

Civil Society in a New Era
Shaping the Conscience of the 21st Century

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Foreword:

The 1998 lecture was presented by James A. Joseph, presently United States Ambassador to the Republic of South Africa, in whose honor the lecture series was initiated in 1991. Ambassador Joseph has served as a minister, civil rights activist, professor, author, and foundation leader. He served in the federal government as Under Secretary of the Interior Department on the advisory Committee to the Agency for International Development, as incorporating director of the Points of Light Foundation, and as chair of the board of the Corporation for National Service. Joseph's corporate career began in Indiana where he was vice president of Cummins Engine Company and president of the Cummins Engine Foundation from 1972 to 1977. For 13 years, he was president and chief executive officer of the Council on Foundations in Washington, DC.

Organizations that have benefited from his service on their boards include the Brookings Institution, the National Endowment for Democracy, Africare, the African American Institute, and the Children's Defense Fund. Ambassador Joseph holds honorary degrees from several institutions, including a Doctor of Laws degree awarded by Indiana University in 1997. Southern University, from which he received his undergraduate degree, has named an endowed chair in his honor. Ambassador Joseph is author of two books, *The Charitable Impulse* and *Remaking America*.

I want to congratulate the Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE) for continuing the tradition of public dialogue on issues of importance to both the African-American community and American philanthropy. For more than two decades, the members of ABFE have dared to raise difficult questions and confront difficult issues that could have been easily ignored or allowed to simply disappear. I want, thus, to commend you for preserving a truly organic link to the African-American community while maintaining an openness to the larger community in which you also have full membership.

When we met at the Smithsonian to inaugurate this lecture series on June 3, 1991, we committed ourselves to bringing attention to not only a neglected part of American history, but also to contributing to a new era of American hope. It is now possible to look back on the decade, which served as the backdrop for the birth of this series, and to describe it as the decade of civil society, a decade in which the courage and commitment of countless individuals and the determination and dramatic staying power of numerous nongovernmental organizations caused communism to collapse, the Berlin Wall to fall, and adversaries in an apartheid state to beat their swords into plowshares.

I was standing on the edge of a crowd in the former Soviet Union when an upstart named Boris Yeltsin made his first major public challenge to Soviet orthodoxy. I was standing outside Parliament in Cape Town, South Africa, with a "Free Mandela" sign when F. W. deKlerk announced that Nelson Mandela would be set free. On each occasion, I was there as a part of civil society groups determined to shape a new and different future.

I come to you today from a liberated South Africa, a country many of you helped to set free—a country now demonstrating to the rest of the world that diversity need not divide, that pluralism rightly understood and rightly practiced can be a benefit and not a burden, and, equally important, that the fear of difference is a fear of the future.

I come to you from a continent where a new generation of leaders is firmly convinced that the 21st century may well be the African century, a continent where many believe that just as almost 100 years ago W.E.B. DuBois described the problem of the 20th century as the problem of the color line, it is now

altogether appropriate to speak of the potential of the 21st century as the potential of people of color.

This is indeed a good time to take note of the contributions of African-Americans to civil society and what scholars now call "social capital". The story has yet to be fully told of how a community limited in investment and physical capital used its vast array of social organizations and civil society networks to establish bonds, build trust, set norms of behavior and meet community needs. When the social capital in the Black community has been strong-when people were participating together to deal with the forces allied against them- the community has had not only higher levels of social cohesion, but less social pathology as well. There is a growing body of evidence that suggests a direct correlation between the health of a society and the voluntary networks that connect people.

I want, thus, to use this occasion to peer into the future and share some personal thoughts about the role of civil society as we draw near the end of the century. Using the South African experience as the context of a new paradigm for civil society, I want to suggest that continued public support for an intermediate space where private energies can be mobilized for a public good may well depend on the contributions of civil society in three areas: 1) providing help for the poor and marginalized; 2) promoting healing for a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time; and 3) providing hope for those who do not yet fully enjoy the benefits of the new democracies they helped establish.

