

Promoting Opportunity: Imperatives For Philanthropy

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When I received Emmett Carson's letter informing me that I had been chosen to receive the fifth James A. Joseph Lecture Award, I was extremely pleased. In my acceptance letter, I wrote:

I was surprised but delighted to read that my ABFE colleagues have selected me as the 1995 James Joseph Lecture honoree; but almost instantly my elation was tempered with an abundance of humility. Indeed, I am very mindful of the stature of the previous honorees and of their contributions to the philanthropic sector in this country. You flatter me tremendously to include me among such an illustrious group.

I mean that genuinely!

Indeed, I was and am cognizant of the fact that the names Joseph, Thomas, Watson and Faith-Jones are synonymous with leadership – real leadership – not just in ABFE, but in the field of philanthropy. They, as individuals, and their institutions, and what they and their institutions have done resonate loudly. They all stand for change.

It is more than an interesting aside that two of those persons here tonight. Jim Joseph and Franklin Thomas, as individuals, are undergoing significant personal transitions; but while that might be personally rewarding for them, their departure will leave a void – an unfillable void in philanthropy and in ABFE. The transitions are personally profound but, also, they symbolize challenges of renewal. And as they renew themselves as individuals, they provide for us a challenge to renew ourselves as a community.

ABFE started as an organization that basically sought to expand opportunities for its members. Its membership both promoted and protected us because we represented a very small minority in, what was for us, a new field. We were protective of each other and, in a sense, ABFE was our (protective) aegis. But, equally important, we came together for professional and personal growth. This was important because we were few in number. A little-known but insightful study conducted in 1978 by John Griffin, former executive director of the Southern Education Foundation, and Charles Griggs, a professor at Florida State University, reported that the African-American presence within foundations was minimal. Included in their study was a survey of the then newly-formed Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE), that revealed that Blacks were present in only 55 of the 856 foundations with assets of five million dollars or more.

But look around us and see the bright new faces who don't need to be protected. They – you – have an unprecedented opportunity. But, at the same time, they – you – can continue to seize real leadership in the field as Jim and Frank and Bernie [Watson] and Anna [Faith-Jones] have done; and also use that leadership to influence what happens in the field to an extent unimaginable by the founders of ABFE – my generation.

Background

Unlike the four previous ABFE awardees, I represent a very small foundation within the foundation universe; and also unlike them, I sit in what for many here is the American Motherland – the South. From my southern post, I have had the privilege of witnessing and participating in the great change in the region and appreciating the transforming role that national philanthropies played in bringing concerted, collaborative and continuing efforts in that process. As a result, philanthropy did not only help to end legal segregation, but helped to set loose the potent and creative energies that continue to transform the nation. To some extent, those forces are represented here this evening by the much-expanded and engaged membership of ABFE. Foundations were successful then – in the transformation of the region – because, whether they knew it or not, they tended to four imperatives, which were vital then and remain, perhaps, even more so today. These imperatives are central to effective philanthropy and crucial to ABFE's continuing renewal as an organization that will differ not only in the lives and careers of individual members, but also in the general philanthropic field and in the larger society.

Let me share those four imperatives:

1. A moral commitment to respond to the needs of those people who are most at risk and most neglected by a society whose values appear to be shifting in dangerous and threatening ways.
2. Strategic engagement with the most important issues facing society – high among which are education and employment.
3. An understanding that philanthropy must be innovative in ideas and flexible and creative in methods. This was true 30 years ago during the Civil Rights Movement; it may be even more true today in the face of proposed radical changes in government policy.
4. Leadership that is willing to take risks and to work relentlessly to develop new and effective approaches to enduring problems.

We approach these imperatives when a harsher and a meaner political ethos drives the social and economic policy debate in the United States. The prevailing ethos is characterized by a fervent desire within the populace, and on the part of the leadership within the government, to force individuals to act more responsibly and to take the government out of our lives.

