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The COVID-19 crisis and political reset: Wielding philanthropic power for a just recovery

By Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson

“These crises are awful, awful, awful. And they open things up. The silver lining of this time may be that this might be one of the only moments in the lifetimes of many of us where there’s actually the political space for a reset. Actually, the space for people to think new things ... This should be a moment where we’re all big enough to rethink fundamental things about the kind of America we want to be part of.”

- Anand Giridharadas author of *Winners Take All*
(May 6, 2020 on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe*)

*Editor’s Note: This piece was written before the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis and the subsequent uprisings in more than 400 cities. Please see **A message from the Vice President and Chief Engagement Officer** that accompanies this issue of Responsive Philanthropy for more context.*

Disorienting is the most appropriate word I can find for the past few months. This spring, our partners were digging in on the census, a statewide Medicaid fight and voter engagement for November.

We were quietly focused on a technology audit and had just launched a grantee perception survey when COVID-19 led us to shut down the offices, push out emergency unrestricted grants and flip our conference center into a virtual organizing space.

Through the social distancing, grief, emergency response, mourning, Zoom calls and self-pity, it has been hard to see a silver lining. But based upon some promising responses to the pandemic, I believe Giridharadas’ claim

that the challenges of this moment may open the door for transformation.

Philanthropy can play an important role in shaping a political reset. In order to do so, though, we will have to wield power with assets beyond our grant-making. The bad news is it will take all that we have. The good news is that is all it will take.

USE YOUR VOICE TO AMPLIFY AND SHAPE A “JUST RECOVERY”

Amid the pain of COVID-19 relief work, it is important for philanthropy to leverage its unique position to help frame a just recovery. This can be advanced by strategic communications efforts lifting up information missing from the debate and amplifying the demands of front-line movement groups.

For example, Deaconess is connecting data about disproportionate health and economic impacts on the Black community to the evolving definition of economic recovery. One target for this work is a regional pandemic task force established and led by major health care organizations.

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Though applauded for its multisystem collaboration, the exclusion of federally qualified health centers and subordination of municipal health directors made it ripe for the exclusionary decision-making, which left poor, Black neighborhoods where contraction and death rates are highest to be the last with COVID-19 testing sites. In partnership with our grantees, we are using our voice and research to hold the task force accountable to communities the relief effort is leaving behind.

We are also developing multi-platform media relations campaigns tied to funding announcements. These announcements are when foundations to “make news” and we can take advantage of the attention to describe what “equitable recovery” is and amplify the agenda of our partners.

We recently announced a cohort of power-building organizations whose organizing efforts represent an inclusive, democratic, just recovery agenda centering marginalized communities that should shape the allocation of more than \$200 million in CARES Act funding for our region, accountability for executives who will stand for election during the pandemic and alternative strategies for integrated voter engagement. Our announcement creates space to hand the mic over to these groups, amplifying their agenda.

It has been heartening to see national funders employ similar strategies. On April 16, the Wallace Global Fund used a field-leading grant announcement to amplify key partners and frame just recovery from COVID-19. The headline covered their bold commitment to spend 20% of their endowment this year. Equally impactful, though, the fund presented the Poor Peoples' Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, led by Rev. Dr. William Barber and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharris, with its 2020 Henry A. Wallace Award.

In doing so, Wallace Global lifted up the call for the 140 million people who

lived in poverty before this pandemic to be centered in America's post-crisis rebuilding project. With the award and \$250,000 contribution, it invests in the moral awakening that Barber calls a “third reconstruction” at a point in history when public resources (including federal relief and stimulus funds) will be available to support the campaign's transformative public policy priorities and vision.

In its video announcement, the fund's Board Chair Scott Wallace made it clear that this is not moment to tinker, but rather to remember what is possible with deep public leadership and investment. Wallace noted, “we have to design programs with a New Deal mentality, programs that will directly subsidize people's lives that are being damaged so severely.”

ADVOCATE FOR PUBLIC POLICY WITH 'POLITICAL IMAGINATION'

In his historical reference, Wallace offers more than nostalgia. The grandson of FDR's former vice president modeled the expansive philanthropic vision-casting this moment calls for, one that takes its cues from the movements setting the agenda and uses its platform to amplify their message. It is in line with Giridharadas's observation that “there might be enough political imagination in the wake of this to actually transform ... things fundamentally.”

Philanthropy does not generate this type of political imagination alone. A pointed Twitter reaction by political consultant and movement strategist Jessica Byrd to a February 2020 Democratic debate segment featuring Tom Steyer and Michael Bloomberg is instructive: “Two white men billionaires on stage saying ‘I built an organization’ and claiming the work of organizers whose names they don't know is wack,” she typed. “Philanthropy isn't the work. The work is the work and they didn't do it.”

There is much more creativity, imagination and boldness in the work and witness of our grantee partners on the ground than the halls where we review returns and revise investment policies.

Because social distancing restrictions are causing policy to be made in emergency mode and with less public input, philanthropy's unique position as a potential bridge between grassroots advocates and elected officials is critical.

