



© Simone P. Joyaux, ACFRE • www.simonejoyaux.com

Social Justice and Progressive Philanthropy: A Subversive Activity

Introduction

This vocation of philanthropy gives me great joy. Voluntary action for the common good. The opportunity for an individual or family or corporation or foundation to live out its interests and aspirations.

More and more I find my work in philanthropy allows me to live out my interests, motivations and aspirations. I am filled with emotion – take a look at my bracelet – the 7 emotional triggers for direct mail response.

I live out my emotions through my work and my own personal philanthropy, as a volunteer and donor.

- Averaging 10 hours per week as a volunteer while working more than full-time.
- Giving 10% of my income per year to philanthropy
- Bequeathing 100% of my estate to charity

There is so much to admire and value in philanthropy

- Healthcare organizations worldwide fighting cancer and birth defects, HIV AIDS and autism. My own father died of cancer and I am forever grateful that donors give to find a cure – even though I do not give to that cause.
- Environmental groups trying to ensure that you and I have breathe clean air and have clean water to drink.
- Arts and cultural organizations reminding us of the spirit. I began my career in nonprofits working in an arts organization.

I believe that everyone should / must choose his/her own interests and causes. I make my choices. You make your choices. Donors and volunteers make their choices.

BUT I'm increasingly concerned about the state of philanthropy – that philanthropy is not sufficiently transformational in one particular sense – equity and social justice. I worry that philanthropy is too tied to the status quo and that philanthropy is too traditional.

There are two kinds of philanthropy:

- Traditional philanthropy – which is most prevalent and most discussed – from healthcare to education to arts and culture to the environment. Improving life. Addressing community needs.
- And then there's social change philanthropy. The philanthropy that addresses the root causes not symptoms.

The difference? Rescuing babies from river – a metaphor about direct service and social change. You are walking by a river and you see babies flowing down the river, drowning. You wade into the river and rescue them. But there are still more; so many. Another person walks by the river

and does not stop to rescue the babies. You call out and ask why. She responds: “I’m going to the head of the river to figure out who is throwing them in and to stop them.” That’s social change philanthropy.

We need both types of philanthropy. We need those who rescue the babies and we need those who go to the head of the river to stop the babies from being thrown in. That is the difference between direct service and social change / between traditional philanthropy and social change philanthropy.

Social change philanthropy is about addressing the root causes, not the symptoms. It’s the difference between direct service and systemic change.

- Give money to feed the hungry OR establish and enforce public policy to assure a living wage and affordable housing, thereby making sure that people can pay for food, shelter and clothing.
- Give money to clean up the rivers OR establish and enforce public policy for environmental protections, e.g., the Kyoto Protocol – and make sure the consequences are so large that corporations and governments will change their behavior.

Of course it isn’t either / or. We need philanthropy for both – rescuing and change.

But my concern is that the social change and social justice piece is too often ignored.

I’m reminded that I wasn’t exposed to social change philanthropy through my own professional association or through conferences or trade publications or histories of philanthropy.

I don’t find social change philanthropy accessible in the mainstream of philanthropy. I had to go look for it.

And I know it’s not just me. Most fundraisers that I know don’t talk about social change philanthropy. Most fundraisers I know are not familiar with the concepts of social justice and social change philanthropy.

That’s my concern. The lack of familiarity with social change philanthropy. I think of what Martin Luther King Jr. said: “Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice that make philanthropy necessary.”

Philanthropy in the Western World comes from the noblesse oblige orientation of Europe. You and I have resources and so we must help those without resources.

Research in the U.S. shows that more than 90% of philanthropic gifts go to what may be called traditional philanthropy – described as “responding to, treating and managing the consequences of life in a society with a capital-based economy.”

I’ll bet that’s charitable giving in many countries – a focus on traditional philanthropy.

We’re feeding the hungry instead of changing the inequities that produce hunger. So many of these charitable acts could also be called the Band-Aid approach.

But what about the root causes of the problems? What about giving more money to make the systems change and solve the root cause?

If we gave money to stop injustice, then we would have less injustice and less need to compensate for injustice. That’s what Martin Luther King Jr. meant.

Take a look around – It seems to me that our society needs more philanthropy because we refuse to deal with social justice.

Why do we focus on rescue rather than change? I think we’re uneasy with social change. Why? Because social change is a progressive concept that demands:

- Questioning the status quo.
- Challenging assumptions – for example the assumption that economic and social inequities are unavoidable as the price of prosperity and progress.
- Taking action.

And the really tough part of social change? Questioning our own personal privilege, because privilege produces power.

Candidly, I think much of philanthropy is complicit in social injustice. I think that much of philanthropy is replicating the socially unjust society that we inhabit.

So let's really get to it.... Social justice and progressive philanthropy. Why is it so hard?

Because it's about my personal privilege and yours. Because 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.

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 world.

And hey, white and heterosexual were not because of anything I did. And even well-educated ... my parents sent me to school! I had every advantage.

I'm a woman. There's the problem. 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 – so that compensates somewhat for the gender disadvantage.

I can get married and I can buy a house – and I can afford a darnn 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 and I've hit the age when age is a problem again, too old. But I'm still enormously privileged.

My privilege. Yet every day, I think about Kris and Pamela and Clare and Peg and Lise and Ron and Lynn who cannot get married except in parts of Canada or in Massachusetts in the U.S. – and these are people who live in RI and RI won't recognize a same-sex marriage done elsewhere.

