

## Philanthropy's Moral Dilemma

Excerpted from *Keep Your Donors: The Guide to Better Communications and Stronger Relationships*<sup>1</sup>, Simone Joyaux and Tom Ahern

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“Giving isn’t a posture reserved for the rich or the 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.” (Alfre Woodard, *Robin Hood Was Right*)

“Small acts of resistance to authority, if persisted in, may lead to large social movements...ordinary people are capable of extraordinary acts of courage...those in power who confidently say ‘never’ to the possibility of change may live to be embarrassed by those words...the world of social struggle is full of surprises, as the common moral sense of people germinates invisibly, bubbles up, and at certain points in history brings about victories that may be small, but carry large promise.” (Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*)

### THE POLITICS OF POWER IN PHILANTHROPY

As in any human endeavor, politics are alive and well in philanthropy. NGOs seek power, just like everyone else. Witness the following actions by nonprofit / NGOs, just a sampling:

- Recruiting people of influence for the board to help get big gifts and special favors.
- Retaining board members who do nothing but give big gifts, despite this violation of good governance principles.
- Depending on executive committees<sup>2</sup> without considering the negative power dynamics, and effect on other board members.

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<sup>1</sup> Modified from *Keep Your Donors*, Chapter 25 | Coda | Philanthropy's Moral Dilemma. *Keep Your Donors* is part of the AFP / Wiley Fund Development Series, copyright 2008, released November 2007.

Chapter 25 includes an expanded discussion of this topic, accompanied by examples and questions to stimulate conversation.

For other writings and resources on social justice and social justice, see [www.simonejoyaux.com](http://www.simonejoyaux.com). Click on social change / justice in the left hand navigation bar.

- Admitting less-than-qualified kids from socially powerful families to elite schools because social capital is so important.
- Recognizing donors by gift amount, with no discussion about any possible negative impact.
- Use terms like “major gifts” and “major gifts officer” with donors, with little thought about the messages communicated. (I recently heard a story about a donor who asked if she should call the “minor gifts officer”. And in Australia, I just heard of a position called “medium gifts officer.”)

Each of these actions reflects some form of privilege. When (rarely) confronted about these (often) unquestioned acts, organizations may respond: “We need money because we do good. Politics makes the world go round so we act accordingly.” Ah yes, the end justifies the means.

It seems to me that nonprofits accept these politics as the status quo, the way of doing business. Organizations often reinforce this approach, either intentionally or unconsciously. Or, because the sector doesn’t talk much about the issue, let alone alternatives.

I don’t think politics are hidden in philanthropy, merely masked with a hint of entitlement and self-righteousness. Power, authority, and influence *do* offer advantages, but not without one big consequence, what I call the moral dilemma and crisis of philanthropy

### **THE MORAL DILEMMA FACING PHILANTHROPY**

For me, this is the moral dilemma: In general, philanthropy and fund development reinforce the status quo. The haves remain haves. The have-nots remain have-nots. By depending upon power, both philanthropy and fund development honor privilege, which destroys the likelihood of a level playing field. And finally, philanthropy’s transformational capacity too rarely touches equity and social justice.

Don’t get me wrong. There is so much to admire and value in philanthropy. But I’m increasingly concerned about privilege and power, the fashion of the world. Philanthropic organizations use both to move their missions forward. At that moment, philanthropy embroils itself in a moral dilemma, an actual crisis in my opinion.

### **POWER, SOMETIMES SILENT BUT EVER PRESENT**

None of this is a secret. It’s just not mentioned much. And discussed even less, except in special circumstances.

You know power when you see or experience it: control and influence.

Just visit your thesaurus. Better yet, check out [www.visualthesaurus.com](http://www.visualthesaurus.com). The diagram of a word – like power – morphs each time you click. For power, you’ll see words like baron, big businessman, king, magnate, mogul, and tycoon. What’s not to like? Or how about “so powerful that you can influence events around the world?” Personally, I want that one.

