

Reflections on Two Decades of the Poetry and Practice of Philanthropy

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This talk is about integrity, and accountability, and the translation of what you know, and who you are, into your work in philanthropy.

The context is a wrap around the two plus decades of the TPI experience as a philanthropic advisor.

In that context, the most amazing part of this advisor in philanthropy conference is that it exists – only one indicator of how much philanthropy has changed since 1989 when TPI began its journey.

I like the metaphor that life is a journey – it is both within our consciousness and external in our experience. We are both an observer and an actor. There is poetry in all that we see and experience, even if we do not use that word. There is something to be learned from the practice of all that we do, even if we do not always understand it at the time.

When I selected this title and subject, it sounded good. My wise colleague Steve Johnson, who has addressed this conference about TPI's extensive research on how professional advisors approach the subject of philanthropy with their high-net worth clients, warned me against being too esoteric.

Steve was right because I have had a lot of trouble writing this – the same trouble I have writing poems. The trouble is there is too much to say that has already been said, that you already know and have heard before. The trouble is the lines keep crossing between the actors – and there are a lot of actors on the philanthropic stage - donors, investors, foundations, boards, trustees, staff, nonprofit organizations, social entrepreneurs, and a wide range of market economy hybrids that are now influencing this dynamic space. Exactly what role a professional advisor, of any stripe, can/should play in this domain is still evolving.

But what troubles me most is the inadequacy I feel - what I see in the world and what is not going on in philanthropy to address it – how most philanthropic response has an astonishing lack of urgency.

David Brooks' column in the New York Times this week entitled *The Big Disconnect* didn't help. He reported on a public mood that is dark – economic confidence polls as low as the Great Depression and the share of Americans who trust government at historic lows. All of this puts more pressure on private action in the public space – and that is where philanthropy operates.

So how do we begin? I take a risk and begin with the inner journey. From Time magazine – December 6, 1963 – a letter to the editor; in memoriam:

The enormous swell of sympathy and despair that has arisen throughout this nation and the world is testimony to these overwhelming aspects of John F. Kennedy – he had within him a sense of greatness: he bestowed upon the presidency a literate, a sensitive and even poetic value. Those values were considered by most people to evidence brilliance and genius. It is this that transcends politics and nationality – the tragedy of his untouched capacities.

Peter Karoff – Watertown, Mass

When a friend, last year, a former university president who not only collects old magazines, but actually reads them, sent a copy of my Time letter to the editor, which I had long ago lost, it was a powerful jolt – a kind of ‘bookend’ in one’s life – something in the past that resonates with today and surfaces out of our consciousness at unexpected times.

I remember being devastated the day John F. Kennedy was shot, and writing and rewriting that letter. Like so many Americans, I was trying to make sense out of what made no sense. I was twenty-six years old in 1963, and did not know then that the tragic death of JFK was to be the first of a troika of loss that would too soon play out – Martin Luther King, Jr. and then Robert Kennedy – those three deaths took away my generation’s heroes. It was like the death of the American dream.

Reading that letter after all these years made clearer things that I had never quite put together. What especially leaps out is the phrase ‘the tragedy of his untouched capacities’ and the notion that there are things that “transcend politics and nationality.” Those were not the words we used in 1989 when we started The Philanthropic Initiative, but the powerful imperative ‘of untouched capacities’ – not their tragedy but their unlocking - are in the DNA of the twenty-two year TPI experience. In fact they are in the genes of philanthropy writ large. I could make a very good case that what philanthropy does best is help people unlock their own capacity, and find their own power.

If this were another speech one could develop the theme of ‘untouched capacities’ as the fundamental challenge of our time. It is a moral challenge, an economic challenge, and a political will challenge.

But for our purposes this morning – the ‘untouched capacity’ is that which lies within the donor – whether individual, family, corporate or community foundation – and within you as advisors or you as staff – in essence within each of us.

Robert Frost wrote that “poetry makes you remember what you didn’t know.” But it’s not just poetry that works in that manner. The reality is that we “see what we do, we form theories about how we do things, but we are often unaware – or have forgotten – the place from which we began.”

