

TO THE READER

We gain our own strength, courage, and greatness from those others whom we idealize, not because they are perfect but rather because they inspire us.... We can be passionate about something because others have been. We can hope for a better future because others have had hope.¹

The September 18, 2006, issue of *Fortune* magazine features a striking picture of Bill Clinton, his arms crossed, with the caption: "The Power of Philanthropy." The word "philanthropy" printed in bold red letters stands in sharp contrast to the black-and-white cover photo of the former president. It is an image intended to inspire readers to take action. "Love him or hate him," the cover reads, "Bill Clinton is a force. He's got Gates and even Murdoch onboard. A cool-eyed look at a new business model in the battle to save the world." Lofty – and hopeful – aims indeed.

Over the past decade, philanthropy – once a word uttered only by the very wealthy or by foundation executives – has captured the imagination of a much larger public. Tavis Smiley, Warren Buffett, Oprah Winfrey, Andre Agassi, and Oseola McCarty – among others – have sparked interest in the transformative power of philanthropic capital. The bookshelf in my home office gets more cramped each month as a new text on this subject is released. A former U.S. president, foundation and college presidents, and academicians have enriched the public dialogue about philanthropy, its aims and purposes, achievements and shortcomings, and how it might be refined, improved, or reconstructed.

Being neither a foundation nor college president, I am more than a tad reluctant to imagine that what I have to say about philanthropy would break new ground or launch a groundswell of "ah-ha" moments in foundation offices across the country. It does strike me, however, that *Wit and Wisdom: Unleashing the Philanthropic Imagination* might be worth a read because it captures the thoughts, anxieties, sensibilities, and sensitivities of women and men who have toiled in the vineyard of organized philanthropy and lived to tell about it. In their efforts to guide organizations intended to demonstrate love of human beings – the root meaning of "philanthropy" – each of the leaders featured in this text has acquired battle scars and a dose of wisdom that stand to benefit future generations of people who want to make a difference with their time, talent, and treasure. They have demonstrated the will, commitment, and tenacity to tackle complex issues of race, equity, and poverty, and their stories are both inspiring and cautionary.

Before the reader takes the next step to read what these leaders have to say, I offer some brief thoughts on wisdom and wit.

Writing in *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Harvard Divinity School Professor Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza offers insights into this concept that speaks to my experience listening deeply to the leaders featured in this text:

Wisdom is a state of the human mind and spirit characterized by deep understanding and profound insight. It is elaborated as a quality possessed by the sages but also treasured as

folk wisdom and wit. Wisdom is the power of discernment, deeper understanding, and creativity; it is the ability to move and to dance, to make the connections, to savor life and to learn from experience....Wisdom is intelligence shaped by experience and sharpened by critical analysis. It is the ability to make sound choices and incisive decisions.

Wisdom, unlike intelligence, is not something with which a person is born. It comes only from living, from making mistakes and trying again and from listening to others who have made mistakes and tried to learn from them. It is a perception of wholeness that does not lose sight of particularity, relativity, and the intricacies of relationships. Wisdom understands complexity and seeks integrity in relationships....It is a radical democratic concept insofar as it does not require extensive schooling and formal education. Unschooling people can acquire wisdom and highly educated people might lack it.²

The leaders whose reflections are captured in this book have lived lives, experienced the good and the bad in the rarified world of organized philanthropy, are committed to seeking integrity in their relationships, and have been known – on an occasion or two – to move and to dance. While all are highly educated, none are pretentious. They are all wise. They are people whose powers of discernment have been informed by their capacity to integrate heart and head in their leadership.

There was a particularly poignant moment in my interview with Jack Murrah, for example, when he described both his battles with depression and what it meant to be a gay man working in Southern philanthropy. The fact that Jack would trust me and the readers of this text enough to hear and respect his story left me stunned and grateful. I was similarly moved by Sybil Hampton's willingness to talk about the alienation and pain she encountered as one of the first African-American students to integrate Central High School and by Gayle Williams' reflections on the harm that philanthropic organizations might cause for the organizations and people they support.

