



INDEPENDENT SECTOR
A vital voice for us all

What Do We Stand For?

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I. INTRODUCTION: DIFFERENT MISSIONS, SHARED PURPOSE

Thank you, Bill. It has been my good fortune, and the organization's, to have you as our chair the past three years. With your steady and skilled engagement, Independent Sector has gone from strength to strength. The charitable community is fortunate to count you among our leaders.

Thank you also to Lew and your committee, who have contributed so much to the rich program all of us are about to enjoy.

We are thrilled to be in Los Angeles, and I want to recognize Paula, Gary, and the rest of the Host Committee, since many of the records you just heard about were set because of their amazing work.

One of their most exciting achievements I see as I stand here. They have made it possible for more than 125 leaders from smaller, local organizations to attend this conference.

Could each of you please raise your hand?

A warm welcome! You bring perspectives and knowledge that will help build the nonprofit community's ever-expanding network of ideas and programs. As leaders who know your communities so well, you are an invaluable resource, and we are delighted that you are here.

Looking out at all of you gathered here today, I am reminded of the breadth and diversity of the community we reflect.

In front of me, I see CASA, providing advocates for over 225,000 abused and neglected children throughout this country.

I see the Hawaii Community Foundation, investing in and working with people across the islands to enrich their lives.

There is Interaction, a coalition of U.S. NGOs shining the bright light of hope into the darkest corners of the world.

And Khmer Girls in Action just down the road in Long Beach, building leadership and strength among Southeast Asian girls and women.

They are but four of the 1.4 million charities, foundations, and corporate giving programs that make up our nonprofit community – each and every one focusing on a different mission, with purpose and passion.

And some may wonder:

What do we really have in common?

Beyond our tax status, what unites us?

What we share is a commitment to building stronger communities, to enhancing the environment in which we live, to enriching and empowering the people we serve. The spectrum of our work runs from filling the most elemental human needs to creating the conditions that inspire the greatest advancements in science, poetry, literature, and knowledge.

Our work is about fairness, opportunity, creativity, and meaning – and in performing that work, we discover meaning for ourselves.

If I asked each of you why you get up every day and go to work, very few of you would say, “It’s just my job.” Or, “I do this for the paycheck.”

More than most jobs, what we do defines us.

More than ever, what we do collectively defines America.

To create the America – the world – we want, we must recognize that though we call ourselves the independent sector, our work is truly *interdependent*. For any of us to fulfill our own defining mission, and thereby serve society, we need others within our nonprofit community fulfilling theirs. For all of us to achieve these goals, we need responsive, effective government and a responsible, prosperous private sector.

None of us is an island, nor can we succeed if we persist in that belief.

I stand before you today to argue against parochialism, against a form of specialization that disconnects us one from the other. To serve our missions, to serve the world, we must serve one another.

II. THE SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM

Growing up in Africa, during family trips to the game reserve I saw a little bird called an oxpecker perched atop buffalos, zebras, and giraffes. It was quite a sight, the tiny red-beaked birds fearlessly pecking away on the backs, and around the mouths, of massive animals. As a child, I wondered why these wild creatures tolerated the constant pecking. My dad explained that the oxpecker helped their hosts by feeding on the ticks. Further, from atop their chosen animal, they were able to spot predators and raise the alarm. My dad told me this mutually beneficial relationship was called symbiosis, and that in this symbiotic relationship, one animal hosted an anti-parasitic ally and an early warning system of potential danger. The other, a little bird, had a safe perch and the food it needed.

Of course, the buffalo and oxpecker both depend on more than one another to survive. They and their fellow inhabitants of the savanna require water, food, a habitable climate, and protection from poachers and hunters.

This system of mutually beneficial co-existence offers lessons for how we work. Today our collaborations tend to be with like-minded organizations. We learn from those focused on a similar area of endeavor, pooling resources and shaping strategies together.

That is not the same, however, as the benefit that can result from organizations whose purposes and programs are substantially different from our own, but whose work—directly *and* indirectly—enables us to better achieve our own purposes. I believe that for each of our organizations to be truly effective, we need to contribute more to, and receive more from, the work of others, including in ways we may not have considered. To be truly effective, in other words, we must think differently about our roles in both the nonprofit community and in our broader communities.