So my question for you to consider – even if it is early in the morning – is this:

What Time magazine letter to the editor type ‘bookend’ in your own experience comes to mind? What event – personal, spiritual, communal, professional – is the major influence on why your work today involves philanthropy? Think about that for a moment. Why are you here? Why do you want to be here in this room with others who call themselves philanthropic advisors?

After you have answered the ‘bookend’ question for yourself, ask it of your clients, ask it of your board of trustees, and ask it of the community of interest you presume to serve.

It all leads to what lies deep within us, or within the work itself.

Steven Spielberg speaking at the Tanglewood Music Festival tribute celebrating Seiji Ozawa's thirty years as Music Director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra said this: "What I have come to admire about you, Seiji, is how you play music from within the music. It's what I want to do, learn how to make films within the film."

If we were to list the poetics of philanthropic advising, I would put deep listening at the top of the list. It is the first step in an advisor establishing a relationship with a donor that works.

In last Sunday's New York Times there was an article about Metropolitan Opera conductor Fabio Luisi, the heir apparent to James Levine. A colleague said about Luisi – "He loves voices, and he listens, and he reacts."

If our clients were to conclude the same thing about us, I think that would be very good indeed.

What do you get if you truly listen?

I have a friend and client who is extraordinary, as a donor, and as a powerful person. He may be the most generous person I have ever met. Well into our work together and one late afternoon after our relationship had been tested – he was and is very demanding – out of the blue he told me this story:

I grew up in a small southern town, and my father was the manager of the big mill owned by a man from New York, a Mr. Stone, who liked my father and mother a lot. When he came to town, Mr. Stone would stay at our house, almost as one of the family. One day when I was about nine a friend who was an older boy said to me, "I hate President Roosevelt!" "Why?" I said. "Because he has a man in his cabinet named Hillman, and Hillman is a Jew!" At dinner that evening, for whatever nine-year-old reason I felt the urge to be heard and burst out with, "I hate President Roosevelt!" And my mother said in her sweet voice, "Why dear?" And I said, "Because he has a man in his cabinet named Hillman, and Hillman is a Jew!" Well my mother, who was very proper, nearly fell off her chair and I was promptly dismissed from the table. Mr. Stone, as was his way, came up to say good night and read me a story. When he was done he asked, "What was in your mind when you told that story about President Roosevelt and Mr. Hillman?" I had no answer and Mr. Stone said in a quiet voice, "Well no matter, but I just want you to know that I am a Jew."

I do not know who else my friend has told that story to, if anyone, but so much about his way of thinking, his instinctive sense of fairness and openness to others, his authentic generosity of spirit, came vividly alive when he thought of this childhood lesson.

Increasingly I have thought about the practice of philanthropy as translational, and that the principal job of those who work in philanthropy is to translate from one language, or one body of knowledge, or one point of view to another using language that is understandable to others. A translator is also someone who changes, transforms or alters something, renewing and expanding its potential in the process.

In medicine, the term translational refers to moving what is learned in the lab into the practice of medicine. The analogy to the field of philanthropy is striking.

At the Council on Foundations Annual Conference earlier this month, my colleague Joanne Duhl moderated a panel entitled *Research into Practice: The Role of Foundations in Translating Research into Practice*. The focus was on how foundations can use their resources to apply what we know to what we do. The big questions considered were: How can foundations bridge the divide between researchers and practitioners, between what we know about what works and the decisions that are made that affect our lives? What roles can foundations play to ensure that the best knowledge is applied to solve critical social problems?

These questions apply to all serious donors. Extended to the philanthropic advisor, here is what it sounds like:

How can an advisor translate – into terms a donor understands – knowledge that will help that individual – or board – achieve their goals and objectives?

Your background might be as a lawyer, insurance agent, estate planner, financial planner, foundation program officer, investment professional, banker, organizational development consultant, psychologist, or entrepreneur. Those experiences will, to a large degree, frame your point of view as an advisor. The job is the translation of that knowledge to the specifics of the client situation.

