

Enlightened Self-Interest in the Nonprofit Sector

12.12.19 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



There's an important conversation these days in the nonprofit community on a somewhat unexpected topic: *Exploring the Problems and Benefits of Self-Interest in Nonprofits*.

That's how the editors of *The Nonprofit Quarterly* launched its new series on Halloween 2019. In separate articles published over the next week or so, distinguished experts – Professor David O. Renz, Vernetta Walker, and Ruth McCambridge – offered historical background and provocative commentary. (We've posted on these developments; see, for example, *Charity Conflicts, Self-Interest, and More* (November 5, 2019).

Toward the end of *NPQ's* introductory article, the editors encouraged interested readers to take a look at another piece published a week earlier: *We Are All Ducks: Othering and Enlightened Self-Interest in the Nonprofit Sector* (October 24, 2019). The author is none other than Vu Le, a longtime nonprofit executive and prolific blogger.

Mr. Le had originally written this piece (absent "light edits" for the *NPQ* Fall 2019 self-interest) a year earlier for his popular blog, *Nonprofit: Absolutely Fabulous*. As usual, readers can easily pierce the irreverent and humorous tone to find the important underlying message in this insightful commentary.

Ducks, Self-Interest, and "Othering"

Vu Le writes that he had been thinking "about a bunch of things" for a while that led to his 2018 epiphany that "we are all ducks."

One of them is "the community-centric fundraising model, and why we each do the work we do." Apparently, he'd been thinking about this and related issues for almost as long as *Game of Thrones* has been on HBO. The footnote links in *We Are All Ducks:...* go back to 2013 (*The Wall of Philanthropy, Wildlings, and White Walkers*) and 2015 (*Winter is coming, and the donor-centric fundraising model must evolve*). A few months later in 2015, he switched from GOT to another popular-culture inspiration in *The Nonprofit Hunger Games, and what we must do to end them*.

Getting back to those ducks and self-interest, what triggered Mr. Le's more recent line of thought had been his escalating – hands-on – involvement in his organization's pursuit of the ever more elusive *individual* major donor. He generally approves of the notion of "donor-centric fundraising," but only to the point of giving an appropriate level of gratitude and acknowledgment of generosity. He "started noticing that many of us have unconsciously created an unhealthy dynamic between our clients and our donors and funders." Vu Le explained that "without realizing it," nonprofit executives and fundraisers, "... often reinforce an image of donors as nice people standing at a lake throwing bread at hungry ducks in the water."

This insidious "othering" takes the form of reassurances to donors that they're desperately needed "... bread helped fifty ducks" who "are now not going to die of starvation." And, of course, there are the ubiquitous fundraising campaigns and events designed to stoke donors' "sense of pity and compassion" where we "show video images of hungry ducks and prevail on the starving ducks "... to tell compelling, sometimes harrowing stories."

Exactly how much, Mr. Le has been wondering, "do we as nonprofits, who stand in the middle between foundations/donors and communities, unconsciously perpetuate the notion that the people we serve are 'others'?"

We're In One Big Lake Together

This "othering" is wrong on many levels, but seems to be growing: "There's been a lot of 'othering' going around in society in general" recently.

Vu Le uses a simple recent example that he recalls of parents from a resource-starved, lower-income, school district pleading for financial help from "... parents from wealthier families" whose kids attend well-funded schools nearby. What's the response? "'Sorry, we are investing in our own kids.'" He wants to tell these other parents: "'Hey, guess what? Your kids are going to grow up, and they're going to MARRY OTHER PEOPLE'S KIDS. So maybe you should invest in those kids as well.'" (*emph. In orig.*)

We are "one community"; it's one big lake, he reminds us. "None of us is standing on the edge of the lake feeding ducks."

We all "have personal stakes in what everyone else in the world is experiencing." We "all personally benefit when other people's kids do well, not just because our kids marry ... them," but also because we'll need them to work in our businesses, teach our grandchildren, and be able to do our heart surgery. We "all personally benefit" from a better environment so we can "breathe and drink water." It's good, too, "when people in other countries are successful" so we can "travel and eat stuff." There's much more, but you get the idea.

That's how "community-centered fundraising" enters the picture. It's important to explain to donors and funders "... how the well-being of people who look completely different from them, or who are geographically far away, or who speak other languages, affects ... their... own well-being."

Enlightened Self-Interest in Philanthropy

The main – though not only – point of Vu Le's current article as well as his earlier linked posts is that placing every big-fish prospective donor on a throne and appealing to that person's narrow interests and "othering" inclinations may seem to be in the short-term interest of a nonprofit and its dependent ducks. But it's unsustainable in the long run in our interdependent society and will not solve society's most intractable problems. Nonprofit organizations should dare to see the bigger picture and take the long view.

And the people in philanthropy should "reexamine their motives and adopt a new perspective."

“Selfishness,” according to Mr. Le, “is not all that bad.” The thinking should be: “I am totally doing this work for me... I want my kids to grow up in a safe neighborhood. I want to be able to walk down the street and see art and hear music. I want trees and pandas to exist in the world so I can visit them—trees and pandas are awesome. I want the world to be safe and diverse and vibrant because I personally am planning to grow old in it and enjoy the hell out of it...”

Conclusion

This type of “enlightened self-interest within the collective good is what will allow us to build our ideal world – not the patronizing notion of selflessness, pity for the ‘others,’ and old-school charity.”