



Keystone Questions

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Two people were standing on the banks of a river, alarmed by the disconcerting sight of babies floating down the river in baskets. The charitable person immediately began wading into the river and pulling the baby baskets to shore, thus saving several lives. The philanthropist ran upriver to find out why the babies were floating down the river in baskets in the first place.

The babies needed both, and so do we.

Many of the topics we have chosen to explore in Conversation 2009 focus on how charity can be more charitable—in effect, how we can save more babies from the river. If the nonprofit community is to play a role in shaping the tsunamic changes many believe are on the horizon, we will need to focus on philanthropy. To actually intervene in the current madness in any meaningful way, we will need to seek transformations “upriver.”

This is not a new idea: In the 1950s, David Rockefeller said, “Philanthropy should always aim to transform society, rather than maintain the status quo.”

Peter Copen of the Copen Family Fund has said that that we must seek and find “a new paradigm—a paradigm that will exponentially reduce suffering (and enhance the evolution) of people and the planet.”¹

A few days after the 2008 election, Diana Aviv, President of the Independent Sector, said this during a presentation at their annual conference:

If we stand, as I believe we do, at a moment of profound rethinking about the American social compact, then the values of mutual concern and shared responsibility that unite us must be central to the discussion. We must use our voice—the organized expression of what we collectively call the independent sector, a voice founded on the values and aspirations that are embedded in the work we do. The great national reimagining that is poised to take place must draw a good part of its moral and intellectual inspiration from the nonprofit community. From us, individually and collectively. From our ideas and our actions. Government and business have recognized that our commitment to the greater good over individual gain is our enduring virtue; this puts us in a unique position to speak up now—when the good needs to be so much greater.

The wisdom in Ms. Aviv’s thoughts should encourage us to realize that we must go far beyond pulling the babies from the river:

- Philanthropy must be transformative.
- The current realities cannot be addressed by “those who cling to a present which is already dying” (Robert F. Kennedy, 1966).
- This time of profound rethinking, of great reimagining, “must draw a good part of its moral and intellectual inspiration from the nonprofit community.”

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- Only a new paradigm will exponentially produce the changes needed to keep the babies from being placed in the river in the first place.

For purposes of this discussion, let's assume that as a sector we are committed to keeping the babies from the river. Metaphorically speaking, how did they get in the river? How and why were they in baskets? How far from the river do we need to trace the problem? And how far ahead do we need to look to foretell what grim, unintended consequences might be of the babies floating in their baskets in the river?

That is when the very difficult questions must enter the discussion—the questions about unintended consequences. What are they, and how do we address both the current crying need and the potentially dire consequences of intervention? Is the river so polluted that the babies are already beyond saving? If they are saved, will they inevitably be at very high risk of another fatal disease? If they are saved from that disease because medicines have reached them in time, what about the next drought—will they and their children die of famine a generation later?

These are brutal questions, but they must be asked. They are immense questions about immense issues that must be triaged if philanthropy is to do more than address symptoms. Do we begin to face these questions by looking back from the future? Can we structure these issues so that we can, in effect, look back at today from a generation or two hence, and might we then be able to see more clearly what we should see today?

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The Baron Luc Tayart de Borms, managing director of the King Baudouin Foundation in Brussels, said in 2005, “A new role is emerging for foundations and philanthropists,” that of “providing a neutral platform for discussion, informed debate and consensus building.... This should be the new ethical imperative of their work in the twenty-first century.”²

The world's great philanthropists have the stature and, in most quarters, the credibility to begin this triage process by convening conversations around these highly complex and highly charged issues. Furthermore, I would argue that they have the absolute responsibility to do so: while their wealth derives from private sources, it is vast, they are relatively unaccountable, the majority of their assets are set aside to grow more wealth, and they are free to define their own priorities without regard for any democratically agreed-upon societal priorities. They are exempted from all taxation, and there is no requirement that anyone other than their boards and their donors agree on their mission. There is no one scrutinizing their outcomes to verify that they are impacting root causes and producing results which “exponentially reduce suffering,” or whether they are applying Band-Aids which may create detrimental, unintended long-term consequences of their own. Some of these consequences could, tragically, increase suffering exponentially.