In TPI's work with donors, that has meant a multi-stage process of translating goals into programmatic action plans built on a platform of research. When we first started talking about strategic philanthropy twenty years ago – a term that was not then widely used - we framed philanthropy as an investment specifically because that term was familiar to most donors. Notions like venture philanthropy and high-impact philanthropy continue to inspire many donors because they are successful translations to what they know and understand.

What does this get you?

At a family foundation meeting that Ellen Remmer, TPI's president and I facilitated last year on Long Island, the patriarch – a larger-than-life American entrepreneur – said to us as we were leaving, “Thank you for this. What you have done is ‘elevate the discourse’ around philanthropy for my family.”

I like that phrase. Perhaps ‘elevating the discourse’ is the business that most of us are in.

There is another phrase I like – “to truly love you must touch.”

The donor advisory relationship is based on respect that turns into trust, and at its highest level, into love. It's not always that way, but when it is a great gift has been given to the client, and to the advisor.

One of the most talented philanthropic advisors I know is the Executive Director of a large family foundation. The donor, the founder of a major public company, died recently. This man

was tough-minded, challenging, and fascinatingly counter-intuitive. The Executive Director had worked closely with him for several years, and she wrote this to me, “He and I came to love each other and we spoke those words out loud. Not many people can say that about someone they work with... I suppose I should say work for. But never once did I call him my boss. It just didn’t fit him. He was not easy, as you know. But we worked out a mutual respect. I learned so much from him.”

That kind of relationship is rare, but the elements that make it possible are not. In other words it will only be the very special set of circumstances, including timing, and personal chemistry that bring a client and an advisor together. But it starts with a safe space – what we call trust and honesty – and it needs time to breathe.

I first met Russ Berrie in the spring of 1999. We hit it off. The context was how to prepare for the future – something about a big foundation someday. Russ’ wife Angelica and I immediately became allies in the challenging task, never quite finished, of organizing Russ!

At that time the foundation board met Sunday morning because Russ was working the other six days! Russ had made his fortune selling teddy bears. He loved his business – wanted to die “on the sales floor pitching the latest hot item to the little old lady from Akron on a buying trip for her gift shop.”

He was a wonderful person, very smart and intuitive. He never forgot his roots, giving back was in his nature and he was already a ‘big giver’ when I met him.

The major issue for Russ and the foundation board was that current annual giving was \$6 to \$8 million, but upon his death the minimum foundation giving would jump to \$25 million. They were not prepared from either a governance or programmatic perspective to handle such a huge increase.

Russ understood this. He was entrepreneurial but also cautious. Something was holding Russ back – what was it?

One evening in his study, following a difficult board meeting where Russ had rejected a major proposal based on TPI’s independent assessment – it was an ask from his closest friend, also a board member – Russ said:

“I just don’t think I know enough to make bigger gifts. It would bother me a great deal if I did something and hurt an organization, or even worse, hurt people.”

It was an amazing moment. Here was someone who viscerally understood the moral hazard, and the first rule of philanthropy and of life, which is to do no harm.

That revelation was a tipping point. Russ agreed to adopt a more pro-active, strategic, approach to giving. The term ‘transformational’ became the foundation’s goal. There were scores of conversations, a series of intense day-long retreats with experts, lots of learning about issues and sorting out, and the gradual increase in the use of professional help – TPI staff was that resource for a number of years.

In the too few remaining years before Russ Berrie died, a lot of progress was made. Giving ramped up, and the foundation board became better prepared to manage the transition to what is today a highly respected and impactful philanthropy.

Within the journey of becoming a donor is a philanthropic curve – here is what it looks like:

Level One – you become a donor

A complex combination of personal and religious values, family background, business and social pressures, ego, and heart-felt response to the world around you motivates you to become a donor. Giving becomes part of your way of life, your position in the community, your yearning to be a good person. Over time, giving becomes somewhat automatic, demands on you increase, and you are on many lists. Your gifts, with few exceptions, are distributed in small amounts to an increasing number of organizations. Sound familiar?

