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Gifts With Meaning

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IT'S time for my annual holiday gift guide, the chance to recommend presents more meaningful than a tie or sweater.

For \$20, through Heifer International (heifer.org), you can buy a flock of ducks and help a family work its way to a better life. Or \$74 through CARE (care.org) pays for a schoolgirl's books and supplies so she can attend school for a year — and girls' education may be the highest-return investment available in the world today.

Here are some other ideas:

■ We're seeing painful upheavals about race on university campuses these days, but the civil rights issue in America today is our pre-K through 12th grade education system, which routinely sends the neediest kids to the worst schools. To address these roots of inequality, **a group called Communities in Schools (communitiesinschools.org) supports disadvantaged kids, mostly black and Latino, in elementary, middle and high schools around the country.**

For \$15 a month per child, it offers mentoring, pregnancy prevention, college counseling and more, and it's effective: 91 percent of the students it helps end up graduating from high school.

■ The world today has more refugees and migrants than at any time since the World War II era, and winter will be a particularly brutal time for them. The International Rescue Committee (rescue.org) has long been the champion of refugees everywhere, and on its website \$25 will buy a solar lamp so refugees can see at night. Or \$84 buys 15 warm blankets to fight the cold.

■ Trickle Up (trickleup.org) lifts people out of extreme poverty through the "graduation program" (so called because people graduate from poverty). The program typically consists of a gift of a cow or other animal, training, a savings account and other support, and as I wrote earlier this year, it seems to work by giving people hope.

The graduation program's effectiveness has been proved in rigorous international trials. In India, each dollar invested in a version of this program generated economic returns of 433 percent. When a Yale seminar on economic development was given foundation money and entrusted with studying how to allocate the money so that it would do the most good, it ended up donating the sum to Trickle Up.

■ I've written twice this year about transgender people and their struggles for acceptance in a world in which even as children they are often bullied, mocked, assaulted and kicked out of the house. The National Center for Transgender Equity (transequality.org) provides a much-needed voice to support them.

■ In Angola, I visited "HeroRats" that have been trained to sniff out land mines (and, in some countries, diagnose tuberculosis). In a day, they can clear 20 times as much of a minefield as a human, and they work for bananas! My kids adopted a rat in my name five years ago for Father's Day, and he's still clearing minefields. You can adopt a rat for \$7 a month through Apopo.org.

■ I wrote this month about Dr. Sanduk Ruit and Dr. Geoffrey Tabin fighting blindness in Asia and Africa (CureBlindness.org), at a cost of just \$25 per cataract surgery on an eye. There's nothing more joyous than to see someone who has been blind for years have the surgery and, the very next day when the bandages are removed, being able to see again. Now, that's a gift!

■ In June I wrote about Dr. Tom Catena, a Catholic missionary physician in the rebel-held Nuba Mountains of Sudan. The government of Sudan regularly bombs the area and has even bombed his hospital; the hospital grounds have foxholes to shelter in when bombers appear overhead.

Dr. Tom, as he is known, battles leprosy, delivers babies and amputates arms of kids hit by shrapnel. He pulls maggots out of burn wounds and struggles to get United Nations agencies to supply vaccines. He's also among the worst-paid doctors in the world: Working seven days week, he gets \$350 a month. And as it happens, donations to Dr. Tom's hospital through amhf.us are now matched by a New York couple, Rabbi Erica and Mark Gerson.

And that in itself is beautifully heartwarming this holiday season: A rabbi matches gifts by atheists or Muslims to support the work of a Catholic missionary doctor.