The reasons for the current conservative populism are many. However, key among them are: the demands of a more global and interdependent economy that have promoted fear and insecurity among middle-class Americans; a belief among many that traditional values, such as delayed gratification and hard work are declining; and the realization and gradual acceptance of the fact that steps to reduce the federal deficit and restore the government's fiscal integrity will require all Americans, rich and poor, old and young, to

make painful sacrifices. Such perceptions, some steeped in reality and others less so, have bred and will continue to engender among many of our citizens the notion that their way of life is threatened and, without appropriate corrective action, eventually will be destroyed.

Neither the neo-conservative predictions of chaos that precipitated the shift to the right nor the foreboding doom and gloom that emanate from the political left as a response to this shift is a new phenomenon in American society. In fact, as recently as 1980, we were caught in the throes of another shift within the American electorate. At that time the Reagan revolution was ushered in by the desire to restore American dominance in the world by strengthening the military, to restore fiscal integrity by reducing the deficit, and to shrink the federal bureaucracy by sending more authority back to state governments through block grants. While the legacy of the Reagan revolution continues to be debated, one fact is eminently clear: With the exception of a stronger military, nothing else changed. Both the federal bureaucracy and the deficit grew during that era.

It was also during the Reagan era that many in philanthropy thought it might be necessary to rush in to fill the gaps created by the withdrawal of government support for various kinds of initiatives. Fortunately, this did not happen on a large scale. Those of us in the field at that time realized that where government chose to withdraw completely, our resources were not sufficient to fill the gap. But more importantly, we gained a better understanding of the interplay between government and philanthropic support. It became clear that a silent partnership existed between public and private funders. For while hospitals provide enhanced medical care as a result of private support, many could close without the public funds received through Medicare. Similarly, private institutions of higher education that are able to thrive through our private dollars would be much different institutions without the public funds they receive through research grants and student financial aid.

This recent bit of history teaches three lessons. The first is that the core economic and social problems that promote fear among the populace, and result in the conservatism of today, and did the same in the past, cannot and will not be addressed adequately by adopting draconian public policies that grow out of fear and anxiety. Second, shifts within the mood of the American electorate are cyclical and thus will continue. Over the course of the past 25 years or so, no matter what party has been in office, the electorate has eventually drifted to the right or left of the prevailing political philosophy of the day. Third, foundations cannot substitute, in any effective way, their funding for that of the government. Consequently, we should stay the course and continue to perform the roles for which we are best suited.

We should continue to support innovation and creativity; we should remain on the cutting edge in both thought and action; we must sustain and expand our efforts to provide opportunity through philanthropy. But more importantly, we must do all of this more effectively by closing the gap between the rhetoric we espouse in our missions and the reality that grips the lives of our grantees. The core problems that American society has confronted in the past, which we face today, and which will continue to challenge us in

the future, demand that we continue to serve as trailblazers and pathfinders pointing the way for those in public service willing to follow. And if we are to be true leaders we must not only "talk the talk," it is imperative that we "walk the walk" to ensure that what we do matches what we say.

Reality for significant numbers of Americans, especially those of color, is one afflicted by inadequate education, job shortages, and a moral and ethical crisis in values. Regardless of the rhetoric of educational equity and equal job opportunity, too many Americans of color – Black, Hispanic and Native American – continue to have their visions of the American dream blurred by poor education and uncertain job prospects. The current educational and employment frustrations of minorities arise out of an historical context within which the signposts of progress serve as beacons of hope for those struggling to fulfill the dream. Yet, our efforts in both the public and private sectors to ensure educational and job equity for minorities make it very clear that such problems are often multigenerational for disadvantaged groups within our society. There is no quick fix; persistence is the only remedy for maladies, which were ignored for generations and to which Band-Aid solutions were applied for years.

Philanthropy's struggle with equity issues in education and employment is a protracted one. No matter how much progress is made at improving educational and job opportunities at any particular point in time, it is inevitable that at other points in time opportunities in these areas are insufficient. Part of the reason for the episodic character of education and job opportunities resides in the fact that they are by-products of the political system. Consequently, their availability is determined significantly by the confluence of dominant political forces operative in our society at any given time.