Level Two – you decide to get organized

The goal is to get control of the giving process, instead of the process controlling you. You review what you have done over the last several years, and think about what gifts have given you the most satisfaction, and what really interests you. You decide to be less reactive to requests, learn how to say no, begin to determine priorities, develop criteria, and make fewer but larger gifts.

Level Three – you become a learner

You realize that you don't really know enough about the issues that interest you. You roll up your sleeves, do some research, visit your community foundation, talk to experts in the field and with other donors, make site visits to relevant organizations, and survey the literature. If you cannot do all this, you hire someone to do it. Out of that process comes a clearer focus, a clearer understanding of the issue, and the organizations you support reflect that focus. You have now made a distinction between the gifts you must make, and your real philanthropy.

Level Four – you become issue and results oriented

You want to maximize giving, and increase the chances of making a difference. You are more concerned with results and evaluation. You look harder at the underlying issues, and the ways your available resources can be best applied. You invest in the most talented non-profit entrepreneurs. Gifts to organizations focus on building their capacity. You have become increasingly pro-active and rather than simply responding to requests, you go out, or have someone go out, search for and fund the best people and organizations.

Level Five – your philanthropy is leveraged

You develop and fund custom designed programs that meet specific programmatic objectives. You collaborate with other donors, you establish networks that cross domains and include public-private partnerships, and collaborations with business. You attempt to create models that can be adapted, and that will attract other private and public resources. You have become increasingly competent about the issues, about what works, and about what can really make a difference.

Level Six – alignment

Your values, your passions, and your interests are aligned. Philanthropy is among the most exciting and satisfying things you do

Here is a story of a gentle and caring man who went pretty far up the philanthropic curve:

My mother was a great reader and some of my earliest memories are of going to the library with her. It was like going to church and my brothers and sisters knew we had better behave or else. This was a special place for my mother – it was in fact another kind of church for her. She read to us all the time and I suppose I associate reading with my mother's love. From that time forward I have been a reader and it has made all the difference. Not only in school but also in my life, in the way I think about things. Let's face it, for kids it is everything. If they can't read they are stuck behind the eight ball

I was drawn to help the Catholic Schools, not just because I am a product of them, but because today their students are among the very poorest and the neediest. They come from families with lots of problems, and by the way most of them are not Catholic. The work these schools do is the work of the true church. It is the church that I love. What I learned is that the parochial schools do not have the resources of the public schools and yet consistently do better. The city has this big reading program for all of its schools and the parochial schools have nothing. We looked around and discovered an excellent supplementary reading enhancement program that was originally developed in Australia. Called *Reading Recovery*, it seemed just what was needed. *Reading Recovery*, when properly administered, is able to take very weak readers and in a relatively short time help them improve their comprehension. I liked the idea that the program trained trainers who could then be part of the ongoing instruction in the schools.

It has not been easy. It has been disappointing that so few of the elementary schools we approached were able to prepare a coherent and compelling proposal of how they would integrate the program into their curriculum. It made no sense to me to provide the resources for schools unless they were willing to commit to make it work. That would be just spinning wheels, and wasting money and I have no interest in that. At the same time, the schools wanted to know how long I would commit to support the program. The more I thought about it the only thing that made sense was to say the answer was 'forever.' That's right – if the schools do their part then I would do mine. It seemed the right thing to do – don't you think so?

Is it working? The answer is yes and no. Many of the students are reading better but their overall life situations are in many instances too tough. We have also lost some teachers right after they completed their training, which was especially disappointing. At the same time, two of the five schools where we have been working for the last three years have made great progress, and several of the schools that had initially taken a pass have now indicated a real interest in bringing *Reading Recovery* into their schools.

I have arranged my affairs so that when I die this program can continue, but only if the schools continue to do their part. That's only fair. This program is the best thing I have ever done, and I am glad I am doing it.

