

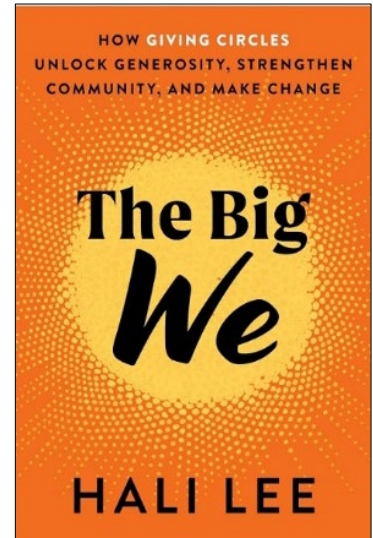


Building a “Big We” *When Relationships Become as Valuable as Resources*

Every now and then I come across a book that doesn't simply reinforce what I already believe. It gives me a new vocabulary for describing it. [*The Big We: How Giving Circles Unlock Generosity, Strengthen Communities, and Make Change*](#) by Hali Lee is one of those books.

At first glance, the book appears to be about giving circles¹ and collective philanthropy. It is. But it's also about something much larger. Lee challenges the notion that philanthropy belongs primarily to foundations, institutions, or wealthy individuals. Instead, she argues that the most transformative philanthropy often emerges when ordinary people come together, pool not only their financial resources but also their relationships, experiences, perspectives, and hopes, and collectively invest in the well-being of others.

In many ways, I found myself nodding in agreement throughout the book. Not because the [Cranwell Family Foundation](#) (CFF) is organized as a giving circle (it's not), but because so much of Lee's philosophy reflects the values that have quietly shaped our work from the beginning.



One of the ideas that resonated most deeply with me was her vision of philanthropy as a participatory, relational, community-building practice. Too often, philanthropy is viewed as a transaction: a donor gives, an organization receives, and the relationship ends. Lee invites us to imagine something different. What if philanthropy were primarily about cultivating relationships? What if generosity wasn't measured only by dollars distributed, but by trust built, communities strengthened, and people brought together around a shared purpose?

That vision feels remarkably familiar.

Since our founding, the Cranwell Family Foundation has intentionally remained small. We have often said that we value *depth over breadth, sustainability over scale, and ripple over splash*. Those aren't simply giving strategies. They reflect our belief that lasting change is rooted in relationships. Whether engaging with students from the African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg, South Africa, refugee leaders in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, partners at Virginia Tech, community leaders in the New River Valley, or organizations serving rural communities in Southwest Virginia, our goal has never been simply to fund good work. It has been to invest in people, strengthen partnerships, and help create the conditions where others can flourish.

Reading *The Big We* challenged me to think even more broadly about that calling.

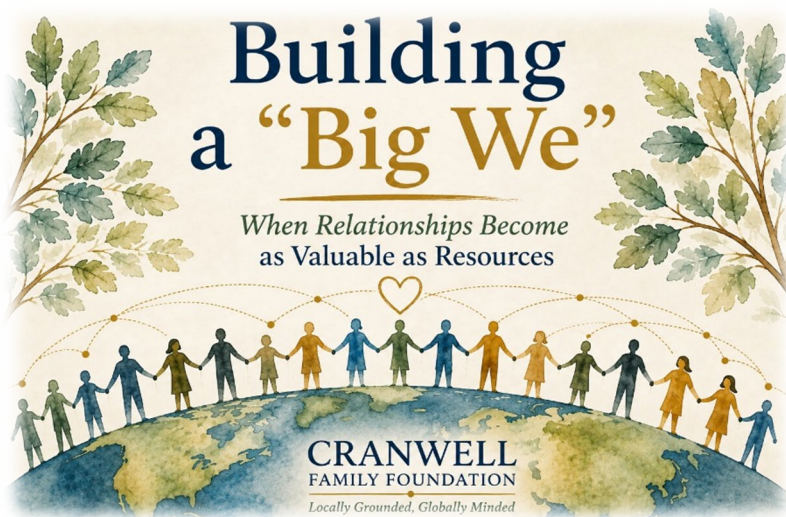
Perhaps one of the unique opportunities available to a small family foundation like CFF is not merely to make philanthropic gifts, but to help cultivate larger “we’s.” To connect people who might never have met. To bridge communities separated by geography, culture, or life experience. To create spaces where generosity becomes collaborative rather than individual, and where relationships become as valuable as resources.