Although I have used the word and the concept of triage, I do not mean to suggest an either-or scenario in which either the babies are saved from the river or that only upstream intervention is necessary. Most philanthropists would be constitutionally incapable of ignoring the babies in the river, thank heavens. But I do suggest that it is essential to deeply consider the places at which philanthropic dollars can have the greatest long-term positive impact, and that this consideration must now be global as well as local.

Dr. Jan Agosti, Senior Program Officer in Infectious Disease Development and Strategic Program Lead for Neglected and Other Infectious Diseases at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, spoke on February 27, 2009, at the Anchorage World Affairs Council. When asked whether the Gates Foundation (or any other organizations she was aware of) were asking questions about unintended consequences of current efforts, or what might be considered the “keystone” questions about which half-dozen initiatives may be essential to ensuring current investments in health, justice, the environment, etc., she replied, “No. But that is THE question we are all talking about.”

If the Gates Foundation is not addressing these questions, who will, and when? If the Philanthropy Roundtable's mission is “to foster excellence in philanthropy, to protect philanthropic freedom, to assist



donors in achieving their philanthropic intent, and to help donors advance liberty, opportunity, and personal responsibility in America and abroad,”³ but does not mention the process of global prioritization, who will, and when?

Proposal:

A series of global philanthropy roundtables should be convened for the purpose of triaging the most basic “keystone” processes or problems philanthropy may be able to address that could, as Peter Copen suggested, “exponentially reduce suffering (and enhance the evolution) of people and the planet.”

The first roundtable should define the process within which the triage will proceed. At the least, each roundtable should have a purpose which builds on the preceding roundtable. Whether or not research is required before or between roundtables should be determined at the first roundtable as well. Initially, it may be most effective to resist the compulsion toward research and rather rely simply on the perspectives, experience, and wisdom of the participants.

Participants should include leading global philanthropists like Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffett, George Soros, and might also come from the leadership of organizations like the Independent Sector, the Council on Foundations, the European Foundation Centre, the Global Philanthropy Forum, UNESCO, and the World Economic Forum.

One of our colleagues, Joe Zanetta, has written provocatively on “the highest and best use” of the charitable dollar. This is a critical and timely topic, and relevant not only to current needs but also to long-term impact. Each donor, whether individual, corporate, or foundation, will have to answer for themselves the questions about the most essential and critical application of their philanthropy. There are those who will want to address immediate problems with compassion, and with relatively immediate, measurable outcomes. There are others who will be motivated to address more universal problems with passion, and with tolerance for less immediate, less measurable outcomes.

Each donor, whether individual, corporate, or foundation, will have to answer for themselves the questions about the most essential and critical application of their philanthropy.

Warren Buffett said, “In business, you look for the easy things to do. In philanthropy, you take on important problems, and it is a tougher game.”⁴ This triaging of the application of philanthropy is important. It will be tough, and it will take courage. Both approaches—charity and philanthropy—must be encouraged by the need we know exists, and by our belief that we can make the world a better place. We know this is a time fraught with the potential for disaster on a scale not known before. We also must believe this is a time ripe for transformation. Transformation is the only worthwhile choice, and our philanthropic community will have to lead.

¹ Copen Family Fund: Quote from presentation to 2001 Trim-Tab Philanthropy Conference, November 17, 2001, Petaluma, CA

² p. 18, UBS Philanthropy Services 2005: The Year in Review

³ <http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/content.asp?pl=406&contentid=488>

⁴ Buffett: Independent Sector: January 2009, Beyond “Business Thinking” as Panacea: Articulating Our Vision of a Distinct, High-Performing Nonprofit Sector, by Phil Buchanan (<http://www.independentsector.org/members/perspectives0901.html>)



About this extract

In Spring 2009, Gary Hubbell Consulting convened a think tank of North American nonprofit organization and development leaders. Four topics were selected for discussion, each of which became the focus of an insightful essay by each of the hand-picked attendees. The four topics are: New Perspectives on Leadership, Reimagining the Future of Philanthropy, Development in a Systems Context, and Demonstrating and Communicating Philanthropy's Impact. The resulting e-book, *In Search of New Meaning: Philanthropy, Community and Society*, is available for free download at www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com. This essay is an extract from that publication.

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