

Imagining Possible Futures 2030 When Driving Forces Interact



OPTIMAL or VIGOROUS
 Robust opportunities, strong incentives for collaboration & networks, creative/innovative era



Driver 2: Society's orientation to philanthropy (institutions, networks, and incentives)

LIMITED or REACTIVE
 Limited, disjointed, shallow, gap-filling, Band-Aid approaches

Driver 1: Approaches to pressing social issues (education, health, retirement, employment, immigration, hunger, borders, justice)

OPTIMAL or VIGOROUS
 Strong, integrated, deep, systemic, long-term responses

Scenario

C Limited, disjointed, shallow, gap-filling, Band-Aid approaches exist amidst tight limits, siloed approaches, where traditional approaches continue to dominate



LIMITED or REACTIVE
 Tight limits, siloed approach, traditional approaches continue to dominate

SCENARIO C STORY CONTRIBUTION BY CONVERSATION 2012 PARTICIPANT



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/3.0/>
or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.



planning ▲ strategy ▲ philanthropy ▲ coaching

P.O. Box 510257 ▲ Milwaukee WI 53203 ▲ 414-962-6696 ▲ www.garyhubbellconsulting.com

PERSEVERING WITH A PURPOSE

Gary J. Hubbell

Gary Hubbell Consulting *Conversation* 2012

PARTICIPANT BIO



Gary Hubbell

Principal, Gary Hubbell Consulting

Gary is a strategist, providing high-level consulting and coaching to social sector organizations and private companies in the areas of planning, strategy development, and philanthropy. He is passionate about partnering with leaders to transform organizations - applying his research and experience to help define and achieve goals.

A voracious reader and student of history, he is constantly looking to understand the driving forces that shape organizational choices and create openings for change. This internal motivation led to his creating GHC Conversations as a desire to incubate and contribute to a community of learners/leaders who share his interest in meaningful reflection on the social sector.

With more than 30 years' professional experience, Gary has been counsel and coach to more than 135 clients throughout his career. He started Gary Hubbell Consulting in January 2006, following 15 years as a senior strategist with a national consulting firm. Earlier leadership roles include development and marketing responsibilities in hospital and museum settings, and consulting roles in resource development, public relations and opinion research.

Resilience 2030

State of the Sector
is a mixed bag

TECH NEWS

TIME



PERSEVERING WITH A PURPOSE

Our Person of the Year:
Natalia R. Lynn

A social sector
leader's mid-life
retrospective

By Gary J. Hubbell

Driver 1: Approaches to pressing public social issues, mandates (education, health, retirement, employment, immigration, hunger, borders, justice)

Driver 2: Society's orientation to philanthropy (institutions or informal networks and incentives or tight limits)

Limited, disjointed, shallow, gap-filling, Band-Aid approaches exist amidst tight limits, siloed approaches, where traditional approaches continue to dominate

January 5, 2031

Natalia R. Lynn, 48, is the founder and executive director of Virtual Grass, an entrepreneurial national B Corporation¹, headquartered in Seattle. Originally licensed as a medical marijuana dispensary in 2008, Virtual Grass evolved to become the leading national catalytic force for resource collaboration and societal problem solving in large cities and mega-regions.

A third generation Maltese-American and a first-wave millennial, Lynn is at the forefront of a powerful new—and recent—surge in North America toward what could arguably become a “golden age” of fairness, equality, access, and the long view. More on this later. In the meantime, her path to this recognition is the story of anything but a “golden” path. The editorial board of Time Magazine has selected her as our “Person of the Year” because she represents generational resilience, a sense of duty and urgency, and commitment to the dignity of the many. Her mid-career, mid-life journey is testimony to her triumphant story and success. Inspired by earlier efforts of the Clinton Global Initiative, she became someone who enters North American communities to bring together the resources (intellectual, policy-making, financial, and grass-roots engagement) to solve big problems. In a career fraught with personal risk, professional isolation, and near financial ruin, hers is a story that mirrors that of the social sector in the United States, if not throughout North and Central American.



Lynn celebrates formation of Virtual Grass (2008)

We had the pleasure of catching up with Ms. Lynn during a recent quasi-vacation cruise she and eleven other women leaders took from Seattle to Mexico. They are attending the Global Mid-Century Conference on Authentic Leadership, taking place in Mexico City. As the keynote speaker, we asked Natalia to reflect back upon her career highlights and to share with us the lessons learned and implications for her work—and our world—in the decades to come.