In social science parlance, education and employment are "values" in society; politics is the authoritative allocation of those values and, as such, they will be distributed in accordance with the prevailing political philosophy of the day. When that philosophy moves to the extreme on the political continuum, it can have detrimental consequences for the weakest members of a democratic society – those most likely to be dependent on government to sustain economic and education opportunities. This is not to imply, however, that the shift itself is right or wrong. In fact, since most political regimes in America govern from the center, some have interpreted the shift to the right as a correction similar to the corrections that occur in the stock market following escalations in stock values.

While the theoretical assumptions that posit relationships between politics along with the economic and education opportunities available to Americans make for interesting academic discourse, my more immediate concern is to emphasize that private philanthropy must commit its resources to sustain economic and educational opportunities regardless of the prevailing political philosophy. Our commitment must be constant because the problems are recurrent. Education and economic problems may abate for one generation, but then they seem virtually intractable for the next generation.

Core Problems: Education and Employment

My views on the current situation regarding education and job opportunities are shaped in large part by where I sit as the CEO of a public charity in the South. As I reflect on the past and contemplate the future, I see the increased importance of education as the key to a productive and fulfilling future for all young people, but especially for minority and at-risk youth. I have seen the American economy undergo a transition from the dominant economy in the world to become one that is both interdependent and competitive with others. This transition has spurred the fear and uncertainty about the future among middle class Americans to which I referred earlier; but in a more perilous fashion, the transition in the economy makes it impossible for young persons without adequate education to secure employment to support themselves and their families.

The connection between education and employment is far more critical today than when I first became involved in philanthropy. At that time it was not uncommon for practically all individuals seeking employment upon leaving school to be able to find work that allowed them to support themselves and their families. Individuals, including those who had dropped out of school or merely went through school without applying themselves, were able to find employment or enter the military. As a result of that situation, much of the effort in philanthropy in the South, for example, was related to expanding opportunities for minorities in relation to pre-school and collegiate education.

The education and employment nexus is critical today. Despite the fact that the current unemployment rate is low, an ill-prepared young person seeking employment is almost guaranteed to go jobless or to end up with a job paying, at best, minimum wage. The American economy no longer generates enough good, low-skill jobs to provide a decent living for those without an adequate education. As simple as this sounds, the situation is aggravated further by the fact that low-skill jobs that might be available are regularly being shipped to developing countries where they are performed at far below the American minimum wage.

The economic transformation that has unfolded in the South combined with the history and traditions of the South have affected profoundly my views on the problems of education and employment and the continuous role philanthropy must assume in addressing them. The South is a crucible where philanthropy has tested many approaches to education and employment problems and can now apply those strategies in other parts of the nation.

Increasingly, the high-wage jobs that are available require technical skills based on solid K-12 schooling and in some instances require some post-secondary education. If it were not for another significant change occurring in American society, i.e., the transition within the economy and the demand for higher educational skills, an adequate education would only require greater vigilance and more accountability from our education system. That other change, however (the demand for higher skills), compounds the severity of the situation. It is what my colleagues Nathaniel Jackson and Herman Reese at the Southern Education Foundation often refer to as the "demographic imperative." The fastest growing segment of the American population is the most economically and educationally

disadvantaged; and they are disproportionately people of color. Historically, this is the segment of the population most likely to be poorly educated and, in turn, ill-prepared for the job market. Unfortunately, the confluence of these trends – the transition from low-skill to high-skill jobs, the rapid growth in the economic and educationally disadvantaged population, and the traditionally poor education they have received – does not bode well for our nation's future.

Our nation's future was similarly threatened in 1867. At that time, many progressive and forward-thinking Americans were greatly concerned about educational access and, to a lesser extent, job opportunity for the freedmen. During the post-Civil War era George Peabody, John Slater and other philanthropists were anxious about the role that the freedmen would occupy in American society. They were concerned about whether the freedmen would be productive citizens, within the limited application of that term to them, or would constitute a drain on the economic and social service resources of the nation. Almost 130 years later organized philanthropy, especially the minority contingent within it, continues to struggle with education and employment equity and with access for Americans of color. The context of the struggle today, however, is much different than it was 130 years ago. Or is it?