The inclusion of "wit" in the title reflects two motivations. Years ago while traveling throughout the American South visiting black churches destroyed by arson, I was introduced to the phrase "mother wit." While the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this term as "a person's native or natural wit...common sense," I have come to understand the term to refer more specifically to the wisdom of African-American women who – embedded in family and community – have a read on reality and the lived human experience not always captured in journal articles or history books. In part, my use of the term is meant to honor Linetta Gilbert, Sybil Hampton, and Lynn Huntley, three powerful African-American women who broke the gender and racial boundaries in organized philanthropy and assumed positions of significant power and influence.

A second archaic definition of "wit" in the *OED* also captured my attention: "quickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy, with capacity of apt expression; talent for saying brilliant or sparkling things, especially in an amusing way." The leaders in this text demonstrate the capacity to shed insight and speak provocatively about difficult issues – race, poverty, equity, and the ethical challenges of leading philanthropic organizations – without bludgeoning the reader to death with statistics or abstract definitions of words and without inducing paralyzing guilt. Each leader in her or his own voice speaks in ways that demonstrate thoughtful analysis and intellectual rigor, empathy and compassion, and a healthy sense of humor. I'd like to meet the person who doesn't break out in a chuckle or two when reading the interview with Tom Wacaster.

Inevitably, the savvy reader will ask at least three questions about this text:

- How were the leaders chosen?
- What questions will the text challenge readers to consider?
- Who is the target audience?

Let me take a stab at addressing these questions.

As noted in the “With Thanksgiving” section of this text, this project was funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation as part of Senior Program Officer Linetta Gilbert’s portfolio. During her tenure at the Ford Foundation, Linetta has dedicated significant resources to support the founding and transformation of philanthropic organizations in the American South that commit themselves to be strategic, long-term investors and leaders working to promote equity, tackle issues of persistent poverty, and deal openly and honestly with issues of race. Given this focus on the American South, Linetta and I agreed that most—if not all—of the people featured in the text should have led organizations serving the region. We also agreed that it was important to feature white and black leaders, debunking the notion that only black people have important things to say about race and equity. Finally, we agreed on the importance of gender equity. Women and men have both made important and significant headway in moving organized philanthropy over the past twenty years.

Of course, some exceptions were made. While Karl Stauber, Emmett Carson, Ambassador James Joseph, and Linetta Gilbert may not meet the criteria of having led foundations in the American South during the time these interviews took place, I am confident that the reader—upon perusing their words—will understand the rationale for their inclusion. It is important to note that most of the leaders featured were—for at least some part of their childhood—raised in the South. Instincts tell me that their commitment to lead on issues of race and poverty was shaped in large measure by their experiences during these formative years.

Four questions served as the frame for my interviews:

- In what ways—if any—can organized philanthropy effectively influence the vision of achieving racial, economic, and social equity in the United States?
- What are the personal and professional experiences that equip philanthropic leaders to work effectively on these issues of equity?
- What challenges do philanthropic leaders and their organizations face as they work to promote equity and address issues of racism and poverty?
- What advice and counsel would current leaders in the field want to pass on to the next generation of leaders who will assume their seats of power and influence?

I hope that the diverse and thoughtful responses to these questions in the pages that follow will not only help philanthropists think about creative ways to invest their capital and use their power, but also shed some insight into what is required to lead these organizations with integrity and imagination.

