

New Voices at the Center: Strengthening Commitment to an Inclusive Society  
Anna Faith Jones  
President  
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The 4th James A. Joseph Lecture on Philanthropy

In 1994, James A. Joseph Lecture on Philanthropy honoree, Dr. Anna Faith Jones, was President of the Boston Foundation. ABFE is proud to honor Dr. Jones for her significant contributions to the field of philanthropy and to share her thoughts on *New Voices at the Center: Strengthening Commitment to an Inclusive Society*.

*A healthy community is much more than a collection of individuals who reside in the same area. It is an extended family of people who are closely interconnected by common practices and traditions, shared values and aspirations, and who look to one another for support and respect. Boston is striving to be such a community, and at its heart lies the Boston Foundation, a unique philanthropic institution whose purpose is to nurture this sense of community among the people of Greater Boston.*

These words come from the draft of a case statement written in the mid-1980's, and the concepts put forth here have been cast and recast over time for use in a wide range of Foundation publications and presentations.

For the last decade, we at the Boston Foundation have been engaged in actively rethinking our role as a community foundation. What do we mean by community? Who is our constituency? Who are the grantees? It is no accident that this quest has unfolded against a backdrop of dramatic change in social welfare policy and funding by government, which has had devastating results for those struggling in the margins of our society. A donor to the Boston Foundation, a retired physician, put it succinctly when he said "The federal government appears to have turned its back on the poor. This seems shortsighted – and unconscionable – especially as it affects children."

The notion of a community of inclusion that is at once compassionate and just has been sorely tested in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Boston, although we have been working toward establishing such a community since 1630 when John Winthrop held up his vision of "a city upon a hill" ...[where] ... "we must delight in each other, make each others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor together..."

Boston today reflects a greater racial and cultural diversity than Winthrop and his Puritan colleagues ever could have imagined. Again and again, however, we return to the spirit behind Winthrop's words --that of Boston as a special experiment, a community which is called upon to be an example of civic enlightenment and creativity.

"As surely as the United States is a 'nation of immigrants'," wrote Sinclair Hitchens in 1970, "Boston is a city of immigrants. Its diversity, its vitality, its turbulent politics, its cross currents of interests, languages, cultures, come from that, and it is at its best when its inhabitants can agree, as they sometimes do, on common needs and common aspirations."

The quest to achieve diversity – to create a community that honors and embraces people of different races, creeds, genders, languages and economic means – has never been easy, and Boston's experience has proved to be no exception. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the struggle by the city's newest arrivals to escape poverty and to gain acceptance and a better standard of living has been virtually continuous.

In the early years of this century, seemingly endless waves of Italians, Eastern European Jews, Poles, Armenians and Greeks poured into squalid ghettos where they were shunned and treated with contempt, as were the Irish who had preceded them. After World War II, Blacks and Puerto Ricans in large numbers joined the struggle for inclusion and opportunity, and in recent years they, too, have been followed by thousands of refugees from Southeast Asia, Ethiopia, Central America and the Caribbean.

With each successive wave of immigrants, the threat of disruption by the new and unknown of familiar patterns established by those previously settled here has strained the limits of openness and trust. The recurrent pattern of relegating newcomers to demeaning life conditions has challenged Governor Winthrop's ideal of a "city on a hill" to which Boston has aspired. We live in the midst of poverty and injustice now, just as did those who began the Foundation in 1915.

Building a genuinely inclusive community – a community for all the people – has been and remains the quintessential challenge facing this city, this nation and, now, the larger global community. The struggle against poverty and injustice has always been what this Foundation is about. What gives us encouragement as we look back over the years are two things.

First, Boston's heritage is proudly rooted in the defense of freedom and democracy, in the right of individuals to determine their own destinies, and in the commitment to equal opportunity to participate. Over the years, the city has never quite given up on fulfilling this legacy, and has been a nurturing host to such innovative initiatives as Settlement Houses, neighborhood health centers, affordable housing and community development corporations.

Second, over the 75 years or so that we at the Boston Foundation have been active in supporting such efforts, our awareness of poverty has been heightened and our understanding of its dynamics has matured, although there have been moments of despair. During the Depression, Charles Rogerson, a founder and director of the Foundation wrote, "I suppose we are making progress, but it is painfully slow. What we [are] largely doing [is] holding a bucket to catch the overflow of distress, rather than to reach up and shut off the spigot."

