

# My own personal journey to social change philanthropy

---

---

I came to social justice early – in my family home.

My parents embraced diversity and I never knew or cared about a person's faith or ethnicity or race or cultural background or sexual orientation.

I remember one of the twins coming home from school in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and bragging about his wonderful teacher and how she had such a cool name. He commented that her hair was “big” like Nicole's (one of my sisters). About 6 months later, the family found out that the woman was African American. But Paul never mentioned that in his description.

Who cared about sexual orientation or first language or faith? My family certainly didn't – except that it meant interesting different life experiences.

I was raised as an existentialist. I reviewed the platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties at 16 years of age and made my choice. I certainly wasn't going to simply follow in any family footsteps! My father, incidentally, was born in France and came to the U.S. as a young man after World War II.

I would sum up my family experience in a quote from one of the last newspaper interviews given by my dad: “Americans need to get out of their linguistic ghetto and understand that people eat, sleep and make love in languages other than English.”

And I would add: “And they eat, sleep and make love in colors other than White and in different sexual orientations and...and isn't that wonderful?”

So I came to social justice early.

## **But I came to social change philanthropy late.**

I committed myself to philanthropy when I wrote my first personal check to charity, as a 27-year-old executive director of an arts organization in my home state of Michigan. One year later, I joined my first board of directors. And two years later I abandoned my doctoral study in 20<sup>th</sup> century comparative literature (French and American), to devote my full attention to continuing education in the philanthropic sector.

Ah, what a passion I have for philanthropy – as both a staff person and a volunteer. I love Bob Payton's definition: “voluntary action for the common good.”

In my early years, I worked in the arts. I served on arts boards. I gave to many different charities.

In 1988, I became a consultant and expanded my horizons of interest and commitment. I work with diverse organizations and reflect upon diverse missions.

But as the years passed, I found myself increasingly concerned and frustrated and very angry about the nature of our society and the choices of our governments and the vast inequities that I saw all around me.

And I remembered over and over how fortunate I am. White. Heterosexual. Well educated. Financially comfortable. Woman.

Oops, woman. In every state in the U.S. and in every country in the world, it is a disadvantage to be a woman. But at least I had a bunch of other advantages.

However, I was raised as an existentialist. “Unchurched” as a friend of mine says. But existentialism talks about responsibility for the self and for others. Existentialism talks about responsible choices.

So my sense of responsibility – which was always huge – kept growing. And my desire for change and my belief in my own responsibility to do something was overwhelming.

I gave to HIV/AIDS early in the pandemic, and I still give. Not because it’s a health issue but because it’s a social justice issue. Too many people didn’t care about HIV/AIDS because it was a disease of gays and druggies. Excuse me? What about social justice?

And what about the growing disparity between the haves and have-nots in this country? And the abandonment of progressive public policy and societal behavior? Just ask my husband Tom how angry I was (and still am).

Sometime in the mid 1990s, I was hired by the Women’s Foundation of Southern Arizona to do strategic planning. I fell in love with the women’s funding movement – a global movement to level the playing field.

Inspired by Arizona, I started the Women’s Fund of Rhode Island, a field of interest fund at The Rhode Island Foundation. The mission of the Women’s Fund is to advance equity and social justice for women and girls. The Fund champions fairness, impartiality, opportunity, shared power and responsibility in all spheres of personal and community life including economic, cultural, educational, social and political.

In May 2000, the Fund for Community Progress and its executive director Nondas Hurst Voll gave me a copy of the book *Robin Hood Was Right: A Guide to Giving Your Money for Societal Change*, by Chuck Collins and Pam Rogers.

That book articulated my feelings. With my family upbringing, my values and beliefs, the founding of the Women’s Fund, and then *Robin Hood* – I was hooked. Much of my heart and soul turned to social justice and its necessary partner, social change philanthropy.

**I came to social justice early. I came to social change philanthropy late. But I’m here now. Altogether.**

Social change philanthropy focuses on social injustice, changing the systems (public policy, society, etc.). Indeed, if we gave more money to social change philanthropy, we could produce social justice – and wouldn’t need so much charity to redress social ills.

We live in an unjust world.

I live in the United States, and we are full of social injustice. Perhaps part of that is inevitable, but I'm not willing to give up so easily. And I know that an extraordinary part of the social justice in the U.S. is because of social and political choices that the voters and elected officials in this country make.

There are many organizations that fight against social injustice here in the U.S. But not enough.

And there is only limited giving to social change philanthropy. I hope it is because not enough people understand that giving to social change will produce social justice. But I think it's more that so many people in all societies worry that social justice will affect their own lives negatively. What a sadness that is.

Martin Luther King Jr. wrote: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." That means that my life and yours are only as good as the lives of others.

Dr. King also said, "Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice that make philanthropy necessary."

As Tracy Gary and Melissa Kohner say in *Inspired Philanthropy*: "Traditional philanthropy is based on responding to, treating and managing the consequences of life in a society with a capital-based economy."

On the other hand, progressive philanthropy – also called social change philanthropy – "analyzes and responds more to cause than effect... Progressive philanthropy strives to fund work that is proactive rather than reactive. Progressive philanthropy's investment lies in supporting and facilitating change, challenging the assumptions that economic and social inequities are somehow unavoidable as the price of progress or prosperity."

