An Era of Powerful Possibility

by Margaret Wheatley

NONPROFITS WHOSE WORK FOCUSES ON communities need to recognize that they are the keepers of knowledge and wisdom about community engagement and community development, the very skills most needed today. And community is the crucible of our major challenges—job loss, failing schools, home foreclosures, violence, fear—as well as where the answers for the future will be found.

This is a time charged with the energy of possibility and uncertainty; today, most of us walk that edge between hope and despair, trying not to look down for fear of losing our footing. And today, community-based nonprofits work overtime to meet the needs of residents. But the times have changed radically, and that means that our practices must also change radically. By going it alone, individual communities and nonprofits cannot create the change we need. The system is too big and complex, so we need to get serious about doing this work together through true collaboration that explores the complexity of core issues. But many of us don't yet know enough about how to create

MARGARET WHEATLEY is an internationally acclaimed speaker and writer and the president emerita of the Berkana Institute.

the knowledge-based yet diversified group work that will take nonprofit power and influence to the next level.

Most nonprofits survive by focusing on turf, status, and institutional ego. In many cases, their pride is justified; they are dedicated to their constituents. But this organizational self-centeredness limits nonprofits, whose role is the common good. This perspective has been only encouraged by funders, which promote nonprofit competition and an increasingly narrow focus, leaving nonprofits little latitude. We must get over ourselves, move away from our petty fiefdoms and step into the space of true collaboration. If we don't make collaboration a priority—by learning new behavior and galvanizing the resources to work together—we risk losing our last chance to positively affect the future of this country. For nonprofits the question is not "How do I position our work to be heard over all others?" but "During this time of uncertainty and dire needs, how can we freely bring our experience, knowledge, and expertise to bear?"

Philanthropy and government will make the way more difficult if they continue to demand immediate results and compliance, policies that are based on a distrust of nonprofits and that destroy nonprofits' ability to mobilize their communities. We need to tackle the distrust that exists

between foundations, government, and nonprofits, because we cannot do the work that needs to be done if we continue to fear one another.

I believe this distrust has arisen because of the failure we've experienced in solving complex problems. We've identified the cause of this failure as individual leaders and agencies that lack the will or intelligence to solve the issues for which they received funding. But in fact, our mental models have failed. We have not approached complex problems in ways that account for their dense, interconnected nature. Nor have we advocated for the processes required of a complex system. So, of course, we've failed by applying rigid, reductionist, and mechanical models of problem solving to a dynamic, complex, and interconnected system.

But too many funders have misidentified the failure as flawed leadership rather than flawed thinking. They grow more fearful and distrustful of those they entrust with their money. And then they add new reporting requirements, insist on more evaluation, and demand greater "accountability." I've observed that nonprofit staff in the field spends increasingly more time on measurement and report writing. If your nonprofit has received money from multiple funders, most of your effort goes toward satisfying these multiple requirements. This doesn't increase accountability; it merely holds talented people who are capable of doing good work hostage to filling out forms that demand nonsensical measurements that aren't particularly useful.

We have to break the cycle of distrust between those who have the money and those who need the money to do the work. If funders continue to insist on more elaborate reporting of inconsequential work and measurements that mean little, we won't get anywhere. We need to recognize that the only way to learn about complex systems is to begin to work *within* the system—together as community residents, nonprofits, and funders—and to learn as we go. And to build trusting relationships, we have to become consummate learners who can

encourage one another to take risks, learn from our experiences, and immediately apply that learning to our next task.

We don't know how to do the kind of continuous learning that complexity calls for. In today's world, when we confront a massive failure (think the current economic meltdown), we try to stop the chaos by imposing simplistic regulations. But every time we attempt to control chaos with controls and oversight, we create only more chaos.

When we dance with uncertainty, we have to notice what's around us in the moment and what we can learn. Too often, instead of staying open to the unpredictable and being avid learners as they go, nonprofits have tracked and measured and, thus, focused on the past. This kind of myopic and backward-looking focus is disastrous in the

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kinds of never-before-encountered situations we face today.

The questions for philanthropy and nonprofits are these: How can we break the cycle of distrust and fear? How can we best work with our partners and those doing the work without constraining them with dog collars that zap them when they move out of bounds? We all have to move out of bounds, far beyond the boxes of our present approaches. Unknown situations require people to access their maximum intelligence, to be able to think well in the moment and alongside their colleagues. And that intelligence needs to be widely distributed throughout the community.

Years ago, I worked with the U.S. Special Forces, and it was a wake-up call about how to mobilize intelligence to deal with the unknown. As is true in other countries, our Special Forces unit trains these elite soldiers to function well in the highest-risk situations. The organization trains its soldiers

in weapons and tactics of war, but it also teaches its soldiers how to think. As a result, trainees spend as much time learning about culture, history, and legal issues as they do learning warfare. And they learn how to think *as a team*, spurring one another to ever-more-precise critical thinking. They do so because they will confront high-risk situations without a commander present; so they have to be able to make decisions on their own, even when these decisions have great consequence for others.

Foundation and nonprofit leaders need to take a lesson from the Special Forces model: develop those in the field doing the work to be skilled decision makers; emphasize and assign resources to develop critical-thinking skills in collaborative teams; and then step back and trust those doing the work to make good decisions. To do this well requires specific action: Agencies need support and resources to learn how to learn. And foundations and funders need to hold those they support accountable for learning.

In this brave new world, we're making it up as we go along. If we knew how to solve our problems, we would have done so by now. That's why learning how to learn and being held accountable for learning are so essential. I want to see philanthropy get fully engaged in providing the resources for people to learn as they go and as they do the work. Instead of insisting on specific, preordained measures, funders should support feedback loops that tell the system what's happening and what needs to be adjusted in real time. Let's have funders support—with money and time and patience—multiple means for people to come together across the boundaries of their individual nonprofits to truly collaborate. Let's take community as the common focus and develop the skills of thinking well together, pushing one another to new levels of insight and practices that work. In other words, philanthropy should support communities of practice that are constantly developing and sharing wisdom about how to develop a nation of healthy communities.

I know this sounds scary for philanthropy. But it appears scary only because our perceptions of those we support are clouded by fear and distrust. At this moment in America, we have to choose to trust people. Distrust has to stop dictating the work of all of us: funders and nonprofits. Because, as Harry Belafonte said after the government's failure with Hurricane Katrina, the last source of faith and hope is in the people themselves. I've been working in communities since 1966, and people have seldom disappointed me. I've learned that people can be trusted to devise good solutions to their own problems, and to do so with the creativity and generosity that have been concealed by distrust and command and control. I've also learned that people are extraordinarily responsible and work hard for issues they care about.

We've truly lost sight of one another and the great potential that lives within just about everyone. For many years, I've defined a leader as anyone willing to help, anyone willing to step forward to change things. Communities everywhere are filled with these leaders; they reveal themselves when the issues appear. To change our communities for the good, we have to change our perception of who's in these communities. And we need to support leadership as it emerges.

I believe we've been given one last chance to rediscover the power of community to solve its own problems. If we can come together as never before and work together to understand the complexity of current systems, if we can develop trust and respect for one another, then we have a chance of discovering solutions that truly work. But we must abandon our practices of distrust, fragmentation, and control. It's now or never.

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