

Our Shared Future: We Must Get There Together

Franklin A. Thomas

In 1992, James A. Joseph Lecture on Philanthropy honoree, Franklin A. Thomas, was President of the Ford Foundation, the largest private foundation in the United States. Throughout his life and deeds Mr. Thomas been an exemplar of such excellence. At a time when ethnic and racial conflicts appear to be increasing throughout the world, his sage prescriptions about how organized philanthropy can strengthen civil society warrant our full attention and consideration. ABFE is proud to honor Mr. Thomas for his tremendous contributions for the benefit of African-Americans and to share his remarks, "Our Shared Future: We Must Get There Together," with abroad audience of grantmakers and public policy decision-makers.

This evening I want to reflect on the role that philanthropy and the nonprofit sector play in maintaining a civil society.

As I was planning my remarks, I thought I would like to review some of the astounding events that have occurred over these last several years. We saw the crumbling of the Berlin Wall and the reuniting of East and West Germany, the independence and free election of the government of Namibia. We saw Nelson Mandela gain his freedom, and the commencement of the process of dismantling apartheid in South Africa, including holding our breaths this past March as white South Africans took an historic vote to pursue equality rather than, inequality, in what we all hope was the last all-white vote in that nation's history.

We saw the collapse of the Soviet Union and we realized that the Cold War had ended with a whisper instead of with a terrifying bang.

I wanted to make the observation that it seemed that history had come down on the side of the way of life that America has expressed so uniquely, on the side of societies open to change and experiment.

And then I wanted to pose the question whether we as a nation could feel confident about our ability to lead the world in its next crucial stage – that is, creating lasting democratic values and institutions with growing economic prosperity, especially in the face of revived territorial and ethnic disputes in so many of the newly freed nations.

With so much of the world looking to the American example, what could we say when asked "How do you do it? How do you translate 'Liberty and Justice for All' from a promise into a reality for all of your citizens? How do you draw the best effort out of your diverse population, and provide opportunities for social and economic advancement for all of your people?" Could we honestly say that as a society we had faced and answered those questions?

I was in the midst of these reflections when the verdict came in the Rodney King case.

For months Americans had cringed at the televised spectacle of that brutal police beating, only to be stunned by the acquittal of the officers involved—a verdict that lit a spark and ignited violence and destruction in Los Angeles, graphically and dramatically exposing us all to America's worsening, unfinished domestic agenda. The events in Los Angeles have had many effects.

For one, they have resulted in the greatest rush to self-examination on the part of Americans in more than a generation... and this lecture is no exception. Instead of starting with the global events I spoke of before, I decided to begin with L.A.

What happened there has presented us with a chilling new metaphor for where the world may be headed – toward becoming not the peaceful global village that the victories of pro democracy movements around the world first seemed to signal, but a global Los Angeles.

The events in Los Angeles have also raised to a new level of urgency the question of philanthropy's role in creating and nurturing a civil society.

In one reading, of course, the problems in Los Angeles may seem the province of those of us concerned specifically with urban poverty. But in a deeper sense, Los Angeles speaks to our nation's, and philanthropy's, need to address a much broader range of Issues. I would organize those Issues around three themes: voice, vision, and will.

First and foremost, Los Angeles has dramatized the need of people to feel that their voices, speaking about their needs and aspirations, are being heard, that they have a stake in the system, that they matter to the larger society, that they have some measure of control over the circumstances of their lives, and over the kind of steps taken to improve those circumstances.

Paying attention to the voices of those who live in Los Angeles and who have been most directly affected by the riots, and also to the voices of those who live in similar poor communities, will be essential to finding solutions to the problems they and we as a nation face.

But Los Angeles has also laid bare the new complexities of urban life in the last decade of the 20th century. We see that, added to the by-now familiar picture of the city as a place beset by homelessness, drugs, poverty, and crime, there are exacerbated antagonisms within and across groups: of Asians versus Blacks, the American-born versus immigrants, and a range of other intensifying competitions.

It has also revealed a city where the too-prevalent view among its more than 10 million inhabitants appears to have been: "*We are not all in this together.*"

In revealing both these realities, Los Angeles has underscored, first, our need to make sure that as we strengthen the voices of separate communities, we encourage those communities to begin talking to one another and to search for common ground, and second, that we also strengthen a common vision of our shared political culture, traditions, and aspirations.

And finally, Los Angeles speaks to our need to marshal the confidence and the political will to try to solve these problems.

In each of these areas – giving voice, forging a common vision, and providing the political will – philanthropy has an important and necessary role to play.

First to the question of voice.

How do we help make sure that all voices are heard? One way is by supporting the community-based efforts of disadvantaged people to help themselves.

I entered the nonprofit sector 25 years ago as head of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation – during a period fraught with its own sense of terrible urgency – out of a faith in the power of people, no matter what their circumstances, to play a major role in changing the conditions of their lives.

When I began, it was on the gamble that the energy and spirit that were already there could be harnessed in a new way.

I believed that no matter what government did, there was a need for communities to design programs that were rooted in their own needs, abilities and resources.