What was that? Oh, you want to know why I have been anonymous. Well I don't like making a big noise about things. Sometimes you can ruin a good thing by too much publicity. I want to keep the focus on what is important and what is important is that more of these kids learn to read, and like me learn to love reading. That's what it is all about. Don't you think?

The critic Helen Vendler writes that “a complete poem is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found its words. A complete gift is when a critical social need has been identified and the gift has fulfilled that need. A kind of synergy between thought and action that simply sings!

Imagine that – action that links how you feel and how you think – about who you love, about your community, about this tough, hurting, and magnificent world where we are *caught in the dangerous traffic between self and universe*.ⁱ Somehow you are able to do something about it, to make a difference. How we yearn for exactly that.

The story of the ‘reader’ – who in his business life was a successful real estate developer – is actually a story of accountability.

There are two key questions that donors seldom ask themselves:

To whom are you accountable?ⁱⁱ

For what are you accountable?

While accountability is understood as a legal and a moral imperative for every organization, it is just as important as a strategic choice. Sorting out to whom, and for what, you are accountable, drives the strategy chosen by a donor to accomplish goals.

Accountability is about trust. It is the process by which individuals and organizations report to recognized authority and take responsibility for actions.

Accountability is the process that responds to and balances needs of stakeholders in decision-making actions and delivers accordingly.

An actor is ‘accountable’ when that actor recognizes a promise to do something and accepts a legal and moral responsibility to do its best to fulfill that promise.

Steven Melville, chair of Melville Charitable Trust, a foundation based in Connecticut that received the Distinguished Grantmaker of the Year award from the Council on Foundation for its path-breaking work on homelessness issues, put it this way:

“A promise is a serious matter. Promising is the connection between voice and agency – speech counts as a promise and as action. Failing to keep a promise is not excused by simply changing my mind. Promises are social acts that must be made and received by someone else.

Philanthropy is ultimately a promissory activity with responsibilities for the kinds of failure or misfires that promises can run afoul of.”

The ‘reader’ understood all of this. He felt deeply accountable to his mother’s memory, to the schools that gave him an education, to the ‘true church’ that he loved, and to the children who today go to those schools – children with very different opportunities than he and his generation had.

The ‘reader’ also understood that making this kind of ‘promise’ was indeed a ‘serious matter’ and to fulfill his obligation required putting in place funds that would be available beyond his lifetime. In essence, he established a kind of endowment for the program if it continued to meet the agreed-upon criteria for performance.

Tom Tierney and Joel Fleishman in their new book *Give Smart* make the point that foundations, and by extension, all donors, are not subject to substantive “external” accountability and “that if you do not demand excellence of yourself no one else will require it of you.”

The story of the ‘reader’ makes it clear that donors have moral and ethical dimensions of accountability that are both internal and external. There may not be a bar association for donors the way there is for lawyers, but donors who do not ask, and answer, the accountability questions do not pass the bar of being excellent.

The ‘reader’ died a few years ago, but his foundation continues to work in those schools, and has expanded into science and math curriculum and other critical areas of need.

If the legacy you leave is the life you have led, the ‘reader’ did very well indeed.

This talk began with the concept of being a listener, and I would like to extend that to the community because community is rarely considered relevant to donor accountability.

Alan Broadbent, TPI’s board chair for many years, with his wife Judy formed the Maytree Foundation in Toronto, another recipient of the Council on Foundations Distinguished Grantmaker of the Year award. These are Alan’s words:

“What is the authentic voice of the community? We want to know the answer to this because it would help us become better grant makers, better nonprofit organizations, and more particularly would help us frame our involvement in changing communities for the better. Asking the question about the authentic voice forces one to go quite deep, to engage first in who is the community, how does it identify its leaders, and how does it frame its needs. That forces you to answer questions about what it values and honors, and about how it reaches consensus, what legitimates authority, how difference is tolerated/accommodated. And once we’ve come to some sense of how communities work, and what guides them, how can we begin to leverage this to help communities raise themselves up.”