PROVIDING HELP

I am asked occasionally by South Africans why as a representative of government I am so high on civil society. The answer is very simple. If we learned anything from the decade of civil society, it is that when neighbors help neighbors, and even when strangers help strangers, both those who help and those who are helped are transformed. We now know that when that which was "their" problem becomes "our" problem, a new relationship is established and new forms of community are possible.

The most fundamental contribution of civil society may be its message that doing something for someone else-making the condition of others our own-is the most powerful force in building community. When you experience the problems of the

poor or troubled, when you help someone to secure housing or to regain health, when you become a voice for those who are marginalized, you not only serve a public good, but there is likely to be an enhanced sense of self-worth as well. It is through civil society that we are able to transform the laissez-faire notion of live and let live into the moral imperative of live and help live.

But lest we lose the momentum of the last decade, we must now come to grips with what could be the most fundamental challenge to civil society in the 21st century. It is the romanticizing of civil society as "the" answer to everything from poverty to marginalization, rather than recognizing it as an important, but not exclusive, part of the answer. Those of us who emphasize the potential of civil society have an obligation to also emphasize its limits. We should have learned from past experience, that there can be no full-scale attack on the problems of the poor unless all sectors of society are appropriately engaged. It is part of the conventional wisdom of most democratic states that a healthy democracy requires three healthy sectors: a public sector driven by the ballot, a private sector driven by markets, and a third or social sector driven largely by citizen action and nongovernmental organizations. It may be that one of the most important messages that ABFE will need to convey both now and in the next century is the need, opportunity and potential benefit of a partnership between all sectors of a democratic society.

We must protect the paradigm of a benevolent community as one which depends as much on the goodness of individuals as it does on the soundness of government and the fairness of laws. It also goes without saying that we must encourage private actions for the public good, but we must also recognize the emergence and increasing vitality of what Peter Drucker has called the fourth sector, a sector that builds partnerships. In South Africa and around the world, the emerging fourth sector is bringing together individuals and institutions that were once very suspicious of each other's motives and methods. Some remain suspicious, but they come together now partly because of the increased potential for success and partly because of the limited scope and scale of single-sector resources and single-sector strategies.

The need to emphasize the limits as well as the potential of civil society is matched by a simultaneous need to emphasize both the potential and limits of government. It is understand-

able and right that there continues to be considerable focus on the social role of government. But the failure of many to understand or appreciate the many pursuits of the public good that occur outside the apparatus of the state is one of the unfortunate realities of both old and new democracies. The role and resources of the state are declining just as representatives of the traditionally marginalized are gaining access to the machineries of government.

It is important, even critical, that we hold the state responsible for playing a lead role in establishing justice and empowering the poor, but its effectiveness will be greatly diminished if it seeks to do so unilaterally, rather than in partnership with the other sectors. Despite our need to ensure that government meets its proper responsibilities, we need to remember that virtually all the major American movements, whether civil rights, women, consumer, environmental or conservative, have had their genesis in the third sector. This is all the more striking given the decline in the traditional modes of public sector participation, like voting, political parties, and union membership.

The idea of partnership in helping the poor must also include the notion that the poor must be included in their own development. When we founded ABFE, we committed ourselves to engaging grassroots energies and enthusiasms. Experience around the world seems to demonstrate that we were on the right track. We now know that participation by the poor is extremely important for three basic reasons: 1) it gets things done at the grassroots; 2) it helps build self-esteem and character; and 3) it helps build trust and the working relationships that are essential to building community .

I urge you, therefore, that as you consider the role of ABFE in the 21st century you recommit the organization to serving as an advocate for the poor, mobilizing social capital and increasing the impact of civil society. You will find that philanthropy that takes seriously the notion of including the poor in their own development is likely to be more effective and enduring.