I still believe that – with a conviction that has only been strengthened over the last quarter century. When we started, our aim was to put into motion abroad revitalization of the area and to give the people of the community the power to play a central role in that work. We believed that the process of development, and not just the finished product, should be of benefit to the local people.

A key element was substantial and continuing core support from several sources – public and private. That help enabled us to test new ideas, develop new programs and, most importantly, draw together large numbers of community residents to enlist their ideas and their assistance. Our donors trusted us to use these funds creatively and flexibly once we and they had agreed on our major goals.

Those efforts bore fruit in no small part because they were planted in the fertile soil of a long tradition among Blacks of community and of self-help.

Scores of other community organizations in New York and many other cities were engaged in similar work. They included the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, Telacu, and CHARO in Los Angeles, the Spanish-Speaking Unity Council in Oakland, Chicanos Por La Causa in Phoenix, and the New Community Corporation in Newark, to name just a few.

What was demonstrated in those years-and what community organizations have continued to assert through their actions – is that the best prospect for healthy communities and for a healthy society is to develop ways for people to exercise some measure of control over their own lives, and to help them develop ways to make effective demands on themselves and on the larger society.

Community development corporations have been important not only to spurring new and renovated neighborhood housing, social services, and business, cultural, and commercial projects, but also to developing strong local leaders, people like Otis Pitts, who heads the Tacolcy Economic Development Corporation in Miami's Liberty City area, like Brenda Shockley, the former head of the Drew Economic Development Corporation in Watts, and like Pete Garcia, the president of Chicanos Por La Causa in Phoenix.

The point of my recalling all of this is not to cite specific accomplishments. It is to remind us all of a time not so long ago when the basic ideas upon which the community development movement was built were regarded as impossibly optimistic.

It is to recall a time when it was hard for many otherwise knowledgeable people to imagine what was possible when new coalitions were formed, when people's imagination and creativity were released, and when resources were made available to them.

The idea of community empowerment, the idea of public-private partnerships, the idea of the nonprofit sector, the business sector, and government working together...those ideas are at the heart of the success of the community development movement, and they must be the foundation of a new round of efforts – efforts that will in large part rely on the dedication, expertise and energy of nonprofit organizations.

But there are other ways that the nonprofit sector can help those who are part of a minority to gain a voice.

Given the importance of law in securing basic rights, a number of foundations, including the one I work for, support the work of minority legal defense organizations.

We also support programs that offer legal services to low-income people along with efforts to improve the delivery of those services.

One of the most obvious ways people find a voice in a democratic society is through the vote, and support of nonpartisan voter education and registration is a natural philanthropic activity. So is assistance to programs that monitor compliance with the Voting Rights Act.

In addition, in all of our work, we must support efforts to identify and nurture future leaders in the minority community.

Much has been written about the problems confronting the nation's Black communities and the need to develop resources to which they can turn for assistance.

But relatively little attention has been paid to the role the Black churches have played throughout history in helping Blacks overcome their problems. Partly because of its location within the community and partly because of the historic respect Black people have for spiritual life and religious institutions, the Black church has provided a safety net for many poor people in both inner cities and rural areas.

Recognizing this key role in providing services and leadership, both locally and nationally, the Ford Foundation has, since 1985, assisted Black churches in these activities. We've focused our support on the delivery of social services and on training clergy to design and manage those services.

We also helped establish a national research center to provide the nation's estimated 65,000 Black churches with information on how to develop church-based secular-service programs.

In these ways, we and others are trying to strengthen the voices of those whose lives and dreams have too often gone unheard in the larger society.

But as different groups gain the ability to articulate their own positions and aspirations, it is important that this diversity of voices not distract us from a common vision.

One of the ways we can help reduce the conflicts that inevitably arise in a diverse society is by supporting efforts to increase understanding of the hopes and values people hold in common—what it means to be an American, the rights and responsibilities that entails.

Another way is by supporting networks of mediating structures within communities as channels for dispute prevention and dispute resolution.

Right now we have a Foundation staff task force considering how we can be of most help in Los Angeles. Conditions there are not only complex but in a state of flux. Yet even as approaches are being debated, it is clear that whatever shape reforms take, they must place a high priority on broadening and deepening relations among the great mix of people in the area.

Today 40 percent of Los Angeles residents are foreign-born, many of whom arrived during the last 10 years, and Asians, Latinos, and African-Americans make up 60 percent of the population.

We have to recognize the layers and complexities of this mix of people. And we have to be able to see beyond the present conflicts and competition and imagine how these groups might relate to each other differently if there were opportunities for collaboration in rebuilding their communities, and opportunities to find a shared vision for themselves and their children.

There must be new institutional support to encourage communication and understanding among minority racial and ethnic groups; among the established residents and the newcomers; among both grass-roots leaders and traditional leaders.

And we must also look for opportunities to help whites see how their best interests lie in a collaborative, multicultural future – and not merely see such a future as threatening and, therefore, to be resisted.