Then click on the little dotted line that leads to “powerlessness.” There you’ll see “impotence,” “lack of strength,” and “weak and feeble.”

The most common origin of power is based on privilege. For example, the privilege of having money, being male, born to the majority race, and being able-bodied.

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<sup>2</sup> I’m on a worldwide mission to destroy all executive committees. And lot of people are signing up!

This traditional privilege and power reinforce the status quo, too often devaluing those with less (or different) privilege and power. Too often traditional privilege excludes other community voices. And by reducing community voices, we limit change.

I think this dynamic compromises the broader purpose of philanthropy, which I believe is about building community. Moreover, privilege and power can compromise the “inherent and inalienable rights of all,” stated in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

### **Privilege, the driving nature of power**

We talk lots about the disadvantaged. We worry about the poor and the infirm, those without job skills, those without education. And wonderful nonprofits help relieve the suffering of the disadvantaged.

But how often do you, me, others talk about the advantaged?

Try it. Soon. Now.

Stop asking who is disadvantaged. Start asking who is advantaged. Advantage – unearned, unrecognized, and too often invisible to those who have it.

Advantage is just another word for privilege. And it’s privilege that people don’t want to talk about because privilege is so personal. Yet some of my privilege and yours come at the expense of others.

Without a fundamental awareness of privilege, it’s almost impossible to understand the politics of human relationships. It’s hard to ask the tough questions about power. And how can we change – if we want to – without asking the most cage-rattling questions (another one of my worldwide missions).

Let’s start with the obvious: Each person experiences life differently. A person of color experiences life differently than a white person. A wealthy person experiences life differently than a poor person.

Consider how you experience life. Consider what advantages you might have because you were born a particular gender or ethnicity / race. Because you were born into a wealthy family.

You must read Peggy McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack<sup>3</sup>.” Back in the late 1980s, Peggy examined her own privilege as a white woman. Things like begin able to buy flesh-colored bandages for a cut. Or speaking out against racism without appearing self-serving. Or readily getting a cab on the street.

Peggy reminds us that this privilege is not a result of something a person has done. On the contrary, privilege is the result of “invisible systems conferring dominance on a particular group.”

And what happens with these unearned privileges? They become the norm. A culture’s socialization about norms produces hierarchies and power dynamics that are often unquestioned and accepted as reality. As authors Capek and Mead note in their book *Effective Philanthropy: Organizational Success through Deep Diversity and Gender Equality*, the norms of our respective cultures advantage some and disadvantage others.

And it’s not just about racism, which was Peggy’s focus. Privilege is found at the intersection of gender, ethnicity/race, class, and sexual orientation.

What does privilege or unearned advantage look like? It looks like me.

I’m a white, heterosexual, well-educated, affluent woman. White, heterosexual, well-educated, affluent.... All privileges that offer me rights and benefits in the U.S., Canada, and most everywhere in the

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<sup>3</sup> You’ll find “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” all over the Internet, including on my website in the social change / justice section. And by the way, watch for Peggy’s new articles, scheduled for publication in fall 2008.

world. Unearned advantages provided to me through birth, via my parents. Sure, I've worked hard. But I had a head start, a really big one.

I do have one glaring disadvantage: I'm a woman. It's a disadvantage in every country of the world to be a woman – yes, even in the United States of America, that bastion of democracy and freedom. But at least I'm white, heterosexual, well educated and affluent, compensating somewhat for the gender disadvantage.

I can get married and I can buy a nice house. I can get lots of different jobs although I won't get paid as much as a man for doing the same thing. Also, I've hit the age when age is a problem again, too old. But I'm still enormously privileged.

You know what's really sad? When I talk about my privilege – my unearned advantage – people flinch. People say I shouldn't talk like that because “nice women” don't talk like that. Don't rock the boat. Don't talk about advantages like class, race, gender, sexual orientation. That makes people uncomfortable.

Damn. If the privileged won't talk about their own privilege, how will change happen? Do we actually expect the disadvantaged and marginalized to continue this war without us there, too, and leading it? Shame on us.