I think about Miriam and Sharon and Cynthia who are Latina and Black and always have to be aware and wary.

And I think about my government

- threatening reproductive choice, a basic human right for women.
- trying to amend the U.S. Constitution to define marriage as a relationship between men and women, thus denying the rights of the LGBTQ community
- refusing to address a healthcare system that ignores millions
- I think of people struggling for a living wage in a country that wants Wal-Mart prices.
- I live in a nation that has shifted its conversation from fighting poverty to accumulating wealth.

Now think about your friends, family members, colleagues, and strangers who are of color, less affluent, gay or lesbian. Think about your government, local, regional, federal.

What's happening in your world, your nation, and your organization? Where is the privilege and power?

It seems to me that we are all complicit – as citizens – and we in this room are certainly complicit in our capacity as leaders of the nonprofit sector.

I don't think it's okay for us to be so ignorant about social change / progressive philanthropy.

Certainly our histories and our conferences and our books and articles should document this other angle of philanthropy. Surely social change / progressive philanthropy is as worthy of attention as traditional / mainstream philanthropy.

And for us as fundraisers and leaders, it's worse than being complicit. I think that too often we fundraisers and our organizations promote privilege. Just think about the nature of power in fundraising and in governance.

I hear fundraising colleagues – staff and consultants – talking about:

- Getting people of influence and affluence on the board to help get big gifts and curry special favors.
- Keeping board members who do nothing but give big gifts – which is not an acceptable definition of being a good board member
- Designing campaigns based on affluence and influence
- Making sure that some of the kids admitted to the school are from socially powerful families because social capital is so important.
- Retaining executive committees within examining the inherent power dynamics
- Recognizing donors by gift amount, which is about privilege
- Focusing on major gift donors and that's defined by gift amount
- And I hear colleagues talking about donors demanding more and more and wanting their money used in certain ways – that's about privilege and power too. Because those donors know they have power.
- I hear fundraisers saying let's not lobby or take a stand because it might alienate a big donor.

All of this is about privilege. And that means someone has more privilege than someone else. Privilege produces power.

Rest assured I'm not naïve. I know that fundraisers will focus more on the donors who are most loyal and who give more money. That's okay as long as we are demonstrating the same respect for all donors – and as long as we are actually talking about and examining the nature of privilege and power in our own fund development and governance activities.

Philanthropy has enormous power for the good – as long as the donors and volunteers and organizations don't get confused about the distinction between social change / progressive philanthropy and traditional status quo philanthropy.

It's up to the donor and volunteer and organization which philanthropy to engage in.

But it's up to all of us – especially all of us here in this room – to demand equal time for both kinds of philanthropy.

I have this dream of philanthropy as a response to social injustice – offering relief to those suffering from the results of the injustice that you and I and everyone around us help create.

But I also see philanthropy as a strategy to eliminate the injustice.

I'm more and more convinced 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.

And that's part of my life's work – to question privilege and power, including my own.

For example: I tell people that I'm on a worldwide mission to destroy all executive committees and to challenge traditional definitions of power in governance and fund development. And I question the focus on major gift fundraising and the attention to board members with affluence and influence.

I believe that we fundraisers can and should be the revolutionaries.

Think of social change movements and progressive philanthropy: Signing petitions and demonstrating. Boycotting. Joining an organization and lobbying from within. Giving money. Subversive acts – aren't they glorious?

So today I challenge you.

- I challenge you to become more aware and get more educated about social justice and social change philanthropy.
- I challenge you to challenge your organization's assumptions about privilege – in fund development and in governance.
- I challenge you to challenge our profession. Demand that our histories feature social change philanthropy not just traditional philanthropy.
- Demand that your fundraising association expands its publications and broadens its story telling.
- I challenge you to make sure that the voice of social change philanthropy is heard, even if you choose not to participate in this kind of philanthropy.
- I challenge you to raise the issue of social change philanthropy and privilege and traditional philanthropy in every venue. That's what I'm doing these days.
- Beware of the silence of dysfunctional politeness.
- And finally, I invite you to examine your own personal giving. Might you have some interest in giving to social change / progressive philanthropy? Are you concerned about the social injustice that is rampant in our society? Do you ever question your own privilege?

Yes, some of these topics will cause discomfort in you and within your organization and its participants. But that's what courage is all about.

IN CONCLUSION:

Imagine a socially-just world. A world without regard for privilege but instead a world with a level playing field.

We will recognize social change when we see community empowerment, redistribution of resources, and transformation of institutional systems that perpetuate inequity.

Here is one of my favorite stories:

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 or infirm, retarded or intelligent, homosexual or heterosexual, or female or male.

So what rules do you want?” [From: *A Theory of Justice*, by John Rawls, 1971; told by Warren Buffett; modified somewhat by Joyaux.]

I know what rules I want – equity and social justice for all. And I know that to create that world requires social change / progressive philanthropy A series of subversive actions – from money to organizing to volunteering.

To paraphrase Gloria Steinem, if you are here today listening to my remarks – and there’s no trouble tomorrow, then I haven’t done my job. And I wonder, if any of us have done our jobs.

“We must accept finite disappointment. But we must never give up infinite hope.” Martin Luther King Jr. And so I go out tomorrow again. To launch my subversive acts. To promote revolution. A revolution for social justice and for social change philanthropy.

So let’s go out there and launch some subversive acts in the name of social justice and social change philanthropy. Let’s start another revolution.