Ten years ago, in 1985, on the occasion of its 70th Anniversary, the Boston Foundation set out on a new course with the launching of a \$10 million initiative called the Poverty Impact Program, at that time, our largest, most pioneering venture. The program set an important precedent in taking direct aim at poverty as fundamentally unacceptable in a just society. Admittedly, it was a limited program with limited goals, more concerned from the outset with creating a stronger, more inclusive sense of community than dealing with the hard indices of poverty. It was, by design, focused on the poverty of spirit that results from economic hardship, abandonment and neglect. This intent was carefully delineated in the original program announcement:

*Our paramount concern is the psychological impact of poverty on those who are caught in its wake. The thought we find most disquieting is that people in our city might feel alone, defeated and overwhelmed – that they might have little sense of their own self-worth and of being connected, nourishingly, to a larger helping community. How, we wonder, can networks be organized, and interventions made, to shield people from despair? What forms of league and institution can help people feel centered when their tendency is to drift to the perimeter? What kinds of association have the distinctive capacity to turn defeat and resignation into self-confidence and action?*

The issue, as we saw it, was one of engagement – of calling attention to, and getting directly involved in, combatting the 'disease' of poverty that causes such inequity and suffering. Our overriding goal was to heighten the responsiveness of organizations serving the poor and to connect people, especially women and children, in more organic and powerful ways with the supports they need.

Four areas of intervention were given priority: maternal and infant health care; teenage pregnancy; employment and training; and urban parks and open spaces. The latter, which initially baffled some observers, represented our considered judgment that the quality of environment has everything to do with poverty and the health of the human spirit.

Fully cognizant of the Foundation's limited resources, we chose deliberately not to declare a "war" on poverty, with its implied goal of victory. We did, however, seek to have an impact – “to make a difference,” as the program announcement stated – in three connected spheres: the development of public policy to enhance the cause of the poor; the creation of more accessible and effective systems of support; and above all, improving the quality of life for those entrapped in poverty.

The impact of the program was twofold. The first, as intended, was on poverty and the awareness of poverty in the Boston community. A detailed assessment of what was learned and accomplished, based on two years of intensive study of the program and its projects by the Education Development Center, was summarized and published by the Foundation as part of its annual report in 1991.

The second, more profound and unanticipated impact of the program was on the Foundation itself. Dwight Allison, Chairman of the Board, wrote in 1991:

*...the Foundation has been concerned with the disadvantaged members of the community from its very inception in 1915. But the deliberate commitment to focus on poverty for five years has, in my opinion, irrevocably changed the Foundation...we are being told by many voices that poverty cries out for empowerment at the*

*grassroots level and more resources from the rest of the community. Do we hear those voices? I am convinced that the Foundation does, and that it can assist in bringing them to the abiding attention of the community as a whole... it was the Poverty Impact Program which improved our hearing.*

What did we hear? The message was essentially the same no matter who was speaking. Listen to the voices:

*All around us, there is an atmosphere of nihilism and decay that is crushing -- particularly of the spirit. Only the powerful mobilization of people at the grassroots can counter this -- can turn things around.*

And another:

*The key to countering poverty is to equip -- to really educate -- the poor to act for themselves and those they care most about, in community and in common interest with others.*

And yet another:

*I believe in what might be termed 'downward mobility'. The way 'up', by which we mean advancement, is really down to the local neighborhood level, and on the streets, where the people are.*

Our conclusion at the Foundation was that we had to act decisively to alter our policies and practices. Who is our constituency? The answers were now more clear. The *community* itself. Who are the grantees? Those organizations and initiatives that grow directly out of the concerns of rank and file members of the community. What is the focus of our interest? Building community capacity to address those concerns through projects which empower neighborhood residents, particularly the poor, to act on their own behalf.

The Poverty Impact Program took shape in the early and mid-80's, when the full impact of the receding tide in federal social funding policies was held in check by the booming Massachusetts economy. During this period, several promising new partnerships were spawned in and between the private and public sectors. Notable among these, as many of you may remember, were the Boston Compact, a partnership between business and the public high schools which leveraged jobs for improved educational outcomes; the Boston Housing Partnership, which provided an effective intermediary for combining public and private resources in the development of affordable housing; and Boston Works, a visionary concept of the Private Industry Council, which proposed to develop a ladder of

interrelated job training programs in the nonprofit, public and for profit sectors that would assure upward mobility for people with a wide range of skills. There was also Healthy Start and Healthy Baby, new alliances between the City's Department of Health and Hospitals and the nonprofit sector to improve access to maternal health care; and the Alliance for Young Families, a coalition of hospitals and private agencies to address the needs of pregnant and parenting teens. And there were others. Along with many of our colleagues in this room, the Boston Foundation supported most of these new partnership programs with generous grants, some of which came from the new Poverty Impact Program. It was the time of the "Massachusetts Miracle."

