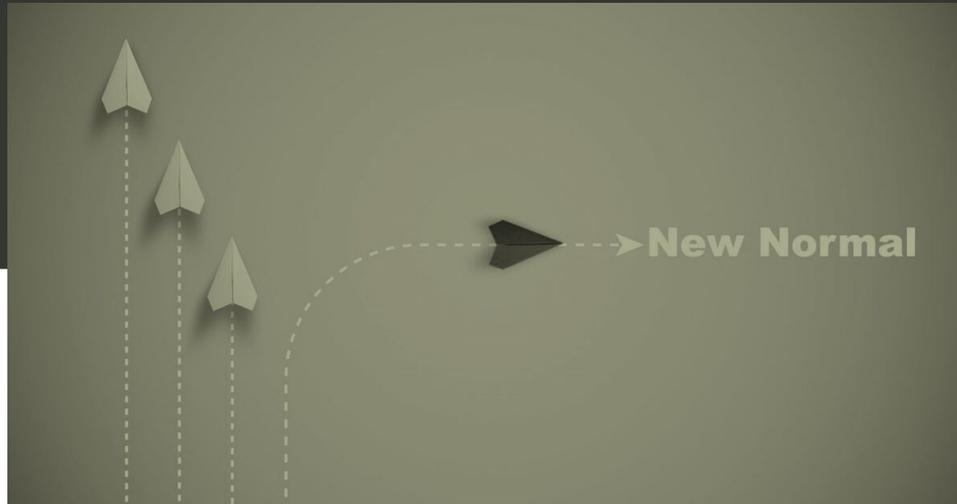


Funders Urged Not to Return to “Normal”

08.26.20 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



A month ago, in [Philanthropy Thinkers On Not Returning to “Normal”](#) (August 4, 2020), we wrote about the nonprofit sector “...anxiously await[ing] the time it can return to ‘normal.’”

But the pre-pandemic “normal” was imperfect at best. COVID-19 has suddenly and sharply reminded us of the weaknesses in our healthcare and economic systems; they have largely collapsed under the strain and the crisis is nowhere near over in the United States. And the deep inequalities and structural deficiencies in our society have come into painfully crisp focus.

Now, “many philanthropy thought leaders increasingly urge against going back to how things were before COVID-19 turned the world on its head.” As commentator Arundhati Roy points out in [The Pandemic is a Portal](#) (April 3, 2020), *Financial Times*, “nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next....”

As the pandemic lingers, “organizations and individuals across the spectrum – nonprofits, foundations, citizens, governments, families – must “grapple with what “normal” means now and in the future.”

We concluded our August 4th post with the promise that we would return again to this important discussion. We’ll begin here with advice from experts on how, in the coming weeks and months, philanthropic funders should pivot away from the pre-pandemic status quo.

Funders Should Discard The Status Quo

Among the nonprofit sector’s thought leaders speaking out on the urgency of taking bold action is David Morse, a former top communications official at Atlantic Philanthropies, Pew Charitable Trusts, and the Robert Wood John Foundation.

In *Philanthropy, Take the Lead in Building a Better Normal* (May 4, 2020), Mr. Morse acknowledges the question we all hear so often these days: “When can we get back to normal?” But he cautions that “...the more crucial questions, and not just for philanthropy, are: Should we get back to normal? Is business as usual good enough?...” He responds with a clear “no.” Getting back to normal is “nowhere near good enough” because “... the old normal wasn’t so great” and it would be a “huge undertaking” in any event.

The right path is to create a “better normal.” That will be “monumental. But it’s doable. Maybe.” And he echoes other commentators who hearken back to Rahm Emanuel’s advice during the 2008-9 economic meltdown: “Never let a good crisis go to waste.”

“What might foundations and philanthropists do to help create the better normal?” David Morse asks rhetorically. “First, simply what they’re now doing to provide support to their grantees who desperately need it, just more of it and quicker. And just do it; it’s a waste of time, space, and money to crow about it.”