I believe it is our moral obligation – as philanthropic leaders – to talk about privilege and politics and power. Talk about this with your staff and with your board. Talk about it with your donors.

Yes, this can be done. Surely we can explore ideas about what to do to minimize the negative affects of privilege. Then make those changes.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE TWO TYPES OF PHILANTHROPY**

There are two kinds of philanthropy: traditional philanthropy and social change (also called progressive) philanthropy.

I'm using the term “traditional” in the sense that this philanthropy is the most prevalent, most common. Operating in the mainstream, it needs no adjective. This is simply philanthropy, including the full gamut of endeavors. For example, healthcare, education, arts, environment, human service, and so forth. This is voluntary action for the common good, to address community needs and improve the quality of life.

This traditional philanthropy is great. But it's not alone.

“Traditional philanthropy is based on responding to, treating and managing the consequences of life in a society with a capital-based economy. Progressive philanthropy, on the other hand, analyzes and responds more to cause than effect. Progressive philanthropy supports...social change...actions that seek to right the imbalances of an unjust society or unequal distribution of resources... often making people, institutions, and government uncomfortable. Progressive philanthropy strives to fund work that is proactive rather than reactive. Progressive philanthropy... challenges the assumptions that economic and social inequities are somehow unavoidable as the price of progress or prosperity.” (Tracy Gary and Melissa Kohner, *Inspired Philanthropy: Creating A Giving Plan*, Chardon Press. New edition now available.)

Social change / progressive philanthropy requires an adjective to distinguish its focus and approach. This kind of philanthropy focuses on root causes and supports systemic change.

An often-told story illustrates the difference between the two types of philanthropy.

Imagine that you're walking along a riverbank. Suddenly you notice babies floating down the river, drowning. You wade into the river and rescue them. But there are still more, so many. Soon, you see another person walking along the riverbank. You call out to her, "Come and help me save the babies who are drowning in the river." But she hurries on by saying, "I'm going to the head of the river to figure out who is throwing them in and stop them."

"Rescuing the babies" is the traditional and dominant approach in philanthropy. Going to the head of the river to fix the root cause is less common and often controversial.

Of course, the choice is not either or. Every society needs both. And some organizations do both. Equally important, everyone chooses his or her own interests and causes, as it should be.

My complaint, however, is that social change philanthropy is not well enough known in the sector. Nor is there enough of it to fulfill part of philanthropy's purpose, building community in terms of that U.N. Declaration of "inherent and inalienable rights for all." Moreover, philanthropy itself succumbs to the politics of power and privilege.

### **TRADITION DOMINATES**

More than one hundred books fill the walls of my office; yours, too, I imagine. Countless articles fill my files and yours. Great books and great articles. Some of the best in the field.

But most don't mention anything but mainstream philanthropy. Same experience with all my continuing education over 30 + years. There's limited exposure to social justice or social change / progressive philanthropy, except in specialized publications or at special conferences.

This isn't my experience alone. Most fundraisers I encounter aren't familiar with the concepts of social change philanthropy or social justice, the purpose of this other philanthropy. Most fundraisers that I know talk about mainstream traditional philanthropy, not the full spectrum of philanthropy, which includes social change.

That's my concern. The lack of familiarity with social change philanthropy. We're missing part of history, an essential component of our practice, a critical element of building community.

The dominant culture, the voice of the "majority," wins. The status quo reinvents the status quo. I'm angry, ashamed, and feel guilty.

I expect a fairer approach from philanthropy and fund development and the nonprofit / NGO sector. Hopefully the globalization of fund development will introduce new experiences that can fight these dominant voices.

### **HAVE YOU NOTICED: THE LESS SOCIAL JUSTICE WE HAVE, THE MORE PHILANTHROPY WE NEED?**

Ironic, isn't it? We need more philanthropy because we refuse to deal with social injustice. We need more traditional philanthropy to compensate because we never give enough to social change philanthropy to actually make change.

