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How One Donor Is Rethinking Her Philanthropy in 2021

By Isa Catto

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The pandemic pushed all of us into dark places in varying degrees. Our two teenagers struggled, but we were lucky to have the option to stay safe at home. Meanwhile, I had to navigate another kind of threat — I was diagnosed and treated for breast cancer. Plodding through this passage became inextricably linked to my pandemic experience. But now we can see a break in the heavy weather.

I am now fine, but like any reminder of one's mortality, this chapter changed me in ways I am just beginning to understand. One thing is clear, though: This year affected how I want to steward our small family foundation and our philanthropy, not to mention the rest of my life.

Here are the changes we are making — and hope to see elsewhere in philanthropy.

Give and give more. Cancer aside, my family and I rode out the pandemic with relative ease and watched as so many in our nation were leveled by unemployment, racism, illness, and inequity. It was hard not to feel helpless and easy to give in to the mind-set of “it’s all beyond my control.” The antidote? Give more. I came out of this year determined to give more out of our own pockets and out of my small business and give beyond the standard, legally mandated 5 percent from our foundation.

Foster connection. After a year of seeing very few people outside of my art studio and family — other than doctors and nurses — I crave connection and authenticity more than ever. I am less interested in transactions or rushing from task to task. Over the course of the year, I got three letters from different nonprofit leaders who had heard about my cancer diagnosis. After starting each note with some rendition of a “Hope you are kicking that cancer nuisance,” they plunged into an unsolicited request for money.

Our collective impatience has pushed us to drop connection in favor of efficiency, and it is dehumanizing. In past columns, I have touched on the innate complications in donor-grantee relations and how refining these dynamics is a constant work in progress. From now on, I want to work with organizations as collaborators. This may not suit some nonprofits that cling to the old ways of doing business so we may shift our grantees accordingly.

Simplify. The year before the pandemic started, we eliminated formal grant reports. I wanted to kick busywork to the curb for our grantees — and ourselves. I asked grantees to design their own grant reports and was delighted by the creativity that followed. Some did videos, one did a drawing, and another collected simple impact stories. We still need metrics, IRS 990 forms, and annual reports, but I want to work with organizations to streamline emails, meetings, and paperwork.

Reinforce the pillars of democracy. I used to take our government for granted. I believed that democracy would always prevail and that we had one of the least corrupt governments in the world. I knew that capitalism was imperfect, but I believed that democracy would ultimately check some of the problems of greed and inequity. I woke up. We are now giving to ensure voter rights, to combat hate crimes and domestic terrorism, and to foster honest, excellent journalism.

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Invest wisely. Years ago, I asked an acquaintance who'd long worked at Goldman Sachs about socially responsible investments since we were shifting our investment strategy in that direction. "I have no interest in losing my hard-earned money" was his swift reply. My husband and I ignored his "expertise" and moved both our private and foundation investments entirely to socially responsible investments and environmental and social-good-based funds and have never looked back. Now SRIs are lucrative and all the rage (though in need of oversight). After the Black Lives Matter movement, we needed to do more. We started to research more ways to directly invest in minority entrepreneurship and the creative economy and began investing in a private-equity fund that encourages Black female entrepreneurship.

Focus on climate — but not exclusively. It's hard to choose a philanthropic mission when we are surrounded by a sea of troubles, but I think the climate crisis is our most pressing planetary issue. However, I feel that giving solely to conservation groups

may not be the only solution. I want to give to nonprofits working at the crossroads of social justice and conservation – and give fewer, bigger grants.

Question privilege. I have spent a lifetime listening to white men who claim they earned every bit of their success. The quicker we acknowledge our privilege and talk about what we didn't earn, the more open we will be to learning and listening.

The writer Lewis Hyde observed “that all pretensions to being self-made hide the reciprocal truth, that we have unpayable debts to the world around us, to our community, to our forebears, to the ancients, to nature.” When individuals are denied equity, dignity, a healthy planet, and opportunity, we all bear responsibility for that.

I am deeply worried about social and financial stratification. For example, \$3 billion of real estate changed hands in our small valley last year as food banks and social-service organizations were stretched to their limits. Our small airport is regularly packed with private jets, but local philanthropy here doesn't come close to reflecting that display of wealth and power. It's not a tenable situation, and I think most of us donors know this. We need to start engaging with people out of our comfort zone and start questioning our privilege.

Democratize giving. When the pandemic started, two astronomically wealthy locals started a fund and invited a select few to join forces. This effort had the best intentions, did a great amount of good, and got a lot of press. But many in the community felt uncomfortable as a very few were knighted for their service. It would have been wonderful if everyone in the community had been asked to participate in the fund, no matter the dollar amount. We need to encourage giving across the board.

In another example, I participated in a Zoom call with a nonprofit leader who repeatedly praised and addressed the richest celebrity donor while the rest of us stood by. I am sure the director was simply star struck. But I am paying closer attention to leadership styles because they can reflect directly on the efficacy of nonprofit stewardship. You can learn a great deal from a leader's body language, grace, and treatment of subordinates and partners. These details often reflect the health of the nonprofit. Once we grow too attached to the idea that “important” people fix problems, we discourage others from giving or exploring diverse perspectives and encourage “feudal” philanthropy.

Volunteer. I joined a board for the first time in 12 years. The organization has a diverse board and staff and is a working board. I am thrilled to be part of the

conversation and will continue to steer away from groups that tie board membership exclusively to seven-figure donations or to crisp resumes.

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By far the most rewarding thing I did during the pandemic was growing a garden for the local food bank. My family and I drove the food to the drop-off location and saw the lines and the anguish firsthand. I'd forgotten how volunteering one's time is a critical part of giving and seeing and how important it is to directly witness how a nonprofit works.

Democratize fundraising. Before the pandemic, my husband and I attended a few benefits. Stepping into a tony benefit for a good cause has often made me uncomfortable, especially when the tenor of the benefit seemed at odds with the group's mission. For example, one pre-pandemic function we attended divided the tables along "class" lines. The trustees and celebrities were sequestered in a group at the front of the podium. The rest of us radiated around them in order of importance. It resembled the protocol of a French court, not of a crusading modern nonprofit, and it was ghastly.

I am well aware that nonprofits need benefits to generate income, but isn't there a better way to get there? The pandemic revealed some of the flaws in the fundraising strategy since all events were shelved or virtual. All the attention to social inequity should deter us from going back to business as usual. Donors and grantees need to foster more inclusion in these events when they return.

Last year showed us how broken we are as a nation, as individuals, and as a planet. But now we have an opportunity to stitch ourselves back together. We don't have time for contempt or hatred or gas lighting or status worship. It's time to create a new normal.

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