

Courageous and Ethical Leadership in a Polarized World

by Grant Oliphant

The genius of movements like #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #BlackLivesMatter is that while each had its creators and drivers, who spark and tend the flame, no one has really been in charge of making it all happen. That makes such movements messy and unpredictable. But it also gives them their power to change culture.

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A N ART MUSEUM NEAR PITTSBURGH recently lost a major funder over a photography exhibit on immigration. In another era, the show's sympathetic images would have seemed poignant yet unremarkable, a typically American invitation to remember our shared otherness. But in today's context, humanizing immigrants and refugees was, for the museum, an act of courage with material consequences.

In this period when even an effort to summon our better angels can invite retribution, what does it mean for America's nonprofit sector to lead bravely and ethically? Like many of us, I have struggled with that question in a time that has felt catastrophic for so much of what we care about—a more just world, air and water we can safely breathe and drink, communities designed for everyone, civility and decency, caring across differences, human and civil rights, a free press, respect for science and art, and perhaps most of all, the sense of collective responsibility that is the core of every healthy, functioning human society. But I actually don't think the answer is all that

mysterious. We are simply being called to live our values.

Centuries ago, a Sufi mystic named Hafiz wrote a poem that I think beautifully captures the noblest mission of our sector:

*The small man builds cages
for everyone he knows,
while the sage, who has
to duck his head
when the moon is low,
keeps dropping keys
all night long
for the beautiful, rowdy
prisoners.¹*

What struck me when I read that poem afresh earlier this year is that we live in a disturbing era of small men. But it also struck me that we live in an era of hopeful liberators, and that, in an increasingly divided world, the task of courageous leaders in our sector is to be the providers of keys, to help free others and ourselves from the cages being built around us.

They are prisons of small-mindedness, meanness, and fear. They are the impulse

to wall off reality and lock us all inside the hellish confines of a warming, polluted, xenophobic, strife-torn planet. They manifest in the desire to curry favor with white supremacists, mock the suffering of those considered “different,” flirt with despotism, and sow intolerance, divisiveness, and mistrust. They appear in the facile disavowal of responsibility, even as bullying, racism, and hate crimes increase; as the climate changes, droughts and disease spread, and sea levels rise; as yet another group of innocents is gunned down with military-grade weapons; as faith in democracy and in each other withers.

It is tempting, at a time when partisanship is infecting everything, to think of these cages in purely political terms. But many are broadly cultural and deeply familiar. We see this in the small men who mistake dominance for strength and employ their power to harass, control, and abuse. We see it in the urge to believe we are only one thing—one identity, one tribe, one tiny sliver of the human experience, lonely islands of experience without common ground—rather than

connected and beautifully interwoven.

We find it in the fierce defense of a deeply unjust status quo, the refusal to consider what we ourselves do not experience—the police stops, poverty, harassment, and violence that tear away at hope. We find it in the naked greed that pontificates about what society can no longer afford—teachers, parks, libraries, health care, pensions, safety nets—while gobbling up ever greater shares of the world's riches. We find it in technology that preaches disruption and community but lines its pockets with the price of our disconnection and the cheap gift of our distraction.

And, if we are wise, we find it in the mirror, in our own anger and righteousness, indifference and arrogance, our own failure to see what is in front of us. One of the wisest and most thoughtful questions I have heard in the past two years was, “How am I this?”

It is such an important question for anyone who aspires to truly meaningful leadership in bitterly divided times. What we inevitably learn in our work is that we are all the prisoners we seek to free, and all the oppressors from whom we wish to be freed. The work of the courageous leader starts there, with a hard look at what we bring to the dance.

Hafiz wrote his poem some seven centuries ago, which tells us something about the constancy of oppression. In some ways, all of human history is the story of people striving to free themselves from the cages of inequity, of mindless conformity, of phony nostalgia for times that never were, of hatred for the different, of shrinking our dreams into a diminished reality defined by bars erected precisely to keep us from ever realizing our own true potential.

It is an old story. What makes today different is that the stakes are so much higher. We can neither afford nor tolerate this any longer. We are destroying

the planetary ecosystems that sustain us, undermining our economic future, dismantling the trust in self-government that protects and empowers us, undoing the sense of shared interests that allows us to see and speak and work with each other, and unraveling the threads of community that nurture us.

All of that sounds terribly daunting, and it is. This is a profoundly serious time. But it is emphatically not a time for despair. The role of the courageous leader is never to *find* hope in good times; it is, rather, to *give* hope in difficult times. So what does that look like? I want to offer three suggestions that I think are especially relevant for us in this polarized world.

First, it means we are willing to act in support of the people we serve and the values we cherish. When a crisis comes, we do something—rarely the perfect thing, but something. As the author Natalie Goldberg has observed, “The only difference between neurosis and wisdom is struggle.”² Courageous leaders in our field understand that the world does not need our neurotic hand-wringing. It needs our voice, and our authority; it needs us to struggle alongside it.

We may often feel like the wrong messenger. When Pittsburgh's local daily paper ran an editorial on Martin Luther King Day excusing the President's use of the phrase “s-hole countries,”³ Pittsburgh Foundation President Max King joined me in responding with an unequivocal rebuke.⁴ We were blasted by white conservatives who said two white men had no right to our perspectives, as if they would have found our views more legitimate had our skin been darker. In a case like that, it is especially important for people in positions of power and privilege to step up, to be the unlikely voice in the room.

What I have learned in the past year is that polarization is a powerful tool for

silencing and intimidating the voices of civil society. I have heard from so many leaders who have felt pressure not to speak out even though values they consider core to their missions were under attack, because the mere act of defending those values has suddenly been made political. The only advice I could give them was to speak anyway, and many have. They understood that, for our sector, silence is damning.