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

Social injustice. What does that actually mean? Unfairness. Inequity. Privilege and advantages available to some but not all.

You know the old saying about giving a person fish to eat – or teaching the person to fish? The thing is, even if you're taught to fish, you need a place on the riverbank to fish from. We teach people to fish but we don't give them a place on the riverbank.

Unequal pay for the same work. No living wage. Vastly fewer women in elective office. Marriage for opposite sex couples but not same sex couples. Prisons filled with black men.

And the list is endless and ever growing. We're good at maintaining the status quo and reinforcing the haves and have nots. Because some changes would threaten your privilege and mine just too much.

Injustice is contagious. To quote King again, "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."

If we gave more money to stop injustice, then we would have less injustice and less need to compensate for injustice through traditional mainstream philanthropy. Surely that's what Martin Luther King Jr. meant when he said philanthropy was commendable, but...

### **We are complicit**

Candidly, I think much of the sector is complicit in social injustice. That's part of the sector's moral dilemma.

Complicit because we don't acknowledge the harm of privilege and power and figure out how to discuss these issues. Complicit because we're comfortable with the status quo and have figured out how to use politics. Complicit because it's easier and less risky to be conventional than it is to question.

Injustice demands social change, a leveling of the playing field. "Social change means community empowerment, redistribution of resources, and transformation of social and institutional systems that perpetuate all forms of inequity." (Frank J. Omowale Satterwhite, Ph.D., President and CEO, National Community Development Institute.)

Redistribution of resources – oops. Maybe taking something away from me because it's become apparent that the world's resources are not unlimited. Transformation of systems – hmm. Maybe overturning the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to outlaw college admissions based on race. Gee, we white people won and got to keep the affirmative action we live with daily.

This is hard stuff because it's about my personal privilege and yours. It's about the personal privilege of our donors and our friends and neighbors and families. Because change could hurt those of us who are privileged.

### **PHILANTHROPY AS A DEMOCRATIZING ACT**

My view is that philanthropy is *not* particularly democratic. As you read in this paper, I believe that usually we accept (and design) philanthropy as an act of traditional power and privilege.

Instead, I think philanthropy can, should, and must amplify all voices, especially those that are traditionally ignored. I expect philanthropy to behave as an empowerment tool. I want philanthropy to be a strategy to democratize our communities and our organizations. A strategy to fight the haves / have nots model of society. A strategy to democratize our communities and organizations.

I expect philanthropy to empower people, to empower the donor regardless of gift size. I expect nonprofit organizations to speak out about privilege, politics, and power in philanthropy.

### **ATTACKING THE MORAL DILEMMA**

"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. We can open our

minds, roll up our sleeves, and reach out our hands.” (Alfre Woodard, Preface, *Robin Hood Was Right*)

Rest assured I’m not naïve. Fundraisers *will* focus more on the donors who are most loyal and who give more money. Nonprofits *will* recruit board members with connections. And on and on and on.

But certainly we can certainly manage power and privilege in our organizations, and in our society. That’s my challenge and battle cry directed to myself, to you, to organizations, donors, and volunteers.

Philanthropy has enormous power for good – as long as donors, volunteers, professionals, and organizations don’t get confused about the distinction between social change philanthropy and traditional mainstream philanthropy. We don’t need to trap ourselves as replicators of the status quo, purveyors of haves and have nots.

Of course, it’s up to the donor and volunteer and organization to chose which philanthropy to engage in. But I think it’s up to all of us in the sector to demand broad recognition of both kinds of philanthropy.

Moreover, I think philanthropy could better stimulate the evolution of society. Of course, maintain traditional mainstream philanthropy in its full panoply. But also embrace progressive philanthropy that fights for social change.

I think the nonprofit / NGO sector must examine itself and how organizations and professionals are complicit in privilege and power. Let’s use the philanthropic process – including fund development – to question privilege and power in the doing of this work.

Leaders can – no let me say should – raise these issues at every opportunity. In organizations where we work and give money and time. Within our professional associations and in writings and presenting.