Much that is occurring in Los Angeles is unprecedented. But although it may appear unique in many ways, the city also presents an opportunity to take a fresh look at urban life, race relations, poverty, crime, and the kind of world we want to create. *It is an opportunity we dare not miss.*

As American society becomes increasingly diverse, it is more important than ever to remember and celebrate not only what makes us separate and distinct, but what holds us together.

One of the stories I read in the *L.A. Times* in the aftermath of the riots stands out on this point. It reported on what appeared to be the first signs of another “white flight” from L.A., reminiscent of a flight after the 1965 rioting in Watts. It quoted one real estate agent from a northern suburb who had been showing homes to Angelenos, “*They're disconcerted about all of the violence that erupted,*” he said. “*They're in fear of not only their own safety, but the safety of the investment they made in the American Dream.*”

That comment caused me to consider just how they were defining the American Dream. In this case, it seemed to be limited to their personal material well-being.

But there is more to the American Dream than that. The Dream of America is a more generous, a more expansive, and a more noble dream than simply the dream of individual success and security. And we must remind people of that greater dream.

The America we now live in was created over the course of the last 200 years through the unceasing demands of women and men in every generation that the promise of America include more and more of its people, that the American identity be rooted in a person's willingness to commit to the ideal of America and to work toward its realization.

The commitment to an America that provides opportunity for all its people remains the central principle of our national life and the deepest source of our strength.

Part of the role we in the foundation world must see for ourselves is as catalysts in the creation of connections – connections among different groups and classes and cultures; connections between the public and private sectors; and connections that bridge all the divides and boundaries that limit the capacity to fashion a better future for all people.

Certainly Blacks in America understand – perhaps, better than anyone else – that the American Dream isn't complete until it is accessible to everyone. That it is also a dream of community, of people not only making it, but making it together.

There are all sorts of ways to lead, but none more difficult than the way America's women and people of color have led this nation – by demanding that America be a just society for all of its citizens.

And we must work harder and get better at advancing a more generous, more inclusive version of the story of America than has prevailed for more than a decade now.

Ours is a living, evolving system of government, and each generation's obligation is to protect the positive gains of the past and to take us to new levels of expansiveness and opportunity.

This is a civic responsibility we all share.

Certainly the present campaign for president is centered around how we understand and respond to the call of our history to greater inclusiveness. Since we are in the midst of that campaign, with all its fascinating twists and surprises, I'd like to say a few words about the third area where I think philanthropy has an important role to play – political will.

In times like these, it is easy enough to forget our strengths, as a nation, as a people. To forget that over the course of our history, perhaps no people on earth have ever demonstrated a greater belief in the power of their collective will.

And so I'd like to quote the observations of one foreign visitor – after a recent tour of Los Angeles. He said,

"There is no question that problems exist. What I saw in Los Angeles

after the disturbances leaves no doubt as to their scale. The poverty is obvious. And the health care system draws as many complaints as public education. These serious dangers alarm people. But I do not think the system is in critical condition.

"America remains an open society in which opposing forces can surface and clash, a necessary precondition for their solution."

"I saw a society that possesses not only economic might and political power but also the intellectual ability to analyze its own condition and develop new policies."

Those words were spoken by Mikhail Gorbachev.

We should keep them in mind as we go forward from here.

And we should remember what an important role philanthropy has played and must continue to play – in supporting and strengthening this country's intellectual ability, to analyze its condition and develop new policies, and ultimately, in moving this nation to more concerted action.

I am proud to say that foundations are helping to move the United States toward facing its problems and solving them. We are doing that through our support of individuals like William Julius Wilson at the University of Chicago and his studies of inner city life...

Of David Ellwood and his exploration of ways to improve income security for families...

Of the work of Judy Gueron and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation in welfare reform...

Of Margaret Spencer at Emory University and her study of the effects of poverty and racism on Black children and teenagers...

And of scores of other scholars and researchers. It is people like these who are the real pioneers in the building of a new America. It is also the thousands of other individuals and organizations in the nonprofit sector who – by their dedication and their hard work in schools and healthcare centers, in community groups and churches, and on street corners – have continued to demonstrate that positive change is possible.

In closing, I'd like to mention just one of those dedicated people. His name is Ted Watkins, someone whom many of you may already know. He has been at work in the Watts section of Los Angeles for more than 27 years as the head of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee.

He started by organizing thousands of young people to clean up after the Watts riots in 1965. And from there he built one of the most dynamic community organizations in this country.

During the recent riot, his headquarters building was burned to the ground, and decades of memorabilia and historical records lost.

With so much of his work in ashes, it would have been understandable for Ted to consider his hopes and dreams for his community in ashes, too.

But when he was asked by a reporter if he was discouraged by the massive work of rebuilding ahead of him, Ted, who is coming up on 70 years of age, and who is in a wheelchair now, replied *"I haven't stopped to let it be hard and I don't intend to. "*

As this nation struggles to recapture the confidence and political will to get on with the work of building a more just and equitable civil society, I can't think of a better place to start than with Ted Watkins' example.

Thank You.

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