To a significant degree, funders *have* stepped up to the plate with generosity and flexibility. See, for example, our March 26th blog post, *Some Good News: Funders Are Stepping Up.*

Second, Mr. Morse urges funders to “embrace what is an all-too-alien concept in philanthropy: real partnership.” He points out that “[g]rant makers talk about partnership but rarely engage in it. Multitudinous announcements by foundations tell the story of what they are doing individually, but not much about what grant makers are doing together.” For a recent example of collaboration, see our post from July 22, 2020: *Foundations Launch Huge Bond Program.* Take a look, as well, at *Philanthropy, Meet Our Matrix Moment: Which Pill Will You Choose?* (April 2, 2020) Dana Kawaoka-Chen, *The Nonprofit Quarterly*.

Of course, the task is too large for private philanthropy alone. “What we need to follow the pandemic is a Grand Bargain on steroids,” advises David Morse, “and this time foundations can and should pull together business and government to help emerge from the pandemic with a fairer America that works for the many, not just the few.”

Funders: “This is The Rainy Day”

The Nonprofit Quarterly’s editor-in-chief, Ruth McCambridge, is a big fan of Vu Le, popular blogger (*Nonprofit AF.com*) and seasoned nonprofit executive who has just begun a much-needed break to write and reflect.

Early in the pandemic, Ms. McCambridge flagged Mr. Le as a particularly valuable voice in these challenging times. See *Heads Up! Says Vu Le: Foundations, Nonprofits, and Our Response to COVID-19* (March 10, 2020) *The Nonprofit Quarterly*. She referred specifically to Vu Le’s March 8th blog post: *A few things for nonprofits and foundations to consider in light of the Coronavirus.*

There, he reminds philanthropy funders that “nonprofits are having to do extra work in response to this virus, on top of all their regular responsibilities, and with the risk of funding being jeopardized due to canceled events and programs.” So he urges them to be “thoughtful and generous”; to “... reassure grantees that you got our backs, by relaxing your expectations on outcomes and timelines,

providing rapid response funding, and not withdrawing your sponsorships and grants for postponed or canceled events and programs.”

In the next few weeks, Mr. Le churned out more tour-de-force blog posts, amplifying his frequent pre-pandemic truth-telling including – but not limited to – how “tone deaf funding practices” are now, more than ever, “... not just annoying but actually endangering people’s lives, such as funders requiring anything to be signed or mailed.” See, particularly:

- [*Funders, this is the rainy day you have been saving up for*](#) (March 16, 2020).
- [*10 archaic and harmful funding practices we can no longer put up with*](#) (March 29, 2020)

On April 9, 2020, Vu Le was the featured guest on *Tiny Spark*, a podcast by Amy Costello and Frederica Boswell. They write about it in [*COVID-19 Crisis “Requires Us All to Be Bolder”*](#) (April 9, 2020) *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, and include a link to the 25-minute session. They praise Mr. Le’s efforts in talking about “... why the COVID-19 crisis is requiring nonprofit leaders to push philanthropy in ways it never has before.” Ms. Costello and Ms. Boswell also mention [*#CrappyFundingPractices*](#), a recent Twitter hashtag that Mr. Le created to shine light on “some of the most egregious examples.” (To acknowledge innovative funding reforms, there’s also his [*#AwesomeFundingPractices*](#).)

Part of the effectiveness of Vu Le’s musings on his blog and elsewhere is that he “says the quiet part out loud”; that is, in the good way of stating the obvious and telling truth to power. See, for instance:

- [*Foundations, knock it off with the philanthropic Sophie’s Choices and increase your payout*](#) (April 19, 2020)
- [*9 crappy paradoxes that shape nonprofit and philanthropy*](#) (August 2, 2020)

Conclusion

It’s the right time to re-imagine our future; to “rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves,” according to Arundhati Roy. “We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And [*ready to fight for it.*](#)”

Philanthropy must take a good look at itself, including how it is – and should be – responding to this unprecedented crisis and to the challenges ahead.

— Linda J. Rosenthal, J.D., FPLG Information & Research Director