¹ At its heart, a giving circle is simply a “community of generosity” – people who come together to combine not only their financial resources, but also their relationships, experiences, ideas, and shared commitment to making a difference. The emphasis is as much on building community and learning together as it is on the giving itself.

One moment came to mind almost immediately as I read Lee's book. A few years ago, I met the founders of [Elimisha Kakuma](#), a nonprofit affiliated with the [Center for Refugee, Migrant, and Displacement Studies](#) (CRMDS) at Virginia Tech (VT) that provides access to higher education opportunities for high school graduates living in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. Not long afterwards, I found myself, along with two other Cranwell family members, standing in Kakuma in northwestern Kenya, listening to young refugee leaders describe the futures they were working tirelessly to build (not only for themselves, but for their communities). Months later, I watched some of those same dreams intersect with faculty and staff at VT, generous donors, host families in Blacksburg, Virginia, and countless others who had never imagined their lives would become intertwined as students from Kakuma arrived at VT to begin their undergraduate studies.

None of these individuals and organizations could have accomplished this work alone. Yet together, they became something much larger than the sum of their individual contributions. Looking back, I realize we weren't simply supporting students. We were a part of helping create a community that now stretches across continents.

And perhaps that's one of the most unexpected privileges of this work. Some of the most meaningful outcomes have not been the scholarships awarded or the other philanthropic gifts given, but the relationships that have emerged because people chose to enter one another's stories. Donors become mentors. Students become teachers. Universities become partners. Refugee leaders become colleagues and friends. Communities that once knew little about one another begin celebrating each other's successes, sharing each other's burdens, and imagining a future together. That, to me, is what a "Big We" looks like.



In our own small way, I think CFF has already seen glimpses of this. We see it in the connections between the [Center for Refugee, Migrant, and Displacement Studies](#), [Elimisha Kakuma](#), and refugee communities in Kenya. In the partnership and educational pathways between the [African Leadership Academy](#) and Virginia Tech. In the connection between rural students from Southwest Virginia, the [Center for Rural Education](#), and the [Steger Center for International Scholarship](#) in Riva San Vitale, Switzerland. In our growing partnership with the [Community Foundation of the New River Valley](#), connecting local donors, nonprofits, and community leaders in ways that strengthen the place we call home. In the renewed connection with [Miller School of Albemarle](#), where a chapter of Cranwell family history dating back more than a

century is now helping create opportunities for a new generation of students. And in the countries, cultures, and perspectives represented by the thousands of international students served by the [Cranwell International Center](#). Together, these relationships remind us that when people choose to invest in one another, they become part of a story much larger than any one person or organization could write alone.

Those connections matter. They remind us that the boundaries defining "our community" may be far more expansive than we imagine.

Perhaps that is one of the quiet invitations of Lee's book: **not simply to give together, but to belong together.** To see philanthropy not as something a select few do *for* others, but as something communities practice *with* one another.

As I finished the book, I found myself wondering whether this may be one of the next chapters in the Cranwell Family Foundation's own journey. Not abandoning our commitment to thoughtful philanthropic giving, but leaning even more intentionally into our role as a convener, connector, collaborator, and catalyst for communities of generosity. If philanthropy is ultimately about relationships, then perhaps one of the greatest gifts a foundation like CFF can offer is helping people discover that they are already part of a much bigger "we."

Small scale. Big impact.

Maybe that's another way of saying: a small foundation can help build a very big "we."