I also urge you to look beyond the declining geographic boundaries of nation states that once served to define and divide the African Diaspora. From the beginning, those who founded ABFE intended that Africa should also be on your agenda. The new democracies and the new markets that are fueling the African renaissance can be greatly strengthened by strong civil

societies and the assets embedded in the notion of social capital. I hope you will find ways to engage American philanthropy more deeply in support of the many new opportunities on the African continent for participatory development and assisted self-reliance.

PROMOTING HEALING

A second imperative of civil society in the 21st century will be that of helping to bring healing and wholeness to a badly fractured world. Here the South African paradigm is again helpful. Under the leadership of President Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, South Africa has become a symbol of reconciliation. It is infused in the culture of those who govern, the theology of those who claim a new moral authority, and the ancestral traditions of many who seek to build a new society. It reminds us that it is still possible for old enemies to beat their swords into plowshares, to come to grips with the past and to forgive if not forget. While there are those in South Africa and elsewhere who argue that truth does not necessarily lead to reconciliation, for many it already has. None of us who have watched proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission can forget the expressions of forgiveness and generosity by many who have been victims. One lady who had experienced the worst of apartheid's horror said, "I want to know who did what in order that I might know who and what to forgive."

Reconciliation in South Africa is made altogether more remarkable by the wide differences in tradition and theology, that produced the architects of apartheid and those who continue to pay so dearly for this horrible crime against humanity. As Alistair Sparks reminds us in his excellent book, *The Mind of South Africa*, "The early Afrikaners developed, in their way, perhaps the most boundless individualism that has existed anywhere. They built few villages and felt cramped if they lived within sight of a neighbor's chimney smoke. Here was the ultimate loner who needed to take no one else into account. The Afrikaners would come together briefly in times of danger, but otherwise each would be on his own doing his own thing. So he became inward-looking, concerned only with himself and his immediate family, unaccustomed to relating to others or to considering the feelings of outsiders."

This strong, almost fierce, sense of individualism was repressed somewhat during the later stages of Afrikaner nationalism,

but, like in the United States, it still remains a central part of the national character. As such, it is the exact opposite of the communal tradition of the early Africans where the emphasis was on the community. The word used to describe this communal spirit is “ubuntu,” which means broadly that each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed through the relationship with others, and theirs in turn through a recognition of his humanity. There is a Xhosa proverb that Archbishop Tutu likes to quote that says, “People are people through other people.” It follows that to damage the humanity of another person is to damage one’s own. Reconciliation is not only possible, but it is a moral requirement that goes to the heart of what it means to be human.

While the debate about the value in utility of the truth and reconciliation process continues, what is not debatable is the reconciling spirit of many victims, who seem to harbor no bitterness. Paramount among these is President Mandela who has written: “I am often asked how it is that I emerge without bitterness after so long a time in prison. This question is intended as a compliment, and I can appreciate the motives of those who ask it. Nevertheless, it must be said that millions of South African people spent an even longer time in the prison of apartheid. Some were imprisoned by the apartheid laws in a condition of homelessness and despair. Others were imprisoned in a racism of the mind. These are places where some still languish.”

What is to happen to the prisoners of race around the world, the many nameless, faceless victims’ who are still alive but who wake up every day to the legacies of race? What is to happen to the many beneficiaries of race who live in psychological exile, knowing but refusing to accept the reality that if group identity creates a problem, its resolution will require group-specific remedies. When all is said and done, the ultimate question is not whether truth leads to reconciliation, but whether there can be genuine, lasting reconciliation without careful comprehensive strategies for corrective action. The “J” word, “justice,” like the “L” word “liberal,” seems to have been banished from the public vocabulary, but we must finally ask if there can be reconciliation without justice. We are in debt to the South Africans for the paradigm of reconciliation without retributive justice and its emphasis on revenge, but those who stand in the way of some form of distributive justice with its emphasis on social equity may wake up one day to find that the romance of reconciliation has lost its vigor.