That's why I so profoundly disagree with those in our field who dismiss courageous speech from us as unnecessary. Equal Justice Initiative's Bryan Stevenson rightly says that truth telling must come first—including for us.⁵ It is neither self-indulgent nor tribal nor partisan to call out racism and sexism, to fight an entrenched cultural belief that the freedom of some depends on the diminishment of others, to publicly stand with the victims of oppression, or to defend science, journalism, and truth itself.

When we learn not to make our actions purely about us, about our own comfort and preservation, we make room for what the activist and writer Rebecca Solnit meant when she commented last year, “We know what we do. . . . But we don't know what we do, does.”⁶ We may not ever know the ultimate value of the actions we take when we move from bystanders to contributors. But we can be certain that all change comes from that shift.

Second, more than ever before, to be a courageous and ethical leader in our field means that we do *with*, not *for*. Hafiz's sage doesn't open the prison doors himself—he merely provides the tools. It is up to the prisoners to pick them up and liberate themselves.

Leaders who arrive as saviors strip the people they would help of power and agency. They offer a self-aggrandizing lie of external salvation, of rescue, when what all of us locked in our cages of

doubt and limitation most need is to see our own capacity to find the way out.

We never learn what doors we can open when we let others define our sense of the possible. In a recent interview for our podcast *We Can Be*, Carnegie Mellon roboticist Illah Nourbakhsh told of working in a village in Uganda where the streets were littered with unused stoves provided by a well-meaning philanthropy. Asked why the foundation had gotten the stove's design so wrong, he answered, "Because we're bigots."⁷

This, at heart, is a failure not just of philanthropy but of our culture. We think we know each other, when in fact we have stopped listening. Our sector has to be the bridge between worlds, between what we think we know and what other people really need and want. Bryan Stevenson describes this as "getting proximate."⁸ If our goal is to help or change someone, he says, we need to know them first; it is the only way we will ever open their hearts, or our own.

As it happens, this is also the first and most important rule of effective social change: we have to start by getting closer and listening and learning. This is the only way we can model moving past the dualism—the divided, us-versus-them view of humanity—that most narrows our minds and shrivels our hearts and perpetuates our pain.

Third, to be a courageous and ethical leader in an era of mind-boggling complexity means that we have to get better at sharing power. Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms describe a phenomenon they call "new power" in their book by that name.⁹ New power is the social change that comes through broad, self-organizing movements. It can be terrifying and unethical. But it can also be a powerful force for good.

The students at Parkland exemplified new power, spreading their message in every medium available and, through

networks of networks, persuading thousands of students and adults to carry their message of sane gun measures forward. Where others had felt impotent in the face of intransigent policymakers who offered only thoughts and prayers, they tapped directly into Martin Luther King's "fierce urgency of now."

The genius of their nascent movement, and of movements like #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #BlackLivesMatter, is that while each had its creators and drivers who spark and tend the flame, no one has really been in charge of making it all happen. That makes them messy and unpredictable, but it also gives them their power to change culture.

Our sector likes to believe we can control outcomes. We still live in a world of projects and logic models. But maybe we need less control and more enabling. In a changing world where we expect others to grow and evolve, that seems like an area where *we* need to do some evolving—by becoming more willing to fund those who do outreach, push for change, bravely speak truth to power, and engage people we never will.

Heinz Award-winner Angela Blanchard, who dedicated her career to social change in Houston, told me recently, "We actually do need everyone." In an era that seems intent on forgetting that and intent on dividing us, our role in the social sector—and, I believe, our sacred responsibility—is not to let it. We are called to be liberators, sages sowing a different kind of populism, one that at its heart remembers that we are all, truly and forever, in this together.

NOTES

1. Hafiz, "Dropping Keys," *The Gift*, trans. Daniel Ladinsky (New York: Penguin Compass, 1999).
2. Natalie Goldberg, *Long Quiet Highway: Waking Up in America* (New York: Bantam, 1993).

3. Editorial Board, "Reason as racism: An immigration debate gets derailed," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 15, 2018, www.post-gazette.com/opinion/editorials/2018/01/15/Reason-as-racism-An-immigration-debate-gets-derailed/stories/201801150024.

4. Grant Oliphant and Maxwell King, "Grant Oliphant and Maxwell King: We must face the realities of racism," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 18, 2018, www.post-gazette.com/opinion/2018/01/18/Grant-Oliphant-and-Maxwell-King-We-must-face-the-realities-of-racism/stories/201801180013.

5. "Inside the Memorial to Victims of Lynching," *60 Minutes* interview with Bryan Stevenson and Oprah Winfrey, April 27, 2018, www.cbsnews.com/news/inside-the-memorial-to-victims-of-lynching-60-minutes-oprah-winfrey/.

6. Rebecca Solnit, "Falling Together," *On Being*, interview by Krista Tippett, December 14, 2017, onbeing.org/programs/rebecca-solnit-falling-together-dec2017/.

7. Illah Nourbakhsh, "R2-D2, Illah & Ethics: How robotics and AI genius Illah Nourbakhsh was inspired to use his superpowers for good," interview by Grant Oliphant, *We Can Be*, Season 1, Episode 9, podcast audio, wecanbe.podbean.com/mf/web/s5qsw8/S01E08_Illah_Nourbakhsh180430_1429.mp3.

8. Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014).

9. Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms, *New Power: How Power Works in Our Hyperconnected World—and How to Make It Work for You* (New York: Doubleday, 2018).

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