This combination of economic optimism and innovation in the cause of equity and access attracted the attention of the Rockefeller Foundation which, through the auspices of the Boston Foundation, selected Boston as one of six cities to participate in an innovative planning and action project that would develop long-term strategies to address persistent poverty. Combining academic research with the practical lessons of these local initiatives, the Rockefeller project sought to address the growing trend among policymakers and rank and file Americans to view urban poverty as an inevitable legacy, which is handed from generation to generation, creating a permanent underclass.

The Boston Foundation formally launched the Boston Persistent Poverty Project, as it has come to be known, with the publication of *In the Midst of Plenty*, a qualitative survey of some 17,000 households that profiled the current status, identity and concerns of poor people in the city of Boston, and by so doing, sought to focus and intensify efforts to develop effective strategies to excise the cancer of poverty in our midst.

By the time the study appeared, however, a disastrous recession had struck Massachusetts, leaving in its wake stunning slashes in state funding programs and a widening trail of unemployment, homelessness and domestic violence.

The bursting of the euphoric bubble of self-indulgence and optimism was followed, here in Massachusetts, as elsewhere, by a growing sense of helplessness and hopelessness, anger and frustration. More than ever, we seemed to be fragmented and polarized by partisan politics, by class, by race and ethnicity – and increasingly, by violence.

Moving out on what had been learned in the Poverty Impact Program, the new Project convened six evening citizen seminars. Roughly 80 to 100 persons attended each meeting, representing every sector and stratum of community life, to consider the findings of the survey and, stimulated by the thoughtful presentations of leading scholars and practitioners in the field, to talk about what could be done.

What grew out of this dialogue was an intensive process of community soundings and outreach at the grassroots. In a recently issued report, titled *To Make Our City Whole*, the Boston Persistent Poverty Project outlines key findings of this process, undertaken over a two-year period from 1991-1993 by a 40-member, multicultural, intersectoral Strategy Development Group. This Group, the majority of which had experienced poverty firsthand, set out to examine the structural nature of urban poverty and its causes; to

explore the interrelationship of race, gender and ethnicity across the experience of poverty in Boston's neighborhoods; to reframe the public debate about chronic urban poverty, and to develop long-term strategies to address its debilitating effects.

The Group carried out this work through a series of retreats, roundtables and focus groups, which involved several hundred Boston residents – primarily poor and low-income – adults and youth, male and female, from a wide variety of racial and ethnic groups. The participants in these sessions willingly shared their private lives and thoughts in frank discussions of the obstacles and indignities they face in their struggle for economic mobility. They challenged widely-held assumptions that too often dehumanize those living in poverty, assumptions that give priority to specialized social and remedial services. What we heard, repeatedly, was a plea for dignity and respect, for opportunity, and the right to participate in the life of the community.

We discovered anew, in successive rounds of stirring personal witness, that the poor are capable people – working, raising families – and a vital part of our community. To paraphrase an expression made popular by the daily comic strip poet and philosopher, *Pogo*, "We met the poor and found that they are us." Like you and me, their deepest aspirations are focused on jobs that pay well enough to maintain a home and all that involves; quality education and training opportunities for their children and for themselves; healthcare that is appropriate, accessible and affordable; and the promise of a productive place in a community that cares about them.

Listening to these community voices was a powerful and moving experience. Again and again, voices raised by anger, frustration, and dogged determination struck chords of common humanity, chords that sounded and resounded, through statements of tenacious faith and hope – in God, in family and in the promise of our democratic way of life. The members of the Strategy Development Group, through countless hours of animated, analytical dialogue, struck again the cadences of shared experience and aspiration, developing new themes of trust and motifs of common resolve.

Brought together without an appointed leader, the Strategy Development Group was set up as an experiment to discover whether new thinking could be forged from its diversity: whether, through a process of dialogue and deep listening among themselves and with the broader community, consensus could be reached about strategies to end poverty in Boston and to make whole a deeply divided city. The result of this dialogue was both process and product, an emergence of new thinking that provided a fresh approach to combatting poverty.

The substance of this new approach was captured in a set of Guiding Principles, couched in language that transcends the usual pessimism of anti-poverty initiatives, and designed to provide anew framework for both action and debate:

- 1) Incorporate those directly affected by policies at the heart of dialogue and community building
- 2) Value racial and cultural diversity as the foundation for wholeness



- 3) Promote active citizenship and political empowerment
- 4) Build on community strengths and assets
- 5) Restore access to fundamental opportunities and remove obstacles to equal opportunity
- 6) Support and enhance the well-being of children and their families; and
- 7) Foster sustained commitment, coordination and collaboration based on a shared vision.

