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Philanthropy, Equity, and The Wizard

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This past week saw an event that was a watershed moment in the world of philanthropy and private foundations in the Los Angeles region. We engaged in a full-day conversation about equity, inequality, and inclusion in the promise of America. The catalytic development for this gathering was a “coming-out party” of sorts for the [Weingart Foundation](#), who after 60+ years of philanthropic existence, has embarked on a journey to fully commit to the matter of equity in its work.

“Equity.” Admittedly, it’s a bit of an insider term in the nonprofit world, but it is certainly what America needs, and right now. It means assuring opportunity for all, regardless of circumstance, and across the full range of America’s socioeconomic spectrum. It means leveling the opportunity playing field, with an emphasis on those who often find themselves stigmatized, marginalized or ignored for reasons that may be political, racial, or ethnic. Inequality is what we fight; equity is what we want to see. Equity assumes inclusion, sees diversity as a strength, and rejects Darwinian, zero-sum game policies and practices in favor of a vision called “prosperity for all.”

Our gathering at the Japanese-American Museum this past week was the perfect venue, as it conjured up painful memories of how Japanese-Americans overcame the racist, exclusionary politics of internment at the outbreak of the Second World War. [Darren Walker, President of the Ford Foundation](#), and [Rip Rapson, President of the Kresge Foundation](#), inspired the audience with remarks about boldness, risk, and philanthropy’s role in the Detroit “Grand Bargain” to resurrect the civic and fiscal life of that once-great city. [USC Professor Manuel Pastor](#) and [PolicyLink chief Angela Glover Blackwell](#) provided insights about how California sets the table for a national conversation that invokes a new narrative: equity and inclusion as a superior growth model for our nation’s economy.

This conversation was timely and pivotal for three reasons. First, our nation desperately needs an equity and inclusion narrative right now. This past year’s politics of exclusion, scapegoating and fear-mongering has not shown America at its best – our nation’s civic soul is torn. It’s time for a new, positive, strength-based framework to emerge. Now.

Secondly, the gathering was a reminder – and a nudge – that California is well positioned to demonstrate leadership about a more inclusive, opportunity-laden America. We are blessed with the resources, experience, civic leadership, community tenacity, and demographic mix to show our nation what a workable path looks like in the decade to come – in education, in health, in the arts, in technology, in economic development, and in civic participation.

Thirdly, the convening was an opportunity to extend an “all-in” invitation to philanthropy about Equity and the epic battle against inequality in America. The universe of private foundations in California is more or less divided into three categories: those who are already funding through an equity/inequality lens; those who are funding and supporting the work of equity in “pockets” and “silos” – but have yet to fully assert or declare their work in this frame; and, those who have not yet (for a variety of reasons) found a way to infuse an equity approach into their work.

In discussing the civic and philanthropic life of our very own Los Angeles, I cannot waste an opportunity to invoke a Hollywood film metaphor, so here it is: The Wizard of Oz. In my favorite scene from one of my very favorite films, Dorothy, The Tin Man, and The “Cowardly” Lion steadfastly seek the blessings of the so-called Great Wizard, in pursuit of their own special prize: getting home, a heart, and courage. Dorothy’s little dog Toto literally pulls the curtain on the Wizard, who ends up actually being some dude turning dials and managing fireworks from inside a booth. The film pivotally turns when the Wizard, in a show of inspiration, convinces our three protagonists that what they seek, indeed, already lies within. When he places the heart on the Tin Man’s chest, it’s a recognition of what the Tin Man has, not needs.

For philanthropy in Los Angeles, California, and around the nation, we need not wait for some great crisis, or illuminating training seminar, or new killer app, or interesting article in the Stanford Innovation Review (or a great Wizard) to prod or reward us into action. The battle against inequality, and the path towards equity – inclusion, opportunity, and prosperity – already resides within us: in the vision of philanthropic founders, in members of our boards, among our executive leaders, and our staffs. It resides in the passion we have for the work that we do, and we need not consider much more than matching the audacity and tenacity of the extraordinary leaders and grantees we support and serve. In that sense, we are merely saying, “Your fight is our fight.” Our organizational mission statements and statements of values contain the words that affirm the need for action; I suspect they don’t require editing for us to move forward.

As we witnessed from our philanthropy colleagues in Detroit, the time is now for a similarly bold “Grand Bargain” among philanthropy for our nation. The narrative of opportunity and inclusion – and those who assert it — will be on the right side of history.

Kudos to my friend and [Weingart Foundation President Fred Ali](#), [the Weingart Board of Directors](#), and their great staff for sharing a compelling message to our field. As the young people would say, it is time for us in the foundation world to “get woke.”

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