¹ B Corporations emerged in the early 21st century in recognition of the inability of governments, nonprofits, and traditional business to produce the necessary social benefits. B Corporations’ legal structure expands corporate accountability so they are required to make decisions that are good for society, not just their shareholders. B Corporations’ performance standards enable consumers to support businesses that align with their values, investors to drive capital to higher impact investments, and governments and multinational corporations to implement sustainable procurement policies. <http://www.bcorporation.net/about>

TIME: How would you describe the state of the social sector today in 2030?

I'd say today we have rhythmic collaboration of an increasingly intentional and effective spectrum of people and organizations, collectively producing significant social balance and fairness in which most people are able to succeed. But let me tell you, it has only been in the last five or six years where I could actually say this. Recently we've emerged from a long period of struggle and isolation. Our political and organizational egotism and myopia has given way to a more realistic—and hopeful—sense of the commons. We have become a more pervasively explicit “community” of peoples and organizations.

Even the way we think, manage, and decide is better now. Especially over the past decade and a half, I have seen greater adoption of the model we at Virtual Grass have been espousing since we started in 2008. The emergence of collective intelligences for issues, businesses, and countries has led to forming new kinds of organizations able to address problems and opportunities without conventional management. Collective intelligence can be thought of as a continually emerging property that we create (hands on) from synergies among people, software, and information that continually learns from feedback to produce just-in-time knowledge for better decisions than any one of these elements acting alone.²

Again, until fairly recently, this description existed in modest proportion for the past two decades. Success was episodic and seemed to take place in disconnected but fertile pockets of endeavor. The past 20 years has been for us and for the sector a long march of survival and resolve amidst a paradoxical mixed bag of great technical breakthroughs but limited sector growth and evolution.

TIME: What were the most pivotal events of the last 20 years that shaped the choices you and your organization made?

I'd need the help of historians to catalogue them all, but a few that stick out for me as particularly meaningful for shaping sector response are the following. The decade of the 2010s produced some world leader moments that reverberated for years and became influential—and often limiting—for the sector.

The 2012 U.S. presidential election was a narrow victory re-election for America's first African American and gen X president, Barack Obama. A second term led to some advancements (in technology adoption, infrastructure, climate change adaptation, and federally funded education initiatives), but was largely hollow and failed to produce a long-desired economic and/or societal recovery. The worst economic crisis in half a century continued to hold us in its grip. In fact, with a bleak short-term outlook, public opinion (the most shrill of which was found in the U.S., but echoed both north and south of American borders) questioned the ability of political leaders and policymakers to find a way out.³

² (Retrieved January 9, 2012 from: http://www.millennium-project.org/millennium/Global_Challenges/chall-06.html)

³ OECD Observer

Then, memorable perhaps for me because it was so soon after our founding and so close to what was supposed to be the recovery after the Great Recession, was the 2013 assassination attempt on German Chancellor Angela Merkel that left her (and most of Europe) paralyzed. She had been the driving force behind the agonizing tight rope walk to keep the European Union together and solvent. Her removal from the scene resulted in continued economic anguish for a few years, just when the U.S. (especially, but not exclusively) was imagining a return to a more robust economic recovery. We gradually dropped the “new” from in front of “normal” because it came to feel not so new anymore and not something to be celebrated or embraced.⁴

Fueled by deep and widespread frustration and the increased clamor of the business class, the 2016 U.S. presidential election was a near landslide victory for Peter Landsdale, a white, 58 year old, GOP-backed candidate whose credentials as a U.S. based global solar technology company CEO led him to be seen as the business messiah who would take the country out of the doldrums. Despite great promise and fanfare, his first term in office produced few inroads in what seemed like an intractable malaise. Nevertheless, he was reelected in 2020 with the promise of economic breakthroughs that heretofore had been elusive. Once again, the hype of the campaign was not at all matched by the subsequent lived experience.

In 2024, Jasmine Barlow became the first woman elected as U.S. president. This became a pivotal year, as her election that November meant that she joined a decidedly strong cohort of women nation leaders. Earlier that year, Karin LaFrance became Canadian prime minister after a spirited national election. To the south, Mexico elected Agraciana Martinez – Cortez. This wave of women in global leadership was not a blip; rather it reflected decades of steady gains. Just more than a decade earlier than this notable election, women made up half of the U.S. workforce, with an unemployment rate 1% lower than men's; more women than men were gaining advanced college and bachelor's degrees, redefining the roles in the family. Nevertheless, although they then held 51.5% of management, professional, and related positions, women accounted for only 3% of the Fortune 500 chief executives. Women's representation in U.S. legislature was 16.9% in 2011, while Canada's was 25%.⁵ By 2024, those percentages of women's representation went to 28% and 36% respectively.

