

The heroic journey of philanthropy

by JIM LORD

These times cry out for innovation in our voluntary sector. And in society as a whole, we ache for social innovation. In a world filled with both unprecedented perils and astonishing opportunities, it often seems that the future of humanity hangs in the balance.

All of us engaged in the voluntary sector are being challenged to come to terms with our own heroism, to step up and make our greatest contribution to the world around us.

Donors, volunteers, and staff alike are called to undertake a heroic journey — discovering within themselves, and in the institutions they serve, more than they ever believed was there.

You may find this idea a little grandiose. I did the first time Gordon Barnhart explained it to me. But let me try to convince you as he convinced me.

“To frame the challenge as anything less than a heroic journey,” says Gordon, “is to do a disservice to the individual — for it understates the demands being made.”

From the beginning of recorded time, as all mythologies attest, heroes have left their known worlds to venture into the unknown. They have faced trials, discovered truths, and returned home with something of value.

For many, the journey seems fraught with peril. It asks us to move from our known world, where we feel pretty sure of our ability to manage, to an unknown world, where we feel uncomfortable and unsure.

“Safety and self-preservation,” as Gordon gently puts it, “argue against the dangerous journey.”

Courage is required to set out on the journey and to see it through — usually more courage than we think we have. So we try to ignore the call to greatness and keep ourselves busy with less demanding tasks.

Carol Pearson (author of *Awakening the Heroes Within*) came to a Philanthropic Quest workshop more than 20 years ago because she wanted to understand how “fundraising” could be approached with more sensitivity. Afterward, she suggested what seems to be the opposite:

A challenge may have to be issued before we finally decide to take the risk. And in our field, it’s often the professional who issues the challenge to the philanthropist.

Whose quest is it?

While the donor fully deserves the feeling of accomplishment that goes with a great act of philanthropy, we professionals have the satisfaction of knowing that if we hadn’t been there to lay out the road, the donor might never have taken the journey.

The Philanthropic Quest is, first and foremost, the donor’s quest.

It is the donor and the volunteer who undertake the heroic journey. And it is the professional who makes the journey possible — by showing the donor how his or her fondest dreams for a better world can be realized through the institution, using the vehicle of philanthropy.

If the philanthropist is the hero, then the professional is the unassuming hero-maker. For that is the power and the leverage that we hold — to provide people with deep and enduring satisfaction, joining them in finding meaning through good works.

Vision inspires heroism

Decades ago, the image of putting a man on the moon inspired the American people to bring that impossible dream into reality.

Today, what picture of the future do your people want?

A compelling vision that's shared by those who have the power to bring the dreams into realization — in our case, our board members, donors, civic leaders, and staff — is key to making a quantum leap in the development of your institution.

It is also key to transcending resistance to fundraising.

A shared vision can create and sustain the energy to redefine your institution in the eyes of the community (or even the world). That's why it attracts people of greater stature, and financial resources of a greater magnitude, than ever before.

It's not an overnight project, but the potential payoff is well worth the time and effort it takes. The discipline of change management provides us with the necessary tools.

And no one is in a better position to bring a shared vision into existence than the professionals involved in the advancement function. (It's crucial to have the institutional infrastructure in place to deliver on an ambitious collective vision, lest disappointment follow the journey to the mountaintop.)

Because this is such a significant process, it's often useful to have an experienced facilitator who can guide the institution along this path.

If all that sounds like more than you're ready to jump into right now, let me suggest another way to move forward.

The personal journey

Leaving aside large group processes for a moment, it can be just as significant for each person — donor, board member, volunteer, staff — to have a clear and compelling personal vision of the kind of future he or she wants. Then they can consider what part the institution can play in realizing that future.

This may happen in an encounter with only one other person — or even solitude. (“What kind of world do you want?” is just one of the questions we use to facilitate these personal journeys.)

My point is that the experiences of which we speak on these pages are powerful even when they are individual, rather than collective.

For example, the person who sees himself or herself as only a “checkwriter” and doesn’t want to become personally involved can still have a deeply meaningful, even self-actualizing, experience. This person may feel more free to speak in the presence of only one other person.

Later, they may feel comfortable speaking in front of a group about their convictions and the meaning of their investment.

Accomplishing this doesn’t require a “group process” or institutional “buy-in.” It’s something you can start with the cooperation of just a small circle of other people.

You could even begin on your own initiative, as part of your own personal heroic journey. Hundreds of your colleagues have ventured out to do this with the support of The Philanthropic Quest workshop. (Just as the philanthropist has your guidance, you deserve to have your own guide along the way.)

This is what the world is calling on us to do — to see ourselves as agents of change ... to facilitate The Philanthropic Quest ... to use our unique talents and leverage to realize the incredible potential of philanthropy, and to make a better world.

How can we say no?