

Fundraising isn't about money...neither is giving

Stop! Stop! Please stop now!

If you and your board and your staff think fundraising is about money...not good. If you think donors are just giving money... not good at all.

Fundraising helps people follow their own interests, express their values, and advance their own aspirations. Our work is about emotional fulfillment.

As Dale Carnegie (1930s self-help guru) said: "You'll have more fun and success when you stop trying to get what you want and start helping other people get what they want."

Why is it so hard for fundraisers and NGOs to understand, accept, and embrace this donor focus?

Because you're all focused on your mission? So you think everyone else is focused on your mission? You universalize your own passion. You think that donors give money to your organization to fulfill *your* mission. The truth is, donors have their own personal missions.

Let me ask you: When was the last time you thought about why you give? And don't tell me, "I'm giving to the mission." Probe your own heart. Think about how you feel. Ask yourself why this mission is important to you. Why you care about this cause.

You're not answering a questionnaire! You're telling a story to yourself. Think about your story.

Fundraising and giving aren't about money

Donors give *through* your organization to achieve their own desires... to fulfill their own aspirations... to live out their own values. Your organization is the means to the donor's end.

I'm a huge Seth Godin fan. Pay attention to this marvelous blog from Seth:

"The brand is a story. But it's a story about you, not about the brand."

"Yes, every brand has a story—that's how it goes from being a logo and a name to a brand. The story includes expectations and history and promises and social cues and emotions. The story makes us say we "love Google" or "love Harley"... but what do we really love?

"We love ourselves.

"We love the memory we have of how that brand made us feel once. We love that it reminds us of our mom, or growing up, or our first kiss. We support a charity or a soccer team or a perfume because it gives us a chance to love something about ourselves.

"We can't easily explain this, even to ourselves. We can't easily acknowledge the narcissism and the nostalgia that drives so many of the apparently rational decisions we make every day. But that doesn't mean that they're not at work.

“More than ever, we express ourselves with what we buy and how we use what we buy. Extensions of our personality, totems of our selves, reminders of who we are or would like to be.

“Great marketers don't make stuff. They make meaning.”

And by the way, if you think the donor's focus on self-fulfillment is bad, you're wrong. The fact that people – like you and me – have aspirations and fulfill them through charitable giving...that's glorious and beautiful. The fact that people – like you and me – choose to give through different organizations...that's glorious and beautiful.

I've told you before...so has Tom Ahern...and so have researchers worldwide: emotions drive much of decision-making. Emotions – like fear – are a biological imperative.

Fundraising and fundraisers are story listeners and storytellers.

We fundraisers listen to stories about clients, those who are served...whether that's a child, a puppy, a tree, a melting glacier, a patient, the actor, or dancer.

Then you and I retell those client stories. And we invite those clients to tell those stories in their own voices.

Now, you and I should also be listening to donor stories. Because donors are the real heroes of all fundraising stories. Then you and I must retell those donor stories. And let those donors tell their own stories in their own voices.

Unfortunately, we're pretty darn poor at listening to and then retelling donor stories. We don't do much inviting. We retell...seemingly grudgingly.

Instead, we tell our organization's stories. How great our staff is. How swell our board members are. How absolutely great our organization is.

We fundraisers and our bosses and boards and program staff make our organizations the heroes. And then we expect donors and prospects to applaud from the grandstand. We expect prospects and donors to applaud by throwing money at us.

And we're pissy when they don't. Yes, pissy and whiny!

How much longer will nonprofits act so stupidly? How longer will you ignore what so many experts keep telling you? The donor is the hero. The donor isn't sitting in the grandstand looking down at your great plays on your great field. Donors are the heroes. And donors are right down there on the field, part of your team.

Everything is a tale. Life is stories.

Fundraising isn't about money. It's about the hearts and minds and values of donors. Giving isn't about money. Giving is about the hearts and minds and values of donors. And donors are the heroes of the story.

Here are two of my favorite quotations. Post them on your wall. Chant them at board and meetings.