Today, many shortsighted Americans see the expansion of equal opportunity as a zero-sum game. That is, expanding opportunities for underrepresented minorities is considered denying opportunities to white males, the group that was economically predominant in 1867 and remains so as we approach the second millennium. Also, today many forward-looking Americans, as was the case in 1867, understand that the absence of sufficient opportunities for disadvantaged citizens will result in a disproportionate number of revenue consumers, the wards of the welfare state against whom so many rail, rather than revenue generators for whom so many clamor.

Emerging Concern: Crisis of the Throw Away People

While in my view education and employment issues will always be with us, and we will always seek an appropriate philanthropic response to them, I realize that societal changes generate other problems from which the government now seeks to retreat or relinquish responsibility. Among the more pressing of these, as I see things, is what I term the "crisis of the throwaway people" or the problem of the underclass. The underclass presents a unique challenge to philanthropy. What is the appropriate response to a group deemed to be useless by most of the rest of society: Do we utilize precious resources to help when the situation appears helpless; or do we indeed succumb to the logic that dictates we apply our resources where they will do the greatest good and throw this group away?

In the late 1970s, social scientists designed a new concept to describe an old phenomenon. The term "underclass" crept into our working vocabulary, as though we had stumbled upon a sociological grouping not before known to us. We treated it with novel interest as though it emerged from some brilliant intellectual insight. In reality, however, the concept describes a group that has been around since the dawn of the industrial

society. They were first dubbed the “lumpen proletariat” by Karl Marx in the mid-19th century.

Since the 1850s the size of the underclass has increased, especially in America's post-industrial consumer society, but the major characteristics are unmistakable. These individuals live on the periphery of society. They have no visible means of support as interpreted by the Internal Revenue Service, or they are permanent wards of the welfare state; and they generally live by a code of ethics that is at odds with mainstream communities.

A few fundamental differences, however, exist between what Marx labeled the “lumpen proletariat” and what sociologists, such as Julius Wilson, call the underclass. The first is the size. As previously noted, the poorest and least educated segment of the American population is the fastest growing. What this means is that the most deprived portion of the population is replicating itself at a faster rate than either the working class or the more affluent portions of the population. Without the capacity to take advantage of educational and job opportunities, which may be further restricted by less government support, many members of the underclass and their offspring are not upwardly mobile and become its permanent victims. Thus, the underclass becomes immutable, and it grows through multigenerational expansion.

A second unique feature of the American underclass is the level of violence it generates. While violence has always been associated with those living at the margins of society, the worst aspects of it tended to be self-contained. In America today no one is safe from the random violence that emanates from gangs, drugs and other criminal activity. Indeed both the high rate of incarceration and the homicide rate among males in our own community attest to the level of violence we are experiencing. The majority of this violence is perpetrated by and upon those who see themselves as alienated from the mainstream communities.

The industrial economy today is giving way to what the social analysts Alvin and Heidi Toffler call the third wave. The transition is from the industrial society to the knowledge-based, brain-centered mode of production we call the information age. And unlike their 19th-century counterparts, most members of the American underclass can move neither backwards into industrialism, because the manufacturing base is declining, nor forward into the knowledge-based economy because they do not possess the requisite skills. Now, I do not want to create the impression that I think that all families on welfare and that all unemployed individuals are members of the underclass. In fact, I think that we can differentiate between those who constitute the lower-socio-economic strata and the underclass in terms that are precise if not easily perceived.

The critical distinction I see between families at risk and those in the underclass, other than the obvious involvement in drugs and violence, is a hope and a positive vision of the future that the former retain and the latter have abandoned. Hope is the anchor of the soul, the stimulus to action, and the incentive to achievement. On the other hand, the loss

of hope is the undertaker's best friend; the ocular evidence of this fact is ubiquitous, as the media reminds us everyday.

The Tofflers, and others thinking about the future, raise the question, as we must in philanthropy: Will the information age furtheracerbate the split between not only the American underclass, the lower-socio-economic strata and other Americans, but between the knowledge-based societies and the nations still caught in the second wave of industrialism? In other words, is there a productive place in society for those not prepared to embrace the information age?

Since I do not consider myself a futurist, I will not attempt a definitive response to this query. But I feel confident that without an expansion of educational opportunities, not only for members of the underclass but for average Americans, especially those of color, rough times lie ahead. What then should be our course of action to meet the challenges of the future? What is our role in securing a more positive future for all of our citizens in the face of government retrenchment?