4

⁵ (Retrieved January 9, 2012 from: http://www.millennium-project.org/millennium/Global_Challenges/chall-11.html)

TIME: In what ways has society changed and in what ways has it not? What's your view of the key social issues of the last two decades?

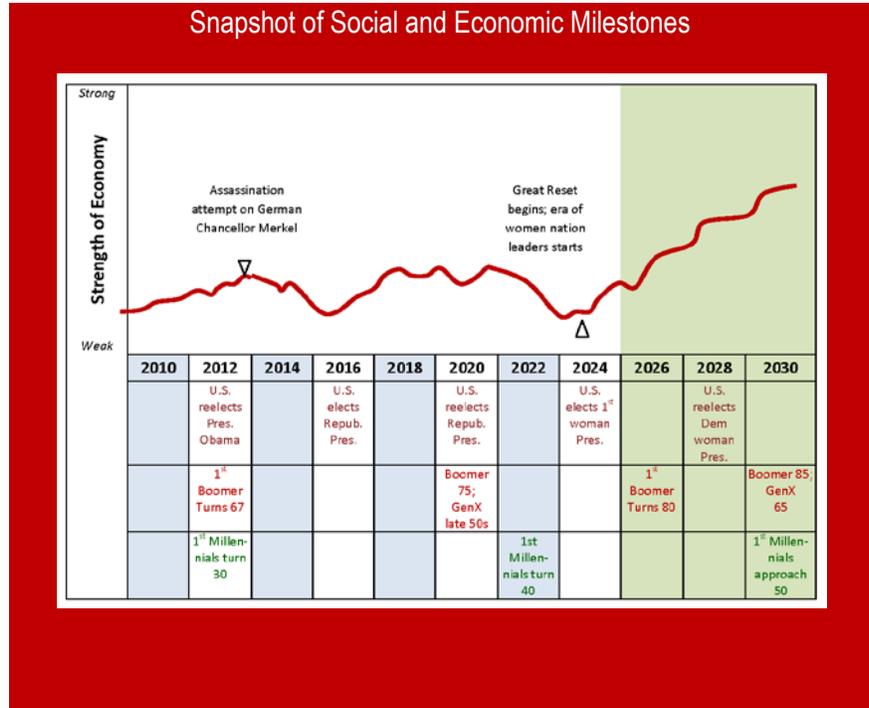
From 2011 to 2017 there were scratching attempts to “get back to the way it was” – the “acceptance” of the new normal was mostly bluff and bluster by the majority. Only a minority really accepted that things would be forever different. Result: we tried to solve civic problems in a marketplace manner – s/he with the biggest and best idea “wins.” Therefore, collaboration was tough and uncommon.

Health care organizations (especially the monied health care systems) competed tooth and nail for business. Their margins shrank every year during this period, so clinical and administrative staff reductions were *de rigeur*. Most of the larger hospitals rolled out their next wave of campaigns, only to find a still reticent constituency who had less and less personal affinity with those institutions and could barely tell them apart from one another.

Campaigns were everywhere and the dollars came mostly from the usual suspects.

Colleges and universities followed a similar track. The publics and the privates were both seeing their numbers shrink. They had clearly begun to price themselves out of business. Fundraising among even the most loyal alums was seldom sufficient to continue the program and campus growth that occurred during the boom years. Here again, campaigns were everywhere, seemingly for some barely discernible variation of the “global access, excellence, and distinctive” theme. Campaigns, which had grown to an average of 7 years long by 2010 were now averaging 10 years long by 2017.

Health care and higher education had the deepest pockets, so they were able to throw the most money at the talent pool, resulting in the best, brightest, and most experienced faculty, administrators, physicians, and development/advancement personnel going into these two categories of work. As a result, there was a solidification of what was clearly emerging even at the turn of the 21st century – more money flowed to the top tier institutions, leaving the mid-tier to settle for less. The lower tier organizations, already at risk before the Great



Recession, were now dropping like flies. Community colleges and technical schools became the preferred approach for many and their enrollments skyrocketed throughout the 2010s. Even their fundraising efforts, which had previously been pretty tepid, began to flourish, as they now had an even longer track record and solid and direct relationships with legislators and corporate/foundation leaders, whose eyes were now open to the impact and return on investment arguments these schools were making.

Human and social service organizations proliferated in the decade of 2011 to 2020. The repeated aftershocks from the Recession made issues of poverty, early childhood education, crime, incarceration, drug and alcohol abuse and treatment constant on the news feeds. Because the entry barriers to forming nonprofit organizations remained low and pretty pedestrian during this time, their numbers seemed to explode. In this wave, coupled with the millennial generation persona of being insightful and impatient to find solutions, we all jumped into the pool and started to form nonprofits that we thought could make a difference. Because we were all more networked with one another than we were connected to existing institutions in our communities (like churches, community government, or the existing social serving organizations like United Way), we leveraged our technology fearlessness to bring attention and resources to the issues that we cared about.