At its heart, this approach seeks to build community to end poverty. It calls for a fundamental shift from servicing the deficits of low-income communities and the poor as "clients," to investing in the strengths and assets of the poor as "citizens." It is based on a deep respect for the capacities of the people who find themselves living in poverty, an appreciation of both the difficulty and the richness of their lives, and an understanding of the desire of all people to live in healthy, safe and neighborly communities.

**Listen** to the voices of community people who were engaged in this extraordinary dialogue. To Beatriz McConnie-Zapater, a coordinator of the focus groups in the Latino community:

*We heard the voices of those really experiencing poverty... We found their analysis of their conditions 'expectedly profound'. I use the term 'expectedly' because, as we expected, people do know what's happening to them – and what it will take to end it. They spoke eloquently about racism and prejudice and the feelings of 'invisibility' which they experience. They know that the solution is long-term, but the suffering is now.*

To Bob Moses, civil rights activist and founder of the Algebra Project:

*This process is a way of giving communities and ourselves a tool to empower our thinking and action. The tool is a product; the product is a process.*

To Harry Spence, Receiver of the City of Chelsea:

*I asked whether it was possible for us to create coherence out of diversity... I discovered that the vision that emerges from mutual understanding and consent is the source of coherence, and that it must be constantly renewed.*

To Frieda Garcia, President of United South End Settlements and Chair of the Boston Foundation:

*There are assets within every community, culture and*

*individual. I see the Principles as helping everyone to learn to look for, recognize and build on these assets as the basis for development... As we begin to try to incorporate the Principles and use them in our work, I believe we will face a whole new set of unknown challenges. We need to develop mechanisms and strategies to support each other and our learning.*

As with any tool, the value of these principles will be measured by their effective use, and the first test begins within our own organization.

Using these Principles and the research from which they were drawn, the Boston Foundation has developed a new framework for its discretionary grantmaking. This framework places children and their families at the center of holistic community building strategies to end poverty; it reaffirms the arts as vehicles for building bridges of understanding between communities of diverse racial and cultural heritage; and finally, it makes support for technical assistance more readily available to those agencies which, in a variety of ways, want to strengthen organizational capacity to identify and address the concerns of their constituencies.

The work of refocusing our efforts also involves an ongoing developmental process with board and staff members, to strengthen awareness of our joint responsibility for infusing the community empowering mission of the Foundation with new life and meaning, both within the institutional environment, and in the community at large.

Now supported entirely by the Boston Foundation, the Boston Persistent Poverty Project continues to unfold its agenda of convening, constituency development and capacity building, working closely with members of the Strategy Development Group and other indigenous community leaders to promote the new thinking outlined in the report *To Make Our City Whole*. A series of workshops, forums and briefings has involved among others, the local United Way, and more than 200 of its affiliated agencies; targeted the Secretary of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, and subsequently briefed, at the Secretary's request, all of the departmental Commissioners, including social services, public welfare, youth services, public health and mental health; and has coordinated panel and group discussions with the Cooperative-Metropolitan Ministries, a coalition of more than 50 churches and synagogues in Greater Boston. We are finding, as we move out in ever-widening circles, that the Principles and the new framework they provide for addressing urban poverty are both strengthening and stimulating the ways in which people go about their daily lives and work.

**Listen** to the voice of the Chief Operating Officer of the local United Way:

*We were realizing that funders and agency heads had to begin to take a more asset-based approach to poverty-related efforts. If you talk with a group in the community – or even an individual -- and you ask them to*

*define themselves by their needs, you are, in a sense, saying to them 'the worse your problems are, the more we will support you', which prompts a very negative cycle of information and experience. Imagine what it would be like always to present yourself through your problems – to introduce yourself to someone by saying 'I have a weight problem; my husband is an alcoholic, etc.', rather than mentioning your good points first. Soon, you would be defining yourself through your problems... that is what we funders have asked our communities to do for a very long time. But through the work of the Boston Persistent poverty Project and our own parallel thinking, we are beginning to turn that deficit-based kind of thinking around. We are asking agencies to tell us about the potential that exists in the people and places they serve.*

**Listen** to the words of a former union leader at Boston City Hospital, a Chinese-American woman who now coordinates the Boston Health Access Project of an organization called Health Care For All.