Social change philanthropy is about organizing and activism. It's about engaging all members of our society in dialogue and action. It's about making the invisible visible – only then can we have equity.

Social change philanthropy and activism are about sharing power. Social change philanthropy makes sure that those who are typically ignored and disregarded are at the table. Social change philanthropy holds governments and corporations and society itself responsible for social injustice.

### **I'd like to share two of my favorite stories or metaphors:**

This first one is a story about **social justice**. The story originated from John Rawls in his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice*. Warren Buffet tells the story sometimes.

It's 24 hours before you were born. A genie appears and says: "You get to set the rules of the society into which you will be born. You can set the economic rules and the social rules and all the other rules. The rules you set will apply during your lifetime and for the lifetime of your children and even your grandchildren."

Just imagine how thrilled you are with this offer! But you're smart. You ask, "What's the catch?"

And the genie says: "You don't know if you're going to be born rich or poor, Black or White, able bodied or infirm, intelligent or retarded, heterosexual or homosexual, male or female. Now what rules do you want?"

I know what rules I want: Human rights for all – whether you are Latina or White – lesbian, gay or heterosexual – poor or rich – female or male. Fundamental human rights.

This next story helps distinguish between **direct service and systemic change**. Direct service is what so many worthy organizations do to help address the ills of this society. Like feeding the homeless and teaching employment skills and protecting women from domestic violence.

It's wonderful that, worldwide, we have so many direct service providers. But so many of the "ills of society" could actually be eliminated or severely reduced. But that requires systemic change.

So here's the story:

A woman (or a man!) is walking on a path by a river. She looks out over the water and sees hundreds of babies flowing down the river, drowning.

The woman rushes into the river and starts pulling out the babies and carrying them to the bank.

Another woman approaches along the same path. She looks at the woman rescuing the babies – and turns away, proceeding up the path.

The woman in the river calls out: "Wait! What are you doing? Come and help me rescue these babies."

And the other woman doesn't stop. She calls out over her shoulder: "I'm walking to the head of the river to find out who is throwing the babies in the river and to stop that from happening."

That's systemic change. That's questioning the status quo. That's social change philanthropy.

One woman is volunteering and giving money for direct service to those in need. Another is volunteering and giving money for systemic change – that's social change philanthropy.

And only through social change philanthropy will we produce social justice.

A colleague of mine once observed: "My board members are voting for elected officials who are changing public policy and causing more harm to the people we serve. Then my board members have to raise more charitable contributions to compensate for the political actions they have taken, and help address the needs of those we serve."

### **Learn about social change philanthropy (also called progressive philanthropy)**

I urge everyone to read *Robin Hood Was Right*. (ISBN Number 0-393-04827-6) And take a look at *Inspired Philanthropy*. (ISBN Number 1-890759-03-1) Both books talk about creating our own giving plans.

Visit the various links on this site. Find colleagues and donors and volunteers who work in social justice organizations and promote social change philanthropy. Question and learn.

## **The philanthropic sector**

I've noticed a missing link. The body of knowledge in philanthropy and fund development tends to focus on the more "traditional" aspects of philanthropy. Most writing on philanthropy seems to make little mention of social change philanthropy. This topic is covered in specialty books, by specialty organizations.

I made a presentation recently about social change philanthropy and was surprised at how many development officers were not familiar with the concept – or misunderstood it. But I shouldn't have been surprised because the concept isn't in the mainstream literature.

I think it's time that mainstream philanthropy and fund development – and especially fundraisers – become more aware of social change philanthropy. No matter where we work or volunteer, we should be aware of the true scope of philanthropy.

I hope that the authors in our field – myself included – will incorporate social change philanthropy in the fundraising books and sectors books, and certainly in the history of philanthropy.

## **Speak out**

It's the speaking out part that's the hardest. Equity means making the invisible visible.

Social change philanthropy – and challenging social injustice – involves great risk. Progressives are not always very popular. But every society has always had progressives. What is democracy but a progressive approach?

Father Dan Berrigan said: "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice. But there must never be a time when we fail to protest."

And Susan B. Anthony reminds us: "Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputations... can never bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world's estimation, and publicly avow their sympathies with despised and persecuted ideas and their advocates, and bear the consequences."

## **In conclusion**

I collect quotations. I've done so since I was in high school I think. I want to leave you with more of my favorites:

"Robin Hood was right. Tipping the balance of resources to include more of humanity is an adventurous, thrilling, and worthwhile pursuit. Charity is good, but supporting and creating social change are about power. Power can infuse lives with purpose and dignity. That opens up the possibility of joy. The life of the giver, as well as that of the receiver, is transformed... No matter who we are, no matter how much money we have, whatever our color, gender, age, religion, or language, we can bring change to the world around us. Giving isn't a posture reserved for the rich or powerful. It is the responsibility and privilege of every man, woman, and child to participate in the task of building more just and humane societies.

“Philanthropy and activism are a gift to one’s self. By giving, we lessen our own cynicism and alienation.

“Creating social change is exciting. It’s proof that we are alive and thinking. What could be better than to work for a future where fairness is the bottom line?”

[Alfre Woodard, from her Preface to *Robin Hood Was Right*.]

“I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live.

“Life is no ‘brief candle’ for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a short moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

[George Bernard Shaw]

**Simone P. Joyaux, ACFRE**  
**September 11, 2003**  
**Foster Rhode Island USA**