This was, in many ways, a very heady start for those of us in our millennial rising adulthood years (our late 20's and early 30s), because we felt like we were contributing. But the bloom was off the rose in less than a decade as it seemed like our initial impact was still disconnected from other factors in the system that were contributing to the social ills we were trying to address. Alone, we didn't have much clout. Comparatively, we didn't have enough financial power to truly take ideas to scale; and, frankly, we (my millennial generation first wavers) were getting a bit bored. We'd sit around and beef about how pointless it seemed to be running to the same big corporations and foundations which were so intent on an insane amount of metrics and issues of "scale" and replicability that we'd spend our energies placating them rather than devoting the best of what we had to innovation and service. This led to a widely shared sense of lethargy for many millennials in the later years of the 2010s. Our younger boomer and older gen-X board members would view this as their prophesized millennial entitlement finally coming true, as they had lamented about 15 years earlier.

The social issues that were occupying our collective time and attention were many.

- *Immigration* – with federal money in such short supply, the U.S. gave up on this as the one time rallying cry for dollars. While Mexican immigration levels slowed from earlier decades, there were still sub-cultures and populations coming from former Soviet bloc countries, Afghanistan/Pakistan, China, Haiti, and central/south America. Services for non-English speaking peoples were in constant demand.
- *Literacy* – In the greatest of ironies, at a time when technology had made it possible to find any information sought in a manner of seconds, the literacy divide mirrored

the economic divide. The ranks of the poor continued to grow through the decades of 2010 and into the first half of the 2020s. Tied closely to poverty issues, literacy was seen as a huge issue and one that attracted significant public and private dollars. An innovative for-profit/nonprofit company collaboration, called Rising Star Studios and Rising Star Workshop respectively, exploded onto the early childhood education scene in 2013 and became first a U.S. phenomenon, quickly picked up by Canada, South America, China, India, Africa and, finally, central Europe.

- *Boomers Cling, Gen-X Ducks, Millennials Take Off* - In the 2010s it seemed like we were all a bunch of do-gooders on steroids. Nonprofit boomer CEOs were not retiring when previous generations had. Largely having outspent their retirement savings (and, let's be real, a widely shared egotism that feared that nobody else could provide the same necessary level of personal commitment and dedication as they themselves!), boomer leaders stayed put. As a result, much of the gen-X generation in their middle and later adult years were relegated to being number two's in their social sector organizations. Millennials who wanted (and believed they could) lead, were all dressed up with nowhere to go. So, we left to form our own organizations. This was true for me in Virtual Grass. Because I saw it happening all around me, I figured it would be a breeze to get "my people" to collaborate. Boy was I in for a surprise. Looking back on it, I can see now that we all got trapped in the existing silos of thinking and funding. We became younger, newer versions of the very problems we'd complained about. We were so busy trying to get human and financial resources to fuel our own mission work that we had little inclination to partner or collaborate in any but the most superficial ways. We talked a good game, but few demonstrable successes were evident by 2020.
- *The Model is the Minority* - Social venture philanthropy and B corporations continued to be sexy to nearly everybody, yet they did little more than paint pictures of "cool things that were being done by 'those' people." National media, conferences, nonprofit associations, The Foundation Center, and consulting groups jumped on every bandwagon, seizing upon each new technology tool and vocabulary busting phrase as the "new it" thing. Individually, there were some real important things happening, but it didn't seem to bring leaders and organizations together to do anything more than TALK about doing things together. Largely absent was the collective willingness to work for a philosophy of "some" — looking for the needs and opportunities that would work — not for everyone, nor for only the few — but for some⁶; that heretofore silent majority of similarly disposed people who wanted a share of just satisfaction and were willing to compromise some personal interests to achieve it. It seemed like it wasn't really until the late 2020s that this idea really began to take hold and gain traction. Up to that point, we were like slot car racers —

⁶ This philosophy of "the some" is addressed by James Ogilvy in *Creating Better Futures*.

moving ever more quickly forward without changing lanes or teaming up with others to seek our desired mission outcomes.