A Good Citizen and a Damn Nuisance

Organized philanthropy has always been viewed from at least two opposing perspectives in American society. On the one hand, it has been viewed as the checkbook of society to underwrite the solutions to problems and close gaps in government funding. On the other hand, when it has stepped forward to provide leadership on controversial issues, it has often been branded a damn nuisance.

Regardless of the anticipated retrenchment by government, I see no need for us to change our role as good citizens and damn nuisances. We should continue what we do best, being supportive when and where we can and leading others where they often fear to tread. This course of action was recommended by the President and CEO of the Council on foundations, Jim Joseph, in his letter to members a few weeks ago. Furthermore, I consider this the only prudent mode of operation if we are to address the problems I have delineated.

As I previously noted and as Jim Joseph emphasized in his correspondence, foundation resources cannot replace those of government. However, what we can do is to exploit our nuisance value. We can do this by becoming even more involved in efforts to influence the formulation and direction of public policy. We have both an opportunity and a responsibility to engage policy makers in vigorous debates about education and employment; the crisis of the underclass; and how all resources, public and private, can be used more effectively to address these issues.

As strange as it may sound, our involvement is not sufficient. Equally important as our direct involvement in fashioning a response to these issues is the need to note what has been learned and to become more effective in sharing and disseminating our knowledge. It behooves us not only to engage in and to support research to understand better education, employment, and the issues associated with the plight of the underclass, but

also to incorporate those research findings into the solutions we support through our grantees.

Additionally, in our efforts to influence the direction and formulation of public policy, we must assess and evaluate vigorously the projects we support so that we might engage and guide more intelligently those who set policy.

Partnerships in Philanthropy

Short of raiding our endowments, those foundations that do not plan to spend themselves out of existence have few options for responding to the daunting funding challenge ahead. However, my experience in philanthropy as both a grantor and a grantee suggests that there is a feasible course of action that is bold but not risk-free. And I realize that in the uncertain funding environment we are about to enter, that caution is a good risk to take. But I also know that when we are afraid, we say we are cautious. When others are afraid, we say they are cowardly. I will not advise throwing caution to the wind, but I will remind you that difficult times require difficult decisions and imaginative leadership – leadership that dares to try new ways of doing things and seeks out new ways of collaborating, not only in the field but with other associations and involved individuals. We should try to engender the kind of sense of community to which ABFE is dedicated, but all the while recognizing that true leadership requires a hard-nosed insistence on results – from grantees as well as other partners.

Some might perceive my call for more partnerships and greater collaboration, especially among funders, to be heresy. But I am not alone in suggesting this response to the impending crisis. Jim Joseph also referenced the same in his recent correspondence to Council members. But I am also reminded of a maxim of one of my old history professors: "Today's heresies are tomorrow's orthodoxies."

My confidence in partnerships and collaborations in philanthropy is born out of my experience with them over the course of the past several years. The Southern Education Foundation has been involved in a variety of partnerships, and many of the philanthropies with which we have worked as partners are represented here tonight. In addition, as the President of the Foundation, I also have the opportunity to take a more or less objective view of the numerous collaboratives managed by members of my staff. And while I cannot report that all have been completely successful, we have learned that when we bring together the appropriate projects, institutions, and personnel, collaboration does work very well.

Partnerships and Collaboration at Work

To meet the challenges before us, I believe that we must create a different style of leadership. As previously stated, the style of leadership required for these difficult times will focus on results. It will make foundations more open to the public and grantees. And it will use partnerships and collaborations more effectively to leverage resources. In short, the leadership required in our current crisis resembles what good teachers and caring parents often refer to as "tough love."

While philanthropy must remain and grow even more responsive to the more pressing problems in society, it must demand and focus on results from the attention and dollars that it provides to address those problems. We must strengthen both our own diligence and that of our grantees to ensure projects are designed that have the potential to produce results and that the potential which those projects embody is fully realized. To the extent required and in ways that are not intrusive, philanthropy must employ assessment and evaluation tools that help us to understand better the results, or lack thereof, produced by the initiatives we support. When we learn that certain strategies have proven to be ineffective, we must be more judicious in our decision to support their replication. In turn, when we are presented with approaches that work, even though they did not originate with our organization, we must be more open to supporting those solutions in places where they are needed.