- “The universe is made of stories, not atoms.” [Muriel Rukeyser, American poet and political activist]
- “Everything is a tale. What we believe, what we know. What we remember, even what we dream. Everything is a story, a narrative, a sequence of events with characters communicating an emotional content. We only accept as true what can be narrated.” [Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *The Angel's Game*]

How good a story listener are you? How about your board members and your staff? How effectively do you celebrate your donor heroes? How effectively do you tell your story?

My family was against the War in Vietnam before it was popular to be against that war. My dad always asked, “Why do you Americans think you can win? The French were in Indochina for years and never won.”

I’ve always felt different. A lot of people feel that way.

In fact, we are all different. And yet all the same. Never forget that. Some of our stories are similar. Some are different. But they are all stories. Stories that belong to individuals who live their lives with other individuals in different communities all over the world.

My beliefs. My values.

When I was 31 years old, the local newspaper quoted my dad: “The most important thing is to step out of your linguistic ghetto and become aware that there are other people in the world who live, eat, learn, and make love in a medium which is not English.”

Over the years, I’ve commandeered that story. Tom and I have translated that into our own slogan, our family battle cry: “People eat, sleep, dream, and make love in languages other than English, in colors other than ours (White), and in pairings other than opposite sex. And that’s glorious! That’s what we’re fighting for.”

And, now I embrace being different.

My life and my work are one and the same. ~~Philanthropy and the nonprofit sector.~~

If I believed in gods or goddesses, I would say that I was put in this world to do the work of philanthropy.

I chose to speak out because I believe that silence is consent. I’m a self-proclaimed change agent. I’m an agitator. I choose to be provocative.

Whether I’m consulting or writing or presenting around the world or volunteering...I speak out. I raise the tough issues. And yes, that makes other people uncomfortable sometimes. But that’s who I work hard to be.

Sometimes I’m gracious and kind. Sometimes I push and provoke. Sometimes I go for gentle explaining and careful care. Sometimes I go for shock and awe.

I make fun of myself. I share my mistakes and my embarrassments.

I wear weird hose. I have 65+ cool but tacky rings – and I mostly always wear one on each hand. (After all, I do have two hands!)

People tell me all this is my brand.

And yes. I chose and choose over and over to be this.

Telling my stories and truly hearing yours

I tell my stories and invite others to tell theirs. I listen to your stories and her stories and his stories and their stories. I find joy in the listening. I work hard to hear the anger and fear and joy and love and anxiety and guilt and confusion and desire and hope and...

Even if I disagree.

Even if I very much dislike his values or her beliefs or their approach to life.

I try so hard to listen and hear and respect and honor him as a human being...her as a fellow person wandering the earth.

Sometimes it’s hard to try because I am so uncomfortable or disagree so very much. But especially when I’m in the nonprofit and philanthropy space...when I’m presenting at a conference or teaching in the Philanthropy and Development Program at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota...when I’m with donors and prospects and professionals from all over the world...then I work even harder to see them all as philanthropists. To invite and listen to their stories. To really hear. To respect and honor.

He changed part of the story... the facts. His truth because, after all, it was his part of the story.

I remember Alain's part of the story differently. Aligned with my values and beliefs and my memories. Memories... how I experienced it.

It's my story, too. My memory. So I tell it my way.

In his novel *Ordinary Grace*, one of William Kent Krueger's characters says:

"What I know from my studies and from my life is that there is no such thing as a true event.

"We know dates and times and locations and participants but accounts of what happened depend upon the perspective from which the event is viewed...

"What we remember together we often remember differently. I'm sure that each of us has memories that for reasons of our own, we don't share. Some things we prefer remain lost in the shadows of our past."

When the Vets' organizations call asking for gifts... Which story am I remembering? Which story am I telling myself?

Both fundraising and giving are about your stories and mine.

We have to see ourselves in the story. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*: "If a story is not about the hearer he or she will not listen... A great lasting story is about everyone or it will not last. The strange and foreign is not interesting, only the deeply personal and familiar."

We have to see our donors in their stories. Carl Jung tells us: "There are some parts of the human self that are not subject to the laws of time and space. And storytelling, the telling of, and the listening to, is one of those things."

This is philanthropy.

Shall I say it again? Fundraising is not about money – neither is giving.

Telling my stories

I tell my stories and invite others to tell theirs. I listen to your stories and her stories and his stories and their stories. I find honor in the listening. Often I find joy.