- *Cities Grew and the Rurals Strained* - City populations grew at the expense of rural areas. Transportation infrastructure dollars were tight throughout the years 2009 to about 2023, so it was a no-brainer for people to stay close to work options. This meant moving to the city. Multi-family housing grew, but not like the big “dorm” Cabrini Green complexes of 1970s. The Recession had made it much more likely that multiple generations of family were living together—in owned and rented homes. It became more common for non-married people to live together, in part fueled by the eventual loosening of legal restrictions on what constituted marriage. People stayed close to bus routes, train service and the high speed trains within the mega-regions. Rural communities shrank in size. Farming became an ever more corporate undertaking, as food safety liability issues, climate change irregularities, and limited access to cheap labor combined to make it all but impossible for the proud independent farmers of yesterday to continue in business.
- *Organized/Traditional Religion Wanes* - The mainline religions continued to lose members during the 2010s and 2020s. Spiritualism, and all its many splended permutations, continued to be prominent, largely due to an aging boomer generation who had historically seen everything differently. Despite there being some notably large mega-churches with onsite worship memberships of 50,000+, spiritualism and the experience industry seemed to coalesce into smaller, more deeply personal “encounters” and “explorations.” A previously unimagined consequence of this trend was that international and religious social ministries shrank considerably, due to the loss of a membership base to fuel them with gifts and people power. Rather than going away completely (although there was some measurable consolidation and reduction to 2020), many of these organizations went looking for other resource angels—thereby simply adding further bifurcation and competition in the resource-seeking disciplines.
- *Obesity*—Both child and adult obesity went from a worrisome forecast in 2000 to a full frontal crisis by 2020. Unleashed in this context was an alarming rate of suicide among, and hate crimes against, the morbidly obese. A small collection of like-minded obesity hate groups in the south/central U.S. began to be identified in 2017. The first fringe group was a radical advocacy group calling attention to the cost burden on society The Lards (aka, the obese, as their literature besmirched) had become. The worst among them began to mirror earlier hate groups by taking lethal violence against their obese victims. FBI and other sting operations were able to ferret out many of their leadership ranks by 2024, but the balance simply went further underground. Widely publicized (and secured) murder trials of these leaders (interestingly, all gen-X members) became a point of great public discourse and debate, especially in the U.S. and Canada. Issues of personal responsibility and

public implications were now being discussed openly, with obesity seen as the leading issue. For a growing minority, especially in Canada and the west and east coasts of the U.S.), this scenario contributed to the growing awareness of and mainstream “legitimization” of hybrid/integrative medicine (east/west/holistic) and “subsistence and personally sustainable farming.”

- *Pharmaceuticals* - Pharmaceutical companies continued to pump trillions into research and development. Despite a slowly growing popularity of Eastern and Native American health remedies and personal philosophies in Canada and the U.S., acceptance (arguably reliance) on pharmaceutical solutions was in its heyday during this 20 year period. Several social factors intersected to bring this about. First, the continuing aftershocks of the 2009 Great Recession, felt for 15-18 years following, made U.S. comprehensive health insurance a singularly prized benefit and one enjoyed by fewer and fewer. As a result, self-medicating was common. Reimbursement changes—most dramatically in the U.S. but also in Canada to less draconian degrees—pushed every acute care provider (the few remaining independent hospitals and the ever larger, newly collaborating healthcare systems) to push for in-home patient monitoring and anything/everything that would forestall an emergency room visit or inpatient admission. Pharmaceuticals became a part of that solution.
- *Hospitals* - Hospital systems continued to churn. The for-profit companies continued to cut services for which margins were thin in order to protect shareholder investments. Their evolution during this period inevitably led to their reclassification from “hospital” to Selective Care Centers, where only self-pay and fully insured individuals were treated. Nonprofit hospitals in the U.S. picked up the balance of the population health service requirement. The health care reform initiative of the Obama administration in 2010 produced a tsunami of changes in every nonprofit health organization in order to remain financially viable. While those changes continued to broil debates in coffee shops and Congress, little more than slight rebalancing of services and cost burdens was accomplished until the mid 2020s due to political polarization, loud states rights advocacy, and the seemingly iron grip of medical and health care lobbying efforts. The 2010s and early 2020s in the U.S. could easily be remembered as the “period of power and promises,” rather than the “power of the people.” Only after being faced with national bankruptcy and a population fed up with fighting did citizens unite to simplify health care delivery and financing with widespread fairness in relation to a host of competing national interests and wants. As you know, this only happened a few years ago, solidified by the U.S. presidential election of 2024.
- *State Government* - State governments were largely struggling financially through the 2010s. A few states, especially in the deep south, were all but destitute, unable to underwrite any but a bare bones social fabric. In these cases, states willingly turned

to private business to take over (and pay for) services. Mail delivery, transportation, criminal registry and incarceration, and others were outsourced to private providers. This sparked a self-congratulatory zeal among state politicians, yet service quality was erratic, often without quality transparency or controls, and constant reshuffling among new price leaders. In short, this was a period of dwindling state government presence and reliability and a huge bifurcation of private businesses. With little surprise, many poor and underserved population segments fell victim to scams, neglect (benign and otherwise), and abuse, thereby merely exacerbating how disconnected the web of social services felt to many.