*We wanted to pressure the hospitals to put their health dollars into the communities, so Health Care For All began building a grassroots health care coalition. We started by identifying groups of people who need to be heard but aren't: immigrants, people of color, the homeless and those whose needs are not met by the current system.*

*Members of the Project went to the Attorney General, asking him to regulate nonprofit hospitals so that they would satisfy their tax-exempt status. The guidelines eventually released included all of the principles that they suggested. Soon after...a local hospital announced a new \$5 million community benefit program. We claim that decision as one of our victories, a response to our pressure.*

**Listen** to the words of the CEO of a real estate management firm who spoke to the Human Services Commissioners:

*In business, we put a lot of emphasis on market research and the subsequent development of products or services that meet the demands which the research suggests. So... I have been very impressed with the way the Project has approached its work...I have served on a number of local*

*boards and been involved particularly in issues related to job development and health care. I became concerned...that we were dealing with pieces of people's lives, rather than the whole picture. The Project is right on the money when they speak about supporting holistic strategies, because...those are the kinds of strategies that will really work over the long run.*

**Listen** to the voice of a municipal official speaking also to the Commissioners:

*I think it's important to tell you that you shouldn't be fooled by the seemingly platitudinous nature of these Guiding Principles. Like all large truths...they keep on getting deeper. It's like peeling back an onion – as you go on, increasingly you get to the structures behind these truths and find that they are really quite profound. Even though I am a member of the group that developed these Principles, I find that I constantly am having to remind myself of their wisdom. Just this morning, I realized that we were taking a problem-oriented approach to an issue in Chelsea, and as soon as we started looking at the assets involved, we could start to build on them, and the issue looked solvable.*

**And finally, hear** the voice of a young African-American man, a Professor at the Harvard School of Education, associated also with the national Algebra Project and Blackside Productions, which as you know, produced *Eyes on the Prize*. Ceasar McDowell coordinated and moderated an exciting series of televised, interactive dialogues about the future of public education in Boston in response to the Strategy Development Group's emphasis on citizen participation and high quality schools. When he sits back and thinks about the deeper issues related to improving communications between people and promoting democracy, he uses language that can be helpful to all of us as we proceed with our work:

*In Western society, how we talk about things says a lot about how we're able to act on things. We have created a language of critique that is very effective. We're very good at critiquing. We also have a wonderful language of possibility words like dreams and hope and vision. We also have a language of action, which is a language that represents achievement, doing things successfully.*

*What we're missing, in order to truly communicate well through any media, is what I call the language of transition – the space in between the critique, the possibility and the action. It is very important to learn to be able to live in the*

*transition, and in order to do that successfully, we must be very clear about what our core values are, and keep them constantly in our sight. If we live successfully in the transition, then the values we believe in will become the most important thing. They will be, in fact, sacred.*

A well-worn adage tells us, "Nothing gets started without individuals, and nothing continues without institutions;" but we need to be sure that our institutions remain flexible and effective. In every sector of our society, there is a growing sense of the need to reinvigorate our institutions, both public and private, by putting the concerns, the creativity and commitment of citizens at their center. Over time, institutions tend to become bastions of the status quo and to perpetuate a model of detached, expert professionalism that seeks approval only from professional peers. Business as usual – in government and in philanthropy – is tied directly to institutional life, as usual. A number of us in this room, I daresay, can recall, as I can, conversations with colleagues in which the discussion – of criteria, strategies, impact and evaluative measurements – has become so abstract, and the connection with the reality of peoples' lives so tenuous, that our thoughts, encapsulated in bubbles like those of comic strip characters, must surely have drifted away to disintegrate meaninglessly in some distant ether.

We need continually to question, to rethink, what we do, putting the people we care about at the center of the inquiry. By keeping what matters in sight, we will come to understand that success is not measured merely by a series of programs, but by changes in how we relate to one another in community. New voices not only bring new perspectives; they change the conversation completely.

"If you don't know where you're going, every road will take you there," is another familiar saying. People across our communities, and across our nation, are beginning to realize that new approaches are needed to address our most pressing problems; and the divisive issues of race and poverty continue to head this list. One of the greatest perils for a community institution is to operate without a vision – to act without a thoughtful sense of what the future holds, and how the quality of people's lives can be enhanced in meaningful ways. Simply to proceed with business as usual – to follow pathways that have grown familiar with time – is not sufficient, even if the outcomes have a certain appeal and style. The ever-popular model of the gun-slinging hero, for example, who purports to solve all with a silver bullet, is no longer credible. Not in an era like ours, when pressures at every level are increasing, and the very fabric of our community life is stretched almost to the breaking point.

Serving, as we do, within a special public trust, those of us at the Boston Foundation are newly mindful of our need to create a shared vision, a caring colloquy, with people across our community. Recognizing the critical importance of listening to others, and the arrogance and ultimate futility of acting alone, we are actively recommitted to seek and value counsel and cooperative enterprise with the poor and all others who want to pursue with renewed vigor the continuing quest for a community of inclusion.