I work hard to hear what you're feeling and what you're sharing...anger and fear and joy and love and anxiety and guilt and confusion and desire and hope and...

Even if I disagree. Even if I don't share those values or those beliefs.

I honestly and genuinely try hard to listen and hear and respect and honor him as a human being...her as a fellow person wandering the earth.

Sometimes it's hard to try because I am so uncomfortable or disagree so very much. But especially when I'm in the nonprofit and philanthropy space...when I'm presenting at a conference or teaching at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota...when I'm with donors and prospects and professionals from all over the world...then I work even harder to see them all as philanthropists. To invite and listen to their stories. To really hear. To respect the person. To honor the person by hearing.

I won't be convinced to change my own values and beliefs. But I can listen respectfully. I believe that is my obligation as a fellow human being. And I believe that is my accountability as a worker in fundraising and the nonprofit sector space.

And I expect the same, by the way.

I take the risk and I use myself. I tell you my stories and my experiences.

I share my weaknesses and my mistakes and my embarrassments. I use myself as a guinea pig.

I tell you my stories. So you can practice listening and hearing stories.

I tell you my stories so you can hear passions that might be similar to yours.

More importantly, I tell you my stories so you can hear passions that might be different than yours. Not to convince you. But to get you more comfortable hearing stories that conflict with yours.

And most importantly, I tell you stories of others whose stories our society too often ignores. I tell stories that aren't told enough in the mainstream. Because those out-of-the-mainstream stories make too many people in the audience uncomfortable.

I tell stories that are avoided in "polite company" and only rarely told at major fundraising conferences around the world. Stories of my friends who happen to be gay. Stories of racism and sexism and homophobia. Stories of reproductive justice.

I share these stories because there are gays and lesbians and transgendered colleagues in the audience. And they're sad about never hearing their stories in the mainstream. I share stories of serving in the Planned Parenthood movement because organizations and individuals that fight for reproductive justice are tired of being ignored in the mainstream so as not to offend someone.

I refer to my husband as my life partner. Yes, I am married to that male. But until there is marriage equality in every state in the country I live in, I will not use the term "husband."

I'm tired of hearing stories from those of religious faith – and rarely hearing any stories of those who don't believe in a god or goddess.

Ah the mainstream...you win. Ah tradition...you win.

The rest of us accede to your wishes and desires. Those of us who want to expand conversations – those of us who want to welcome the full diversity of life – are criticized.

Sometimes, my audiences deny me my stories

Several years ago, I was presenting in Illinois, USA. Maybe 100 people were in the room for this 6-hour workshop on keeping your donors through relationship building. Audience members participated actively.

At lunch, a gentleman came up to me and asked if he might speak with me privately. "Of course," I responded.

He was very gracious and gentle. He told me that I was the best presenter he'd ever heard and that he was learning lots of stuff.

Then he said, "But your examples are distracting."

I asked him to explain.

He said, "Your personal stories are about giving to Planned Parenthood and to homosexuals."

I explained that I was sharing my stories and wanted to hear his stories. I explained that this was about all of us learning to listen and hear the stories of our donors and others.

He responded, "Yes, I know. But your stories are distracting." Then he asked me how I would feel if I was hearing stories from those who believed in God and thought my donations were contrary to God's principles.

I responded, "I teach at a Catholic university. Many students in my courses believe in God and some are evangelicals. I listen to their stories with respect. I honor their beliefs. And I expect them to do the same with my stories."

He responded, "Yes, I know all that. But your examples are distracting."

And I responded, graciously and gently, “Don’t you understand? I don’t care. These are my stories and I listen to your stories.”

He came back after lunch.

And when the workshop ended and I was walking out, two women came up to me. They said: “We’re from the local Planned Parenthood affiliate. Thank you for talking about us like we’re just another nonprofit organization. That happens so very rarely.”

And I’ll bet there were homosexuals in the audience, too. And I’ll bet there were people who didn’t believe in a god or goddess.

I hope to speak for all of them.

Here’s another story

I was presenting a workshop in New England.

I was talking about fundraising. I was talking about respecting donors and realizing that people are different and welcoming these differences. Not just tolerating differences but actually welcoming and respecting differences.