As a moral conscience of democracy, social society will have to take on the test of not only promoting reconciliation in a world that is integrated and fragmented at the same time, but cultivating compassionate values as well. Compassion and generosity are virtues every society desires to cultivate, but there are all too few clues

about how to prepare the members of the next generation to understand their obligations and meet their responsibilities to one another. The time has come for us to ask: “What are the values, attributes, and human development practices that can enhance the capacity for compassion and continue the commitment to a benevolent community?”

Almost a decade ago, I published a book entitled *The Charitable Impulse*. It reported on the results of a study of wealth and social conscience in communities and cultures outside the United States. Not all the donors I studied were motivated by compassionate values, but for those who were there appeared to have been at least four stages of consciousness in the evolution of the compassionate impulse: stage I, in which the altruistic personality and compassionate values were developed; stage II, in which compassionate values were nurtured and reinforced; stage III, in which compassionate values were activated, moving from passive empathy to active engagement; and stage IV, in which increased awareness of the interdependence of private and public life lead to the consideration of options beyond private benevolence.

I continue to be struck by the extent to which private beneficence is a part of a family culture. Parents who transmit compassionate values most effectively exert a firm influence over their children’s moral development. They actively guide them to do good, to share, to be helpful. Children who have been coached to be helpful are more likely to be helpful when a spontaneous situation arises later. No intermediary situation, regardless of how influential or persuasive, can ever replicate the parent-to-child transmission of compassionate values.

The fundamental message here is that the ability to maintain a caring society does not so much lie in the philanthropic institutions we create or even the legacies we bequeath, but in our progeny. Our children must learn from us at an early age that if the strong exploit the weak, or the well-off ignore the needy, the future of our society is gravely impaired.

The second stage in the development of compassionate values involves the reinforcement of what is learned in a family by religion, intermediary institutions and morality tales. The injunctions of religion are particularly valuable because they embody values that are not powered by a culture or a community alone. While religion has been the most powerful force creating and sustaining compassionate values, it is a mistake to overlook other intermediate forces. Many public benefactors have reflected all the noble values taught by religion without being overtly religious. They may have a dynamic and driving sense of the public and their responsibility to it, without raising the

deeper questions of meaning or using the language of moral theology. Yet, they feel a responsibility to contribute something that is meaningful, significant, and even as extraordinary as those who claim to be acting out of a religious imperative.

The third stage in the development of compassionate values has to do with the movement from passive empathy to active engagement. The American myth is the story of the little guy who works hard, takes risk, believes in himself, and eventually earns wealth, fame and honor. This notion of individualism, which was so widely romanticized in the nineteenth century, overlooks the communal tradition that existed side-by-side, often in tension with individualism. The story that has not been told is how so many individuals came to recognize that they were also members of a public with special obligations to that public. For many, there was an essential oneness with the neighbor with whom they shared the resources and destiny of community.

The key here is community. Where there is a sense of belonging, there is likely to be a sense of obligation; and as the individual's sense of community expands so does his sense of the scope of his obligations.

The fourth stage in the cultivation of compassionate values has to do with the awareness of the limits of private benevolence. In my study of the charitable impulse, I was struck by how the active immersion of the donors in public life through philanthropy often led to a more direct involvement in the political life of their community. In private life, they may have been satisfied with what they could achieve through the use of their wealth, but once involved in public life, the very experience of trying to help others persuaded some of them of the need for political solutions, strategies, or participation. They came to recognize that a good society depends not simply on the goodness of individuals, but on sound government, just laws, and institutions that are humane and benevolent.

The message here is that while the concern for maintaining a caring society must certainly start with altruistic individuals and philanthropic institutions, it cannot stop there. In a truly benevolent community, the private and the public are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing. One of the most frequently cited examples of benevolence is the story of the Good Samaritan, who paused on his way to Damascus to help an injured man on the side of the road. What would be the responsibility of that Samaritan if on each successive day for a week he found someone injured at the very same spot on the side of the road? Ultimately, I would hope he would want to

know who has responsibility for policing the road and what public policy exists, or is needed, to protect those who walk along the road.