- *Information Technology* - GoogleChinaMobile, the world's largest telecommunications firm, produced the world's fastest computer, which can perform 250 petaflops per second, 100 times the fastest rate of 2011. This massively parallel processing computer is capable of reading an essentially unlimited number of documents, digesting the information, and answering questions posed in natural language. It has reliably proven to use vast amounts of data to accelerate improvements in health knowledge and decision making, transportation, and logistics management. The acceleration of science and technology continues to fundamentally change the prospects for civilization, and access to its knowledge has become universal—except to the poor, who lack the tech tools to gain access. The ability to learn this knowledge is also improving with “Web-based asynchronous highly motivational educational systems, adaptive learning models such as cellular automata, genetic algorithms, neural networks, and emerging capabilities of collective intelligence systems.”⁷

TIME: But Virtual Grass wasn't nearly as ubiquitous nor as impactful as you've become lately. Why not?

For multiple and interconnected reasons, but while you've got me thinking about the economy, let me remind you that money was tight for much of these last two decades. Only really since 2009 have we had a period of 20 quarters (5 years) of back-to-back economic growth. While the last five years has us all feeling bright and cheery again, let's not forget the zombie walk we were all on for the previous 20 years!

Early in the 2010s in the U.S. there seemed to be a rise of a new frugality “as people shift[ed] away from conspicuous consumption to simpler, more basic priorities, from a lifestyle where people thought they could purchase their way to happiness to something better and more real. Americans [had] certainly begun to save more and rely less on credit, at least partly because credit had become much harder to get.”⁸

⁷ Retrieved January 9, 2012 from: http://www.millennium-project.org/millennium/Global_Challenges/chall-14.html

⁸ Richard Florida, *The Great Reset*, e-book page 105, location 1657

But this didn't turn out to be lasting. boomers have never been savers and what they had tucked away was used to maintain as much of their lifestyles as they could. gen-Xers, for the most part, just withdrew to their life of gadgets and gaming, just kind of holding on, content to let others figure out where the money would come from to fix what troubled the world most. Even we millennials got right back on the shopaholic bandwagon, frustrated with all the "hunkering down" going on around us and pretty well used to a sense of immediacy that we'd grown up with. This reaction was less true among our late wave millennial brothers and sisters (born 1997 to 2003), as they seemed a bit more risk averse, studious, and less likely to party and spend.⁹ The next generation cohort group—the new silents (birth years of roughly 2004 to 2026) are an adaptive generation, dutiful, a bit self-contained and seemingly risk averse in their formative years. So, you can see that the Great Recession was like a perfect and lasting storm for us western democracies in North America simply because of the constellations of generational personalities and their respective age locations during this period. Much of the impetus for any resurgence, arguably, fell to us as first and second wave millennials.

Money seemed to be tight everywhere but China. Because my mom was born in Toronto, I thought Canada would be a great launching pad for Virtual Grass. Canada managed to avoid the humungous housing bubble and financial irresponsibility that plagued the U.S., so they remained financially strong and an attractive location (major cities) for talented business and finance professionals.¹⁰ We tried in the early days to work with health care, human service, and tech players like Research in Motion (you remember...the Blackberry guys who struggled until going under in 2015). We felt Canada was ripe for breakthroughs because of their scientific competence, entrepreneurship, federal support, and natural resources but even their own government budget directors worried about a national complacency that meant Canada lagged behind other advanced economies in terms of innovation. When we met with national and provincial leaders in 2010, they acknowledged the connection between complacency and limited access to capital. One leader said, "National growth fuelled by an abundance of natural resource assets does not require us to be innovative leaders in a highly competitive global environment. Perhaps the need to innovate for survival and prosperity has not been a burning platform for Canadian businesses." One thing that fledgling businesses lack, she said, is venture capital. "The limited availability of risk capital at all stages of the growth cycle often impedes our ability

⁹ Mary Beth Marklein, *USA Today*, January 26, 2012, Today's freshmen hit books harder, p. 3A

¹⁰ Innovation: Opportunity Without Frontiers, *OECD Observer*, retrieved January 9, 2012 from: [http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/3524/Innovation: Opportunities without frontiers.html](http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/3524/Innovation:_Opportunities_without_frontiers.html)

to grow global companies from Canada.”¹¹ What we found was that this observation would hold true for more than a decade to follow.

