I mean, I was in the movies the other day and I was sitting kind of towards the back. There are 40 people on their phone.

You've seen this, right? People pull out their phones, they're emailing in the middle of a movie. Like, you know how big the screen is? Like, Dolby THX! Like, IMX can't hold people anymore. So, I think, you know, part of that is, you know, something that's really scary about society and our brains and our attention spans.

So, I kind of tend to go the other way, thinking about what's going to work or what's going to be most effective in the future.

[silence] Hi, I actually have two questions. So, the first one is when you say clean water, there's a lot of assumptions associated with it.

I should also clarify, I am a civil engineer that works with drinking water, so, and I know you're not, so I'm not going to ask you for details. But, when I think about charity and water, one of the things that always comes up is Bangladesh for a long time. It was what's drill wells, what's drill wells, because everybody else has surface water, and then it turns out that the drill wells have arsenic in it.

And so, you just put the post poll in the public home issues. So, if you could talk a little bit about the wells that you drill and what kind of a twister is associated with that. And then, two, water poverty is not just a third world country issue anymore, we're seeing that more and more here in the United States.

So, I was wondering if you could talk about what you think of your company on free to charity here in the United States. Great questions. On the first, so, wells are one of 14 different solutions that we employ across the portfolio.

And the local partners really lead that. So, in Bangladesh, it's interesting, I've been there a bunch of times, we did Ponsan filters. So, we did these huge, we took the surface water and we would clean it through chambers.

As you drive through Bangladesh, as you know, you see a bunch of wells with the Xs on them. They've gotten on top of that, so they're testing water. So, every well that we would ever drill gets tested, and they don't all work.

We had a bunch of wells in Kenya that we just had to shut down because of fluoride issues. So, there's a bunch of different issues with its fluoride, with its arsenic in different regions. So, the solutions would range from \$700,000 gravity fed systems in Rwanda that we're doing to rainwater harvesting systems in Rajasthan because we can't drill because of the water saline.

We fund the biggest biosan filter program in the world in Cambodia, which are \$65 household filters. We just did an eight-year retro study and 98% of the filters were being used properly eight years later. So, there's a whole team that works on that.

That's about a \$3 million cost center at Charity Water of 19 people, whose entire job, and they're the water experts. So, they're flying around with clipboards, testing water, auditing, making sure the money's being spent. So, I'd love for you to talk to them if you ever come to New York or they're much smarter about that stuff than I am.

When it comes to stuff like Flint, we looked at that and our mission has been very focused on rural water supply. So, we don't work in urban or peri-urban. Of the 663 million people without water, 80% of them live in rural areas.

So, there's a lot of work to be done there. We did some early urban projects that just were disasters. Liberian slums, everything was vandalized.

We just didn't understand it. We didn't find any partners with a proficiency of working sustainably in urban environments. So, we decided to focus on rural.

We avoided conflict zones. We were too young of an organization to be working in South Sudan or DRC Congo at the time. And then we avoided governments who didn't want us.

So, that left us a lot of countries to be able to work in. When it came to Flint, our team actually looked at it and said, "We don't add any value. We don't know anything about huge billion dollar public infrastructure." Wells aren't the answer to drill wells in backyards of people in Flint.

It's advocacy that's needed. It's very political. So, we just kind of said, "We don't have any of the core proficiencies.

We did a blog post and we put it on our social media and we recommended six or seven local organizations that people could vet." The same thing, we've heard of these pockets in Appalachia where you might have a couple communities. The thing I will say, when we've investigated any of that, it's not that they're drinking dirty water though. They're all going to the 7-11 to fill up buckets with clean water from the hose outside.

So, it's not, in some ways, it's so different than what you see in Ethiopia, in Bolivia, in Rajasthan, India. So, I think just, if the right situation, I think we'll look at it. I think I'd probably see us get into an extension of water in rural water supply that would have to do with agriculture or livestock before we would take on domestic issues or kind of build that functionality.

I am always struggling because I don't know who to send people to because I get the question a lot. So, there was one awesome charity here that drew a circle around the 72,000 people in America that didn't have clean water and had a solution for them. I think I could send them a lot of business.

But I haven't found that yet. So, if you know anybody, let me know.

[BLANK_AUDIO] >> Hi, just a question.

What creative charitable idea do you wish somebody would do now? >> It's a great question. >> It's not another website. [LAUGH] It's not another company or another marketplace that tries to get charitable goods that give to like charities together because none of that stuff works.

>> I think, it's an idea that we don't have yet. We're really trying to reinvent the subscription business. So, what is the new thing? If sponsor a child was the old thing, millennials aren't really sponsoring children.