I envision a style of leadership that is willing to be more open with grantees and the public. I believe firmly that if we do a better job of sharing with grantees, potential grantees, and the public the limitations and constraints that we face, that they will come to understand that we cannot assume the funding role that may be abdicated by government. They will understand better and appreciate our situation despite what they may perceive to be our enormous resource base. Over the past several years we have heard a great deal about partnerships and collaborations, and for some of us they have become not only buzz words but clichés. Nevertheless, I think they do have a role for those philanthropists willing to pursue a different style of leadership. I posit this belief based in large part on my own experience.

Balancing Risk and Accountability

In order to determine the long-term viability of partnerships and collaborations in philanthropy, they should be subjected to the same scrutiny that other initiatives now receive. Although I sometimes think that we have come to the point where we often over-evaluate our programs, I am keenly aware, as evidenced by the evaluation conference held by the Council last November, that assessment is now a standard component in a more professional approach to philanthropy. Therefore, I would suggest that as we experiment with partnerships and collaborations, which many will perceive as a more risky mode of operation, that we balance this risk by rigorously assessing our efforts.

The lessons learned will help us to understand better the benefits and shortcomings of funding partnerships and grantee collaborations as strategies for coping with the funding crisis we face today, and which we will invariably confront us again in the future. Both hard data and anecdotal evidence will help us to fine-tune these strategies to make them more effective. The evidence, moreover, will help quiet the doubts of our board members, who will want to know how much bang they are getting for their bucks; whether their foundation is receiving too much blame for failures; and whether they are receiving appropriate credit for successes.

Funding partnerships, and a rigorous assessment of them, will help demonstrate to grantees that cooperation works, and that if we can pool effectively and share our resources, so can they. They will understand better that during difficult financial times it

is more important to meet the needs of their clients than to worry about who gets the credit. Their rhetoric must also match their reality.

This is a reality that we all share because in the final analysis we are all working together to make our nation, indeed our world, a better place in which to live. Whether we provide funding to clean up the environment and conserve natural resources, support initiatives to improve the delivery of health care and social services, or focus on education and employment, we are all seeking to improve society by expanding and sustaining opportunity. To the extent that we are truly committed to these lofty goals and prepared to restructure our approaches and strategies for achieving them, funding difficulties notwithstanding, we can continue to expand opportunities through philanthropy.

In closing, I want to reiterate that I realize that the days ahead will be rough, and that they will be more difficult for some in the funding community than others. But as a CEO who wears the hats of both grantor and grantee, I am as aware as any of you that the funding challenge upon us is indeed daunting. But let me hasten to add that I see also an enormous opportunity embedded in this challenge.

I believe firmly that if we accept the challenge as an opportunity to reexamine and rethink our institutionally individualistic funding to single organizations for addressing multifaceted problems, we will discover that the funding crisis demands a different strategy that also may be a better mode of operation. I encourage you to give consideration to funding partnerships and grantee collaborations.

It requires, however, that we shift our operational focus and reject tunnel vision characterized by inflexibility, shortsightedness, and territoriality. We must be willing to overcome some of our differences and replace fragmentation in our approach to problems and funding with a greater effort to find common ground. Our search for solutions and our strategies for achieving our missions must be driven by a cooperative vision, one that values and effectively utilizes partnerships to support grantees as they seek to empower their clients. In sum, we must achieve a "coming together" as grantmakers that employs our resources to expand and sustain opportunity and to enhance our efforts to recreate a sense of community.

I am not naive enough to think that the fulfillment of America's promise to its people is the sole province of the world of philanthropy. Indeed, it is not. But we in this sector have a unique opportunity to help move our nation in that direction and to help bring about what the novelist Thomas Wolfe talked about in *You Can't Go Home Again*:

So then to every man his chance.
To every man regardless of his birth,
his shining, golden opportunity.
To every man the right to love, to live,
to work, to be himself, and to become
whatever thing his manhood and his
vision can combine to make him –

This, seeker, is the promise of America.

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