For me, this is an obligation. It’s about speaking out because silence is consent. It’s about taking risks – all the time knowing that even the ability to take a risk may be based on privilege, e.g., I can afford to lose my job.

I believe that one of the obligations and glories of philanthropy is questioning privilege and its resulting power. I’m convinced that philanthropy can and should be – more often – a subversive act.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Here is one of my favorite stories, told by Warren Buffet based on John Rawls *A Theory of Justice*. I modified Buffet’s words somewhat. For me, this story represents philanthropy’s moral dilemma.

Imagine that 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 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 poor or rich, White or of color, infirm or able bodied, homosexual or heterosexual, or female or male.

So what rules do you want?”

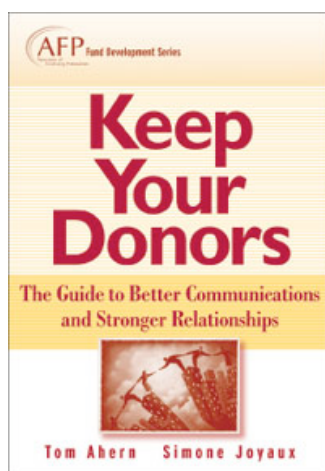
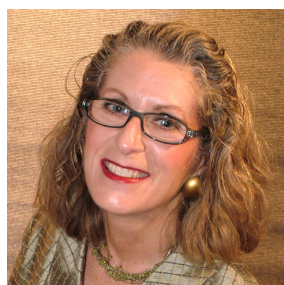
I know what rules I want, equity and social justice for all.

I know that to create this world requires social change / progressive philanthropy, not only traditional mainstream philanthropy.

And I know that this means transformation, more probably revolution. I think it's time for more subversive acts like asking cage-rattling questions. Confronting complicity and challenging privilege and power. Exploring morality and speaking out. Increasing philanthropy for social change.

But I have hope.

“La esperanza muere última.” Hope dies last. (Jessie de la Cruz, retired farm worker recounting the days before Cesar Chavez and the founding of the United Farm Workers. Studs Terkel uses this 2003 book *Hope Dies Last: Keeping Faith in Difficult Times*.)



Simone P. Joyaux, ACFRE is recognized internationally as one of the most thoughtful and inspiring leaders in the philanthropic sector. She is an expert in fund development, board and organizational development, strategic planning, and management. Both her book – *Strategic Fund Development: Building Profitable Relationships That Last* and *Keep Your Donors: The Guide to Better Communications and Stronger Relationships* (co-authored with Tom Ahern) receive rave reviews.

Simone presents all over the world and is a faculty member of the Master's Program in philanthropy and development at Saint Mary's University, Minnesota. She serves regularly on boards, founded the Women's Fund of Rhode Island, and is a former chair of CFRE International. In 2003, Simone was recognized as RI's Outstanding Philanthropic Citizen for her work as a volunteer and donor. Simone and her life partner give 10% of their income to charity each year, and have bequeathed their entire estate to charity.

“An instant classic. No other book on the market addresses the primary role of fundraisers – building relationships.” (Susan F. Rice, ACFRE, SFR Consulting)

“A great book...a great read...value beyond words. Ahern and Joyaux have married ideas, insights, stories, and real-life examples to remind us all...it is all about the donor.” (Tony Myers, CFRE, University of Calgary)

“Brilliant. A wonderful combination of big picture inspiration and practical know-how.” (Alexcia WhiteCrow, CFRE, Planned Parenthood of Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota)

“Tom and Simone have made an invaluable contribution to the art and science of relationship building that is the hallmark of successful philanthropy.” (Pearl F. Veenema, Past Chair, AHP)

“The counterpoint of their style intrigues, and their prose is lively and surprising: interspersing anecdotes with intermezzos with powerful challenges to the way we approach our work and our relationships. Bravo!” (Kay Sprinkel Grace, Transforming Philanthropy, LLC)