>> Why is it? >> I think there's a lack of trust in the system. Is that really my kid? \$38 a month, it's like too perfect. It only costs \$38 a month for every month in that child's life cycle for eight years.

It's just not a product that young people are buying. But yet, millennials are buying subscription products like Crazy, Netflix, Hulu, Spotify, Apple Music, New York Times, New York or magazine, right? We, a millennial might have seven to ten different

subscriptions. So, that's what we're really trying to reinvent at the moment is what would we give people? We don't have a child that can write them.

The money is actually fractionally going to a bunch of different countries to fund a wide variety of solutions that might cost \$65 or \$700,000 or \$61 a person or \$29 a person. And that's always in flux. So, what does that experience look like that would get someone to give 30 bucks a month, 50 bucks a month for a long time? So, I wish that someone would solve that and then I could do that.

And that's what we're working on. So, we launched. So, this video, you guys saw the, you saw the alternate ending.

The actual video we released online made a very clear ask at the end of this for people to join a new giving community called the Spring at \$30 a month and kind of anchored there. And we got about 6,600 people. So, we realized that the key to our success over the next ten years, we're too big to start at zero every January one.

So, we need to build this community of people who can give a little bit every single month that we can talk to, that we can share stories with, that we can kind of bring along with us. But we're not quite sure what that experience is yet. Yep.

You're like on top of water. Like, what practical need? So, that was the idea with the colon, was going to be charity education, charity shelter, charity health. I was actually interested in basic needs.

If I was going to do something else, it would probably be hunger. If I was going to do anything, it would have to be something that I could show a supporter, your money did this. So, it has to have a tangible, you know, physicality to it.

So, charity colon, the cure for cancer, wouldn't work for me. I can't take people's ten-year-old's money selling lemonade to give it to, you know, people in labs that are looking for possible cures in test tubes. Just the way that my kind of brain works and the people that I'm trying to reach.

You know, it's a much more sophisticated donor, I think they can give to that. So, it would be shelter. I mean, I think people should have roofs over their head.

I don't think people should be going to bed hungry. I don't think a woman should be losing eight children. You know, some of them that could probably, that might have died of NTDs, completely preventable diseases.

So, there's a lot of stuff I could get excited about. The nice thing about water is water touches education. It touches health.

It touches the local economy. Fifty-two percent of disease throughout the developing

world, what other people would call the third world. Fifty-two percent of disease is water and sanitation, lit.

That would be a world health organization. So, half of the sick people in all these countries where we are working are sick because of bad water and sanitation. So, that's kind of the beauty of water and why we never strayed because we started building water projects and toilets at schools.

The toilets are more expensive than the water projects. Because the girls hit puberty, get their period, they stay home for four or five days every month. If the school has no toilet, they fall behind in their studies.

Culturally, a lot of these communities are saying, "Well, kids, girls shouldn't be in school anyway." So, they go back to walking for firewood or for water every day. So, that's, it is this really kind of core crux basic need that we've just been able to stay focused on and find all of these peripheral benefits. For one more question, the last question.

[inaudible] Hi, do you work with other sister organizations like Water.org? Are there many of them like PAP to do lots of water projects? Yeah, so the implementing is done through currently 13 implementing partners. So, we are, the money we raised for the water projects employs about 1500 people now across the portfolio. Working in five different states in India with five different local partners, for example, 600 people in Ethiopia, part of an indigenous organization called the Relief Society of Tigray that we've been working with for nine years.

The other, you know, the other NGOs that you guys might have heard of, water.org is a pretty big one. They do water credit, so it's a little different. They're working in urban and peri-urban, more than rural, and they're working with a slightly higher income level, kind of three to five dollars a day.

One of the things they do is they make loans to people so they can connect up to the municipality, water source. So, it's great work. It's a little different.

Matt Damon's done an awesome job by showing up year in, year out, going to the projects. I mean, he's a great advocate for water. A lot of celebrities, you know, will talk about a cause for about three months and then move on to the next one.

So, we have a lot of respect for their work. I think there needs to be more charity waters and more water.orgs, and I'd love to see some of these other much, much smaller organizations get to, you know, a greater level of scale. I mean, we've got 663 million people out there.

And we are not at a funding capacity yet. So, charity water specifically has a 3X delta between the people we could help today and the money we're raising today. Not 10X, but 3X.

So, there's, you know, the funding drives the capacity. So, when we scaled up our Ethiopia program, we've now bought them 45 trucks. We've helped them hire 450 people over the last nine years.

We've bought them drilling rigs and helped them kind of build a new factory. So, the funding drives more capacity. And right now there's not enough funding.

And there's too much capacity. Thank you, Scott. Please join me in thanking staff for being with us tonight.