



INDEPENDENT SECTOR
A vital voice for us all

Remarks when Accepting The John W. Gardner Leadership Award

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John W. Gardner Leadership Award Dinner
Independent Sector Annual Conference
Los Angeles
October 22, 2007

Thank you for this generous tribute. It belongs as well to my colleagues on the Ford board and staff who have shared the foundation's leadership with me.

But tonight we should also pay tribute to democratic principles and their protection by women and men around the world. In part, our achievements spring from the freedom we have to strive and advocate for each other. John Gardner knew that freedom and civic activism matter. The award in his name rests on that powerful truth.

Not long ago, I had two opportunities at archeological sites to think about social connection and activism. The first occurred in Sterkfontein, South Africa. I viewed, deep in a cave, embedded in hard earth, a perfectly preserved ancient skeleton of a young man. Experts believe he fell through a concealed hole in the ground and died alone, three or four million years ago. I will never, ever forget his small injured skeleton, in a fetal position, and my sense of his suffering and fatal loneliness.

Recently, I visited the Southern Rift Valley in Olorgesailie, a site famous for its landscape littered with hundreds of early human rock tools, called hand-axes. The axes seem to have been deposited in heaps near where they would be used but not where the early human lived. The hunters using them appear to have agreed that this location was a safe place for cleaning and storing the heavy tools and avoiding having to carry them home. Contrast this sign of cooperation with the image of the mortally injured boy dying painfully, alone in the dark bottom of the cave.

Today, we have new opportunities to come together and create community and safety on a wide scale. For example, we now know that for the first time in history, human activity is significantly affecting our environment, rather than the other way around. We have a chance to devise strategies to avoid environmental destruction.

But will we find leaders who ensure not only survival but also broad scale well-being? We need them in government, business and, very importantly, the Independent Sector.

Some of us here tonight grew up in the United States in a period of social idealism – idealism about fairness and opportunity. We were inspired by leaders who were social prophets. Their idealism became our personal north star. I hope we can begin to help more of our civic leaders discover those north stars today.

I see three particular challenges I hope our sector's leaders will address.

First, we must ensure that economic opportunity is open to all in societies around the world. In the next decade, the majority of the world's population will, for the first time, live in cities. Huge urban conglomerations already exist. Beyond their delights, they include vast, miserable and dangerous slum areas. Unless we generate far greater earning and living opportunities than our economies now provide, tragedy is surely in store.

In the United States, we already see growing proportions of our working-age populations in low-reward jobs. Our social compact teaches that if you play by the rules and work hard, you can get into the middle class, pay for college, health care and have a reasonable retirement. If we tolerate the growing concentrations of compound disadvantage, we make a dangerous mockery of that notion.

We must remember that huge advances in national well-being occurred not only when our economy expanded. They also came when the United States made ambitious investments in people and public moral standards. Think of the Homestead Act of 1862, signed by Abraham Lincoln; the GI Bill, signed by Franklin Roosevelt; the Federal Home Mortgage Program, giving a new generation of homeowner's a stake in their communities and a long-term financial asset. Recall the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which Wade Henderson reminded us was an Eisenhower innovation and the Civil Rights act of 1964, the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 and other such sweeping laws that helped tear down unjust advantage systems, opening access to the mainstream.

Now is the time to consider dramatic public investments that will have significant intergenerational skill-building payoffs. Over the last decades, people in this room have incubated ideas on which new ambitious and generation-boosting investments could be based. For example, Ford and other foundations' grantees have tested children's savings accounts, individual development accounts, college accounts, life-long learning accounts. These programs could be knit together into a national system of publicly and privately supported, individually earned Asset Accounts. They could have dramatic effects on aspiration and opportunity in disadvantaged communities. That is the first challenge I see before us.

A second and closely related challenge is to show the ways that our organizations support the worth and dignity of every human being. We can ensure that differences based on gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, disability, religion, geography or other qualities do not marginalize "the other."

But inclusiveness is something too few of our organizations are very creative about. Think of all the debate and writing about so-called "new philanthropy" or the "buzz" about new combinations of nonprofit and business efforts. We have far less dialogue and buzz

regarding inclusion. Leaders in our sector need to show that we know how to make an asset of our many differences.

In the United States, this means intentionally including marginalized groups in our hiring pools, our boards and decision-making bodies. It means examining what may be out-of-date concepts of qualifications. It involves seeing that formerly under-represented people are welcomed and effective where they can earn and learn.

I believe we still need affirmative action. For one thing, we have clear evidence of prejudice from paired studies of black and white job applicants, health care and housing seekers. So declaring that we want to be a “colorblind” society doesn’t get us there. We have to take differences into account to ensure equal opportunity. And when we do so, we must embrace our full diversity. Bishop Tutu has said it so well: “We can’t pick and choose for justice.”

Affirmative action is such a modest measure when compared to the power of accepted advantage systems. We need to reveal how many among us have had crucial advantages that people don’t often count – people who say: “I made it up the hard way; why can’t everyone else?” Often that person does not see what helped along the way – being in a poor family but one with a long tradition of work and learning; a school teacher or relative who reached out and rescued a young person in a dysfunctional family or neighborhood; or a family member who could loan money at a key moment.

The truth about advantage is complex. It is not just about being rich. We have to help people see and extend to others the many kinds of support and opportunity that make a difference.

The third challenge I see is ensuring that our sector’s organizations are effective and accountable. Our sector is making progress, particularly in standard-setting. Civil society organizations in many states have now framed standards of proper governance and operation. In the last year, the IS’s panel has pulled together common elements in these various systems and has admirable plans to promote the core principles.

But, will we vigorously promote our various standards? We need to make them so widely understood and part of the public’s understanding that everyone feels pressure to meet them. We can’t do this on the cheap. I hope each person here tonight will make a significant contribution to this public education effort – in time and money.

In that connection, I have to say that I am disappointed by the lack of a broad commitment to our field’s common good. For example, too few foundations support research and analysis about philanthropy. We should all work together to support creation of accurate data on our field. We need to ensure that it is disaggregated in ways that make it useful for policy makers. Part of our difficulty in the legislative arena stems from lousy data that suggests damaging norms and benchmarks.

The same is true for the broader independent sector. We need to know about the diversity of our field’s top ranks and talent pipeline. Are poor people really served by charities set up

for that purpose? We should be asking ourselves these questions, not waiting for our regulators to do so.

We will be better off if we band together and generate sophisticated research that helps us define and reform our field. To put it simply, if we don't take ourselves seriously, why should anyone else?

Finally, as we put standards to work, we need to be willing to critique and repair organizations that fall short. Let's not gossip about them, let's engage with them. And we have a corresponding obligation to support those who are unfairly criticized, not just feel relieved that someone else is in the cross-hairs. The Council on Foundations and the IS have done a very good job in this respect in recent years, citing missteps and chastising bullies.

John Gardner expected us to aim high. Let us not disappoint him. Let us not leave people behind. Let us beseech our country to invest in dramatic generation-boosting opportunity programs that are earned by striving. Let us also keep difference and equality in the forefront. And let us take our sector seriously.

I feel proud to have the honor you have given me tonight. I leave the presidency of Ford knowing I will miss so much of what Ford and you have given me.

I had a chance to lead an idealistic institution dedicated to equity, justice, free expression, good governance, excellence and creativity. It has been fun and deeply satisfying. And I am proud that with many of you in this room, I have defended Ford and other institutions so we can continue to freely support courageous people and their organizations around the world.

Thank you.