Not only was money tight, but doubt was everywhere. I was reading a piece recently about American’s trust in elected officials. Two generations prior to my birth, which would have been in early/mid 1960s, three-quarters of the American people said yes when surveyed about whether they trust the government—especially in Washington D.C.—to do the right thing. By the late 2000s that figure had dropped to only a quarter to a third of the people expressing the same confidence in their federal government. “This dramatic erosion of confidence in the government constitutes a massive crisis of legitimacy in the public sector,” one observer noted in 2011.¹² At that time, none of us had any idea that this trend would continue and worsen, falling to a confidence level low of 18% by 2016.

China was clearly hitting its stride in the early 2010s. Its meteoric rise in this new century led to China’s economic output surpassing the U.S.’s in 2015. Shanghai—with its well-capitalized banks and government backing—eclipsed New York and London in 2020 as the world’s premier global financial center.¹³ The long tail of the Great Recession of 2009 exacerbated the U.S. national debt problem. By the quarter-century mark, almost two trillion dollars was going just to pay the *interest* on the national debt. “There was no longer room for any meaningful programs; it seemed that the president’s job was just to keep the ship afloat. Initiating any great changes had become impossible. It was just too expensive.”¹⁴

All these factors seemed to coalesce and feed off one another. After the death of the iconic Apple founder, Steve Jobs, in 2011, it started a steady mood swing—especially in America—where we seemed to worship the business person and disdain anyone with a different view. It was like the nation drank the Kool-Aid that big business deals were our salvation and the way out of the Recession. While it initially sparked entrepreneurial zeal for partnerships like those Virtual Grass was proposing, it ultimately led to a series of events—promulgated by excessive corporate and individual greed—that continued to destabilize the whole economy.¹⁵

We now realize, from the perspective of 2030, that our longing for quick fixes and our willingness to gamble on the art of the deal simply and inevitably handcuffed us to a sustained economic crisis. Rather than being willing to admit we were contributing to our

¹¹ Innovation: Opportunity Without Frontiers, *OECD Observer*, retrieved January 9, 2012 from: [http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/3524/Innovation: Opportunities without frontiers.html](http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/3524/Innovation:_Opportunities_without_frontiers.html)

¹² James Ogilvy, *Creating Better Futures*, e-book location 538

¹³ James Ogilvy, *Creating Better Futures*, e-book location 593

¹⁴ Albert Brooks, *2030: The Real Story of What Happens to America*, e-book page 19, location 412)

¹⁵ James Ogilvy, *Creating Better Futures*, e-book location 593

own malaise, we simply fell into what you've heard me refer to as zombie mode. This "new normal" became the not-so-new "normal," which meant that we lived in economic crisis (or at least weakness) for about 18 years. In retrospect, we can now recognize this historical pattern of history, where "economic crises inevitably give rise to critical periods in which an economy is remade in ways that allow it to recover and begin growing again."¹⁶ Two decades ago, one author referred to these periods as Great Resets.

TIME: Arguably, we've all seen evidence over the past couple years that a Reset or Resurgence is happening in the North American and global economies. How would you characterize the economic realities of the 2010s and the 2020s?

Well, I've touched on some of that already, but there are other signals we should note. Much of the last two decades—until very recently—has felt like running in deep, loose sand: we knew terra firma was beneath our feet, but shifts were constant and it was tough to get traction. The Great Recession of 2009 was a new phenomenon for all of us. Even after economists told us we were technically not in a "recession" the unemployment rate was 9% in the U.S. in April 2011 and 7.6% in Canada. The U.S. national debt was above the \$14.3 trillion cap, and in 2010 over 43.9 million people (one in seven Americans) were enrolled in the food stamps program. Meanwhile, at that time the top 0.1% of Americans controlled 10% of the nation's wealth, the U.S. had the most billionaires, and CEO pay rose 24%. The six largest U.S. banks controlled 63% of U.S. GDP. The year 2011 became one of vocal dissent, with the Arab Spring in the Middle East and the fledgling Occupy Movement that got its start that Fall.¹⁷

TIME: Yes, it certainly was an interesting period for all of us. Both economists and historians are now concluding that the Great Recession of 2009 fit the pattern of the U.S. Crash of 1873 and the Great Depression of the 1930s in that each was followed by a long depression lasting 2-3 decades.¹⁸

I certainly was guilty of being hopeful—and a bit impatient—at the outset of the Great Recession. It just seemed in the early 2010s that every day I logged onto my computer, my RSS news feeds were giving me conflicting stories about economic signals. One day doom and gloom; the next day upbeat; followed by some release of new stats that bodes ill for the nation. We all just got a bit worn down and lethargic about the whole context.