We must be careful to listen with humility, learn from and incorporate movement brilliance into policy discussions and bring our partners with us to these (virtual) decision-making spaces.

While we were still assessing how to transition our office and weighing portfolio losses, our partners at ArchCity Defenders and Action Saint Louis were developing a list of policy priorities for COVID-19 to center unhoused, incarcerated and otherwise marginalized citizens. By March 13, they had mobilized 30 organizations to sign on (including Deaconess) and launched an online petition gathering thousands of signatures. The county executive later expressed appreciation for the recommendations and translated some into his executive orders for crisis response.

In the weeks since, they launched St. Louis' COVID-19 Response Hub, an online platform tracking how government officials' actions responded to the organizing agenda, while turning up the heat on a campaign to close a jail and taking voter engagement for the census virtual.

Our initial, conservative advice to our grantees was to focus on organizational sustainability and the potential financial impact of economic shifts. But, following their lead has broadened our sense of what is possible.

Another national foundation getting this right in their COVID-19 response is Open Society Foundations, as they invest in the imagination of their grantees for relief among the most vulnerable populations and keep an eye on systemic injustice for recovery.

They identify exposed communities as “informal, low-wage, and gig economy workers; refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers; disadvantaged groups such as the Roma in Europe; homeless people; frontline health workers and caregivers; and detained and incarcerated individuals.”

When committing \$130 million to support them in this pandemic, the foundations’ leaders emphasized lessons learned from the 2008 financial crisis about the need not just to respond to immediate needs, but to attack systemic inequalities, strengthen democratic systems and take a proactive posture on human rights:

Deeply concerned about grave threats to democratic accountability and individual freedoms, Open Society will also fund partners that are challenging violations to political freedoms, as leaders take steps to suspend access to information, roll back sexual and reproductive rights, extend surveillance beyond public health means and look for scapegoats to blame, exploiting the pandemic as a means to seize unchecked power.

‘BE STRONG AND VERY COURAGEOUS’ ABOUT CENTERING RACIAL EQUITY

Finally, in order to support the political reset that will be required for a just recovery, foundation leaders must be brave enough to be open about racial equity.

Wielding the type of rhetorical and historical hyperbole appreciated by

preachers like me, Giridharadas, notes that, “This is a crisis that in many communities is literally a ‘Black plague,’ that is killing African Americans disproportionately in part because people are not listened to in the health care system, in part because of lack of access.”

He makes a bold parallel between COVID-19 and the Black Death, which killed up to 200 million people in the mid-1300s. In a sector drunk with nuance and impressed with academic sophistication, this type of unequivocal case-making for targeted, unwavering commitment to Black communities is a necessary act of courage.

During their virtual April conference, ABFE convened Black foundation CEOs to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on Black communities.

Crystal Hayling, executive director of The Libra Foundation, spoke about their relationship to the National Domestic Workers Alliance, noting “they may be the most important labor organization in the country right now.”

Libra is doubling grantmaking to \$50 million in 2020 because they consider this a historic opportunity to gain ground against systemic oppression. They see the alliance, comprised primarily of Black and brown domestic and home health women workers fighting for dignity in the workplace and cultivating the leadership of women of color, as one of their most important grants.

Hayling’s centering Black women resonated deeply with me because they are the face of death from COVID-19 in St. Louis. The first 2 people to die in our community were a Black female nurse and a 31-year-old Black Red Cross staffer. For a full month, the only people to die of the disease were Black people.

When I received a message from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation about participating in their \$50 million response to COVID-19 by accepting and deploying \$1 million in our community, Libra’s leadership was top of mind.

Inspired by Hayling and moved by the tragedy of these 2 women’s deaths, I began to repeat that “if Black people are the ones dying, then Black leaders should shape the healing process.” Within a week, alongside \$1.2 million from Deaconess, we launched an Equitable Relief and Recovery Fund to support the work of Black-led organizations.

Initially, I would not have called these race-specific actions or statements brave. But as we spoke about this fund with partners and media, the more the messages came. A white, female philanthropic leader expressed appreciation for Deaconess pursuing impact in affected communities by resisting what she called “the privileged solidarity of white women” influencing other responses. One Black capacity building consultant emailed, “I’m really grateful for your team’s leadership. This is unapologetic, brave and just.”

For us, it is simply our best effort to support a social ‘reset’ with all the resources at our disposal. This is what all of philanthropy will need to do to ensure that the public health and economic recovery from COVID-19 is just and transformative. Doing anything less would be an abdication of our moral responsibility to seed change for future generations and leave this world a better place than how we found it.

Hebrew scriptures record a moment of transition and recovery from a period of disequilibrium, loss and death. The rising leader, a young man named Joshua, is encouraged that the coming days will be filled with promise. He simply had to remember the lessons from the past and “be strong and very courageous.”

If we too can be strong and courageous in our grantmaking, in our words and in our actions, philanthropy has the potential to help birth “days of promise” for our society from the tragedy of the pandemic. ■

Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson is president & CEO of Deaconess Foundation and NCRP’s board chair.