At one point in the workshop, I looked at the audience and said: “Just look, Mary is the only person of color in the audience. That’s a problem.”

Yes, I called out the truth that we weren’t particularly diverse. That we had better work on that. That we had better realize that the world and our community is diverse. And we have to respect that and welcome diverse people.

At the end, a white woman came up to me and said: “I don’t think you should have said that about Mary.” I responded, “Don’t you think that Mary immediately knew she was the only black person in the room. We cannot expect those who are marginalized to speak out for themselves. Those who aren’t marginalized have an obligation.”

Yes. That’s what I do. I hope to speak for the marginalized. I will not be silent.

And here’s another story of denying the stories of others

I was presenting outside of North America – in an English-speaking country. The workshop title was “Fundraising Is Not About Money – Neither is Giving.”

I explained to the audience that this would be very personal. That I would use my own personal stories as examples.

I explained that I was the Chair of the Board of Directors of Planned Parenthood of Southern New England (RI and CT). I told the stories of my gifts to social justice organizations.

I said loud and absolutely not proud: “I’m a white, heterosexual, well-educated, affluent woman. I win – except for gender. Because it’s a disadvantage to be a woman in every country in the world and every state in the USA. But at least I’m a white, heterosexual, well-educated and affluent woman. I win and I find that appalling. And that is my life’s work – to fight that.”

At the end of the plenary, a woman came up to me crying. She asked if she could hug me. I said of course. She was a lesbian and unable to marry her life partner, a woman.

I’ve had that happen before. Another time at a big conference, a woman came up and hugged me after that statement. She was lesbian.

And gay men tell me how wonderful it that I speak that way. And people of color say that to me. And people who aren’t wealthy say that to me.

I respond with thank you. Thank you. Because I’m only marginalized as a woman. But I’m privileged – unearned privilege – because I’m white and heterosexual (born that way!), well-educated (thanks mom and dad), and affluent (partially because I’m white and heterosexual!).

By the way, in my evaluations, I received an eloquent comment from a Christian. The individual talked about how inappropriate I was; how Christians were in the room and didn't expect to have to hear those kinds of comments at a fundraising conference.

There was no way for me to respond directly to that evaluation. So I am responding here. I'll bet there were Muslims in the room, too. And people who don't believe in your God or Allah. I'll bet there were LGBTQ colleagues and friends in the room who are tired of continually being unacknowledged.

To all the fundraisers out there

In too many spaces – in too many rooms – the majority seems to think it's okay to deny the stories of some people. Often that's because of unearned privilege. Unearned privilege is how you're born: race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical status, socioeconomic status, and so forth. You don't choose any of these.

I believe philanthropy should be greater than unearned privilege. I believe philanthropy is love of humankind... and that crosses all diversity. I believe philanthropy should be a democratizing activity, embracing donors regardless of socioeconomic status.

And I believe that fundraisers and their organizations should welcome all donor stories. We fundraisers are supposed to be enablers of philanthropy. Fundraising is the essential partner of philanthropy. Without fundraising, philanthropy isn't as frequent or effective or productive as it is and can be.

How can a true fundraiser – any real leader – deny a donor his or her story? How can a true fundraiser – any leader – allow the marginalized to continually be denied their stories?

I tell my stories. I don't tell your stories because your stories aren't my stories.

I expect you to tell your stories.

No matter where I've presented – Eastern and Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand, North America, Mexico – I told my stories. I will continue to do. I will be honest and genuine.

That's my obligation as a human being – because you're a human being, too. That's my accountability as a fundraiser – because you're the donor or the prospective donor.

You're the hero. As the fundraiser, it's my honor to listen and hear your story. I'm trying to learn your aspirations, what you're trying to accomplish.

Psychology tells us that human beings need to feel known and understood. We need to know that others heard our stories, and understand our feelings and aspirations. That is what it means to be human. To find connection.

Surely that's what fundraisers do with donors, our heroes: make them feel connected.

As Maya Angelou said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

My giving isn't about money. I want to join a fight I think I can win. It's my fight, my interests, my aspirations.

Can I give through you? How will you, the fundraiser and your organization, make me feel about my story?