FPLG: COVID-19

Philanthropy Thinkers on Not Returning to "Normal"

08.04.20 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different." - Arundhati Roy

The nonprofit community eagerly awaits the time it can return to "normal." But many philanthropy thought leaders increasingly urge against going back to how things were before COVID-19 turned the world on its head.

The Enormity of the Catastrophe

"What is this thing that has happened to us?" asks Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy in _The Pandemic Is a Portal_ (April 3, 2020). "It's a virus, yes," she continues, "But it is definitely more than a virus …. Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could."

In _The Coronavirus Butterfly Effect: Six Predictions for a New World Order_, (April 14, 2020) commentators Parag Khanna and Karan Khemka characterize the pandemic as an "… earthquake," albeit one "with aftershocks that will permanently reshape the world…." If we're lucky, they write, "the world will pass 'peak virus' within the next six months." But – "the economy, governments, and social institutions will take years to recover in the best-case scenario…. The next 3-5 years will remind us that COVID-19 was the lightning before the thunder."

It's best, they advise, "rather than even speak of 'recovery,' which implies a return to how things were, … to project what new direction civilization will take." But "that too will be a bumpy ride."

Here in the United States, the (avoidably) rocky and uneven course of the pandemic has created an additional element of confusion and uncertainty not seen in much of the rest of the developed world. Not only don't we know how long it will take before the worst of it passes, but we slide back and forth between too-quick "reopenings" and returns to restrictions.

The editors at the prestigious *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (SSIR) agree that "…the changes wrought by the epidemic will likely not fade soon, if ever…." They recently published a series titled *Rethinking Social Change in the Face of Coronavirus* (July 2020). It's a collection of articles by philanthropy thought leaders on our collective desire to get back to "normal" as soon as possible even though that "normal" was imperfect at best. "As people's frustrations rise, [and] economic woes multiply,…" the editors explain in their introduction, "the desire for a return to pre-lockdown "normal life" grows stronger." But the lingering effects of the pandemic will "force organizations and individuals across the spectrum—nonprofits, foundations, citizens, governments, families—to grapple with what "normal" means now and in the future."

Rejecting the Old "Normal"

The authors of the *SSIR* articles in the *Rethinking Social Change in the Face of Coronavirus* series are among a growing chorus of commentators writing on the common theme of why our society's old "normal" needs a serious reexamination and why right now is the time to do it.

In her recent article, Arundhati Roy echoes this sentiment: "Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to 'normality,' trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves."

"Nothing could be worse than a return to normality," continues Ms. Roy. "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. 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."

Social-change consultant Robin Karcher picks up Ms. Roy's theme in her recent article for *The Nonprofit Quarterly*: *Leading toward a Transformed Future in a Disrupted Present* (June 11, 2020), "It is time," Ms. Karcher writes, "to actively make use of the disruptions and breakdowns as portals to a reimagined future."

Andrew Wolk, who describes himself as a "serial social entrepreneur," concurs. In his blog post, *Respond→Recover→Reframe* (April 20, 2020), he cites a *New York Times* series from mid-April titled *The America We Need*. The *NYT*'s piece began: "The coronavirus pandemic may have reminded Americans that they're all in it together. But it has also shown them how dangerously far they are apart. It may not feel like it now, but out of this crisis there's is a chance to build a better America."

Mr. Wolk adds: "This could not be more true for the mix of tens of thousands of nonprofits, thousands of foundations, millions of individual donors and volunteers, government programs, and

school models that are responding today. This is our chance to consider how the recovery can help reframe what success should look like for the rest of the 21st century."

Going Beyond "Normal" Right Now

Last year, we ran a series of posts on "intriguing articles and writings that have a philosophical 'big-ideas' tone." For instance, in _Philanthropy Thought Leaders: Hot Topics_ (June 24, 2019), we compared the critiques of our sector in writings by Phil Buchanan (Center for Effective Philanthropy), Aaron Dorfman (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy), and Rhodri Davies (UK's Charities Aid Foundation). A month later, we continued with _More Thoughts From Philanthropy Thinkers_ (July 23, 2019), contrasting a review of Edgar Villanueva's Decolonizing Wealth with the decidedly more conservative observations of James Piereson (Manhattan Institute) and Naomi Schaeffer Riley (American Enterprise Institute).

Implicit in those discussions a year ago was the question: Can (and should) any significant change happen right away? What a difference a year makes.

Blogger Andrew Wolk recalls something that former Obama Chief of Staff and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel said in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis: "Never allow a good crisis go to waste. It's an opportunity to do the things you once thought were impossible."

It came to mind recently, Mr. Wolk writes, "... because of the myriad amazing efforts our sector is making right now to respond to COVID-19." He wonders: "Could the 'disruptions' in the normal way of doing things be turned into 'disruptive innovations' like those celebrated in the business world...." To avoid going "back to the way things were before the pandemic," we must "... answer the question: To what end? In other words, with everything we do, are we making enough of a difference and the right kind of difference...."

The _Coronavirus Butterfly Effect_ authors pose similar sentiments: "Can we forward-engineer probable scenarios emerging from the consequences of today's pandemic? Given how stretched our institutions are in coping with the current crisis, few tasks could be more urgent in helping us prepare for the future. It is easy to predict further doom after a devastating phenomenon such as the coronavirus. Reality will likely turn out differently—and it certainly can."

Conclusion

In the next few weeks, we'll explore in more depth the advice and urgent pleas of philanthropy thought leaders on how and why to toss out the old "normal." But, first, we begin a 3-part series on the immediate task for nonprofit and foundation boards and executives to conduct meaningful "scenario-planning" exercises. There, too, the theme of "not returning to normal" is key.

— _Linda J. Rosenthal, J.D., FPLG Information & Research Director_