Robert Wright defines “moral imagination as putting yourself in someone else’s shoes” – that is why I like so much the Alan Broadbent/Maytree Foundation perspective on community.

Poetry and Practice

The poetry of philanthropy begins with the creative, imaginative surge that we feel when we are deeply moved. The practice of philanthropy is the process of making grants and social investments that have impact, and the evaluation of the work. The process includes research and analysis, development of creative strategies that meet unfilled needs, and includes collaboration and partnerships between donors, nonprofit organizations, and communities.

The primary test for both the poetry and the practice is integrity – was our purpose noble, were we true to it, and did we in all instances deeply listen to the community of interest we presume to serve.

A poem, if it works, makes the subject new – in fact that was Ezra Pounds' clarion call in his famous 1917 article in Poetry Magazine that reviewed T. S. Elliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Pounds call was for artists and writers to follow Elliot's lead and "make it new!"

Does philanthropy need to 'make it new?' Many believe it does.

At the closing session of the Council on Foundations annual meeting two weeks ago, there was a mock trial with philanthropy as the defendant to debate how well philanthropy was doing to fulfill its mission of advancing the public good. If found guilty of falling short on its mission philanthropy would lose its tax-exempt status.

Acting as prosecutor, Gara La Marche, president of Atlantic Philanthropies argued these four points:

First, philanthropy too often acts in its own interest. One example was when foundation leaders argued against President Obama's proposal to modestly decrease charitable tax deductions to help pay for the healthcare overhaul which seeks to narrow the huge gulf between the rich and the poor.

Second, philanthropy doesn't take nearly enough risks and tends to shy away from the big social issues, like climate change. And further the emphasis on measurement and results contributes to donors being more risk adverse.

Third, philanthropy is awful at admitting mistakes, although organizations like the Foundation Center are working to change that.

Finally, foundations are not sufficiently committed to diversity with their own ranks, and in the programs they support.

Despite the best efforts of Ralph Smith of the Annie B. Casey Foundations who defended philanthropy, the jury at the Council on Foundations sessions found philanthropy guilty as charged – 10 to 2 no less!

Alas the COF mock trial is not a mock trial – philanthropy's tax favored status will be severely tested along with every other aspect of its regulation. There are no sacred cows on Capital Hill

these days, but reductions in the tax benefits enjoyed by philanthropy are only the tactical issues facing the field. Far more fundamental is how well philanthropy addresses the critical issues facing our own society and the world. Philanthropy is doing a better job of promoting effectiveness which is a very important value. As a field, however, we have not done a good job of reflecting on the relevance of what we do, and the moral and ethical aspects of accountability. A powerful case statement for philanthropy requires both jobs done well.

I think we need a John Berryman.

The most famous poetry workshop ever was held in 1953 at the University of Iowa where a remarkable group of students were first taught by Robert Lowell and then by John Berryman. The students were a marvel and included, Donald Justice, W. D. Snodgrass, Philip Levine, Jane Cooper, and William Dickey. Berryman was fierce – “No hanging back! One must be ruthless with one’s own writing or someone else will.” Those students today – Pulitzer Prize winners included – can still hear Berryman’s voice saying, “That will never do!”ⁱⁱⁱ

I think philanthropy needs a John Berryman because the gap between what philanthropy does, what it could do, and what it needs to do is huge – it simply will not do!

Is that a role an advisor can uniquely play? Can you be that voice? Can you encourage your clients to be that voice?

and indeed there will be time
To wonder, “Do I dare” and “Do I dare?”^{iv}

I can think of no better way to end this reflection of many more questions than answers than with this poem, “On the Pulse of Morning” by Maya Angelou:

Lift up your eyes
Upon this day breaking for you
Give birth again
To the dream
Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands,
Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your public self.

ⁱ Poet Stanley Kunitz

ⁱⁱ See *The Many Faces of Nonprofit Accountability*, a working paper by Alnoor Ebrahim, Harvard Business School

ⁱⁱⁱ From an essay by Philip Levine

^{iv} T.S. Elliot - *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*