That was really my internal motivation to shift the direction of the business. That's when I decided that Virtual Grass was going to have to adopt a new posture. We had to a) move forward in community without physical form—hence the emphasis on "virtual"; b) we had

¹⁶ Richard Florida, Great Reset, e-book page 4, location 106

¹⁷ (Retrieved January 9, 2012 from: http://www.millennium-project.org/millennium/Global_Challenges/chall-07.html)

¹⁸ Richard Florida, The Great Reset, e-book page 106, location 1673

to go viral—making our presence felt as a lever for change everywhere, beginning first with the largest cities with the most seemingly intractable problems; and c) we had to go to the street—aka, the grass roots—people like me who had a fire in their bellies for change. No offense, but I must confess that as first wave millennials, we got sick and tired of listening to people like you—middle aged and early elder boomers—who seemed to sound smart but frankly did little more than talk about solutions, never able to really cobble together the kinds of alliances that we found essential to success.

TIME: How has your view of philanthropy changed as a result of your experience and is there anything that is largely unchanged?

In many ways, North American philanthropy practices changed little in the last 20 years. Sure, as always, there have been people and organizations in the vanguard practicing new approaches and getting the spotlight, but the sector as a whole changed little. We just seemed to hunker down and stick to our knitting as a sector during the 2010s and 2020s. As I said earlier, the big organizations sucked up the best talent. They were, therefore, most able to attract the mega-gifts and to afford the technology and marketing platforms to have a constant presence in their constituencies. The big colleges and universities, big health systems, and nationally recognized “franchise” human service organizations continued to attract the most money and attention. The small, local serving organizations—despite often having great mission integrity—struggled mightily for professional staff, governing board talent, and money.

Nonprofit organizations had a tough time breaking their addiction to copy cat practices and zeal for metrics and performance measurement. During the 2010s, time and attention on quantifying everything created a sector-wide immersion in the “science” of fundraising practices. This continuous drumbeat by professional staffs during this period had the unintended consequence of numbing and boring the best board members and supporters who found no escape from metrics mania at work and in community service. We’ve come to believe that this was a contributing factor during the 2020s where it became increasingly difficult for nonprofit organizations to attract quality board members. Prospective leaders wanted something to uplift them and to feel a compelling pull toward community service. Instead, they were being offered board seats to play roles as business analysts, production overlords, and efficiency experts. Aging boomers wanted something with more heart; mid-life gen-Xers were willing to provide the technocrat perspective but basically weren’t very interested in volunteering; and the oldest millennials were tired of “the old way” of doing things and wanted to be more expressive.

Direct mail fundraising all but ceased to exist during this period. The cost of postage and the comparatively slow delivery rates made this method untenable. The more sophisticated nonprofits moved their resources into technology-assisted methods. Passive online giving portals persisted, but the sector seemed most enamored with the push technology of text and image messaging to the ever growing array of personal communication devices. While

these technology tools were fun, efficient, and effective, they were pursued separately by organizations and, after a while, all organizations started to look like all others in the eyes of stakeholders.

Collaborative philanthropy was episodic and fragile throughout much of this time. Within the context of this societal, demographic, and economic environment, only the vanguard was willing to transform their organization-centric messages to whole system/whole community messages of win/win.

But Virtual Grass kept at it. We started to see the sector barriers thaw and egos be set aside more often and by more leaders. Perhaps reflective of, or resulting from, the era of the strong women as leaders (reference the Canadian, Mexican, and U.S. national elections bringing women to power in 2024), we finally began to see sector-wide responses on a large scale. During this upward progress, we saw the previous separateness of private philanthropy evolve into more organic and, certainly, wholesome alliance with service providers across the spectrum—education, literacy, shelter, poverty reduction, safety, health care, and many, many others. Large scale co-located and virtual planning discussions took place in World Café-like fashion, creating not just breakthrough ideas, but genuine ownership and commitment throughout. Each organization—government, corporate, and social sector—became accustomed to bringing to the common good the best resources and assets they possessed. Virtual Grass invited in the previously private companies like FedEx and UPS who leveraged decades of logistics expertise to become über-project managers of some of these mega-region solutions. Private and community foundations were asked to take a long view and to make long term commitments toward these integrated solutions. Solutions were elegant (and sometimes not so elegant) expressions of commerce, pure volunteerism, private philanthropy, and a groundswell of civic engagement and shared responsibility.

So...after decades of struggle and disappointment, I now feel that the social sector has established momentum. I can now see that philanthropy—long seen as the purview of the rich or idealistic—is now being taught, practiced, and integrated NOT for its own purposes but for the sense of whole solutions, taken with a long view.

Check back with me in 2050 to see what two more decades has taught us.

###