As for who will read these interviews, I’d love it if foundation staffs and boards would read one or two of the interviews and talk together about the questions and issues that surface. If these conversations

take place and folks want more questions to grapple with, I offer an abbreviated list generated by respected colleagues:

- How do leaders work with complexity or “grayness” of matters as they cast and present challenges of race, equity, and/or poverty?
- How do leaders determine which aspects of equity–equality of opportunity, equality of outcomes, equality of individuals or groups–are most significant for a particular challenge or concern?
- How do philanthropic leaders maintain a sense of hope and optimism in the midst of such daunting, seemingly intractable, current data on these issues?
- How does a leader change the conversation around issues of race and equity? It is one thing to fund projects and organizations and to measure their successes, but it is quite another thing (especially when one is talking about racism) to truly change (dare we say lift) the course and tenor of the conversation in an institution, community, or individual.
- To what extent does the basic DNA of philanthropy (e.g., roots in “charity,” perceived powers of donors, implicit dependencies of grantees) impede foundations’ efforts to advance work for justice and equity?
- Foundations have spent billions of dollars addressing issues of race, poverty, and equity, yet they persist. Should foundations continue to try? Why? Why not?
- What lasting, sustainable impact can occur without the buy-in of elected officials who control city coffers and accordingly set a community’s course of action for the future?
- What has given you your greatest sense of failure as a philanthropist?
- How important is it for a philanthropist to trust–or distrust–others?
- What has this work taught you about trusting others?

I’d also be excited if students in graduate and undergraduate courses on philanthropy at colleges and universities would engage with the text and learn from wise and seasoned veterans who simultaneously demystify philanthropy and inspire us with their passion.

But, at the end of the day, my greatest hope is that the next generation of philanthropic leaders–be they program officers at foundations, pastors at local churches who mobilize congregational resources to address community challenges, members of the growing number of giving circles taking root throughout the country, second- and third-generation family members who stand to inherit significant wealth, or wealth managers who advise clients about their philanthropic investments–take time to read, reflect on, and discuss these interviews. One of my great regrets about the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors is the limited attention we pay to passing down wisdom from one generation to the next. Too much is lost by our collective failure to capture–in oral or written form–the lessons learned by our foremothers and forefathers. I hope this text makes a small dent in addressing this shortcoming.

With all this said, I offer some final thoughts. Despite my best efforts not to bias readers, I must admit one final hope that I carry in my heart. Questions of community and our collective obligation to care

for one another—people we know and don't know—lie at the heart of this text. I hope that reading these interviews gives people reason and resources to think anew about the question that concludes the interview with Sherry Magill: "When you begin to change your focus from the individual to the common good, you must ask yourself what kinds of investments—public and private—must we make in all people to ultimately live in the world we wish to live in? That's the question for me: *What kind of world do we wish to live in?*"

This question may be the most important for philanthropy to consider. But, I'd add two others: What is the role and what are the limits of philanthropy—in its many shapes, sizes, and forms—in supporting people and communities in their efforts to live into this new reality?

As I write these final sentences, the need to grapple with these questions has assumed a new urgency. The U.S. economy has slumped into a deep recession, with virtually no signs of a speedy recovery. By all predictions, unemployment will soar, leaving even more workers without health care and unable to take care of their families. The crisis in the housing mortgage market serves as a powerful reminder that public policy made without the informed engagement and oversight of citizens on Main Street can undermine the health and stability of families, neighborhoods, and communities. State budgets are imploding and individual donors show signs of becoming increasingly skittish about whether or not they should continue making charitable contributions. Contemporary life is indeed hard—and frightening.

In the face of these events, there will be people who look to organized philanthropy to make up for the precipitous decline in government funding that aims to preserve what remains of the social safety net as well as create opportunity for all people to enjoy some modicum of prosperity and genuine freedom. Organized philanthropy—while small in comparison to the charitable contributions of individuals—is miniscule when compared to the budgets and resources of federal, state, and local governments. Philanthropy must respond to the profound challenges of 2009, but there are limits to what philanthropy can and should do.

Conversations about these limits and the legitimate and strategic roles of organized philanthropy in response to this unfolding crisis would benefit from thoughtful discussion about the intersection of race, poverty, and the pursuit of equity. I hope that this text informs the debate and enriches the imagination of what organized philanthropy can make possible for people and communities in both this present moment and the future we will shape for generations to come.

1 Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 158.

2 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 23-24.