My thanks to some women who mothered me through dark and bright days,

Annie Henderson
Vivian Baxter
Frances Williams
Berdis Baldwin
Amisher Glenn

My thanks to one woman who allows me to be a daughter to her, even today,

Dr. Dorothy Height

My thanks to women not born to me but who allow me to mother them,

Oprah Winfrey
Rosa Johnson Butler
Lydia Stuckey
Valerie Simpson
Constancia Romilly
Philanthropy

To write about giving to a person who is naturally generous reminds me of a preacher passionately preaching to the already committed choir. I am encouraged to write on because I remember that from time to time, the choir does need to be uplifted and thanked for its commitment. Those voices need to be encouraged to sing again and again, with even more emotion.

Each single American giver keeps alive the American Cancer Society, the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Goodwill, Sickle Cell Anemia, American Jewish Society, NAACP, and the Urban League. The list continues to include church foundations, synagogue programs, Muslim Temple associations, Buddhist shrines, groups, officials, and city and social clubs. However, the largest sums of money come from philanthropists.

The word philanthropy was taken from the two Greek words, philo—lover of; and anthro—mankind. So, philanthropists
are lovers of humanity. They build imposing edifices for people to work in and to play in. They give huge sums of money to support organizations which offer better health and education to the society. They are the principal patrons of the arts.

The mention of philanthropy elicits smiles, followed by the sensation of receiving unexpected good fortune from a generous but faceless source.

There are those who would like to see themselves as philanthropists. Philanthropists often are represented by committees and delegations. They are disconnected from the recipients of their generosity. I am not a member of that gathering. Rather I like to think of myself as charitable. The charitable say in effect, "I seem to have more than I need and you seem to have less than you need. I would like to share my excess with you." Fine, if my excess is tangible, money or goods, and fine if not, for I learned that to be charitable with gestures and words can bring enormous joy and repair injured feelings.

My maternal grandmother who raised me had a remarkable influence on how I saw the world and how I reckoned my place in it. She was the picture of dignity. She spoke softly and walked slowly, with her hands behind her back, fingers laced together. I imitated her so successfully that neighbors called me her shadow.

"Sister Henderson, I see you got your shadow with you again."

Grandmother would look at me and smile. "Well, I guess you’re right. If I stop, she stops. If I go, she goes."

When I was thirteen, my grandmother took me back to California to join my mother, and she returned immediately to Arkansas. The California house was a world away from that little home in which I grew up in Arkansas. My mother wore her straight hair in a severe stylish bob. My grandmother didn’t believe in hot curling women’s hair, so I had grown up with a braided natural. Grandmother turned our radio on to listen to the news, religious music, Gang Busters, and The Lone Ranger. In California my mother wore lipstick and rouge and played loud blues and jazz music on a record player. Her house was full of people who laughed a lot and talked loudly. I definitely did not belong. I walked around in that worldly atmosphere, with my hands clasped behind my back, my hair pulled back in a tight braid, humming a Christian song.

My mother watched me for about two weeks. Then we had what was to become familiar as, “a sit down talk to.”

She said, “Maya, you disapprove of me because I am not like your grandmother. That’s true. I am not. But I am your mother and I am working some part of my anatomy off to buy you good clothes and give you well-prepared food and keep this roof over your head. When you go to school, the teacher will smile at you and you will smile back. Other students you don’t even know will smile and you will smile. But on the other hand, I am your mother. I tell you what I want you to do. If you can force one smile on your face for strangers, do it for me. I promise you I will appreciate it.”

She put her hand on my cheek and smiled. “Come on, baby, smile for mother. Come on.”

She made a funny face and against my wishes, I smiled. She kissed me on the lips and started to cry.

“That’s the first time I have seen you smile. It is a beautiful smile, Mother’s beautiful daughter can smile.”

I had never been called beautiful and no one in my memory had ever called me daughter.

That day, I learned that I could be a giver by simply bring-
ing a smile to another person. The ensuing years have taught me that a kind word, a vote of support is a charitable gift. I can move over and make another place for someone. I can turn my music up if it pleases, or down if it is annoying.

I may never be known as a philanthropist, but I certainly am a lover of mankind, and I will give freely of my resources.

I am happy to describe myself as charitable.