Those of us who founded ABFE intended that it should be both a private voice in philanthropy and a public voice in the larger society. It is my hope that you will help to cultivate the compassionate values that lead to philanthropy, but that you will at the same time point to the limits of private benevolence, reminding your colleagues of the need for just, humane and benevolent public policy as well.

PROVIDING HOPE

My final observation, then, is that while civil society will be expected in the years ahead to provide help and promote healing, it will also be in a good position to provide hope for those who are struggling to survive. It is the kind of hope that Maya Angelou had in mind when she described the African experience as the spring of hope immersed in the winter of despair. "You see a young boy, fourteen, fifteen years old, semiliterate. Maybe third generation on welfare...But he walks down the street as if he has oil wells in his backyard. If I had come from Mar's or Pluto," she continues, "I would look at the people on the planet and say, 'Who are these Black Americans? Who are they? How dare they hope, with their history?' There is something so irresistible about the hope we embody."

The richness of meaning in this statement is a testament to Maya Angelou's ability to paint a portrait that so many of us in this room recognize as our own. I grew up in Cajun country along the bayous of Louisiana. How dare I hope, with my history? Like me, some of you grew up not knowing from where your next meal would come. How dare you hope, with your history?

My wife and I had the privilege of hosting a special premier of the movie *Amistad* in Cape Town. We were exposed by film to our nation's worst nightmare, the sickness of slavery and reminders of a legacy not yet fully addressed. Some South Africans in our audience were undoubtedly thinking: "How dare we hope, with our history?"

The answer is the same for African-Americans as it is for black South Africans, who believed that liberation was possible when many others had given in to doubt and despair. The hope

that Maya Angelou had in mind is not the same as optimism. As Cornell West put it in his recently published conversations on the future of Black America, optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Hope, on the other hand, enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides that could lead to personal despair. In Cornell West's words, to live with hope is to live and wrestle with despair yet never to allow despair to have the last word.

Connecting the idea of hope to the practice of philanthropy brings me to another answer to the question, "How dare we hope, with our history?" To say that we are African Americans is to say that we take pride in our African connection. It is to celebrate and promote what Thabo Mbeki, the Deputy President of South Africa, likes to call the African renaissance. It is to believe and affirm what the Deputy President said to the South African Constitutional Assembly on the day the constitution was adopted: "Whatever the setbacks of the moment, nothing can stop Africa now. Whatever the difficulties, Africa shall be at peace. However it might sound to skeptics, Africa will prosper. Whoever we may be, whatever our immediate interest, however much we carry baggage from our past, however much we may have been caught by the fashion of cynicism and loss of faith and the capacity of the people, let us say today- nothing can stop Africa now." I agree.

To say that we are African-Americans is also to say that we take pride in our American connection. It is to say as Fortinbras said to Horatio in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "We have some rights of memory in this kingdom." It is to say with Langston Hughes:

I am the child they stole from the sand,
Three hundred years ago in Africa's land.
I am the one who labored as a slave,
Beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave.
Three hundred years in the deepest South:
But God put a Song and a prayer in my mouth.
God put a dream like steel in my soul.

Now, through my children, I'm reaching the goal.
I couldn't read then, I couldn't write.
I had nothing back there in the night.
Sometimes, the valley was filled with tears,
But I kept trudging on through the lonely years.

Sometimes the road was hot with sun,
But I had to keep on till my work was done.
I had only hope then, but now through you,
My dreams must come true.

I cannot say it any better. Those of us who formed ABFE had only hope then, but now through you, our dreams must come true. We take pride in our civil society connections. We know from our own history that when you use private energies to support public purposes, when you mobilize the community's social capital to provide help and promote healing, when you volunteer time to conserve culture or educate a child, you will not only provide an important resource, but you will be helping to fulfill the African-American dream. We had only hope at the beginning, but now through you, our dreams must come true.