Imagine if, tomorrow, one of our organizations or grantees discovers a cure for AIDS. That would mean for a five-year-old living in Swaziland thought to have a death sentence, a chance to live. However, if the only investment made in that child was a cure for HIV, what kind of life would she have? Would there be a school for her to attend? Are there books and pencils for her to use? Will she have clean water to drink or healthy food to eat? Later on, will there be a job for her and will her government protect her? As essential a step as the cure for AIDS would be, it would still be but a first step, just a first link in a chain of conditions and opportunities, each connected to one another and each vital for her to grow and thrive. *Saving a life, as great an accomplishment as it is, is not the same as securing a future.*

That is true not only for the child across the world; it is also true for the child across town. For how much good is an after-school arts program to a young boy in Los Angeles if he does not feel safe enough to walk there? How can he take advantage of a sports program if he is ill or malnourished? Where does he nurture a love of reading if the library is out of reach, or its shelves are bare? What does he miss if there are no parks and playgrounds?

A healthy youth, a successful life, a thriving community: Countless inputs and influences work in synchronicity to make these things possible. Each input provided by a different organization – each of you adding your distinctive contributions, that, when fashioned together, provide the richness that a full life requires. Each of you opening someone’s eyes to the experiences that often fulfill the hopes and ignite the passions that last – and define – a lifetime.

Unlike the oxpecker and the buffalo, our symbiotic relationships are not hard-wired into our biology. Our collaborative efforts are not a result of a Darwinian imperative of mutual coexistence in order to survive.

Instead, they are the result of choices we make. If we choose wisely, we create a climate that helps both ourselves and other organizations succeed. Charities and foundations together contribute to the environment that deepens the meaning of our individual work, and magnifies the impact of each other’s efforts. *That is why I call us a social ecosystem.*

III. WE MUST STRENGTHEN OUR ECOSYSTEM

A thriving social ecosystem begins – and I want to emphasize, “*begins*” -- with every contributor filling its niche and doing so to great effect.

Our businesses go under if they fail to meet their goals; our governments (mostly) are voted out of office when they do not succeed.

What happens to our organizations when we fail to meet our goals? In some senses it may be worse than failure, because our community does not enjoy unlimited resources. When we fail to meet our goals, we may also be drawing away the funding and talent and time that would allow another organization to achieve theirs. Noble intent is not enough – we are responsible for working effectively, for producing tangible results that make a concrete difference in the world.

In the last few years, we have taken bold actions that address *how* we do our work. We have examined how our organizations are governed in order to improve our practices and maintain the public trust on which we so depend. *The Principles for Good Governance and Ethical Practice* that we worked together to create, and that were given to you today, are part of this commitment.

Ensuring the highest level of ethical conduct for our organizations, vital as that is, is only the beginning. Equally important is *how we work together* to create the environment that allows all of us to make an even greater difference.

Committing ourselves to an agenda that encompasses a larger habitat may call for working in a new way: adjusting priorities, refocusing some of your communications, and even altering a few program activities. Working beyond your zone of familiarity may not be something that you welcome, particularly if you feel burdened by the immediacy of your work, the pressure we all feel to place urgent needs ahead of a broader vision. You may be thinking, “Important as it is, while I might agree with

you in principle, I can't afford the time to engage in these wider community efforts. My board won't understand why we need to do this. Surely there are others who have the time and resources to worry about the larger issues."

And yet this need to attend to the greater good – and the challenges inherent in doing so – has been documented since the time of antiquity.

It was Aristotle who observed

"...that which is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it. Every one thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest; and only when he is himself concerned as an individual. For besides other considerations, everybody is more inclined to neglect the duty which he expects another to fulfill"¹

I suggest to you that we must participate more deliberately and actively in the larger environment in which we do our work. Failing to do so compromises our efforts to create the opportunities we agree should belong to everyone.

We are, collectively, one of this country's, and the world's, most powerful forces for progress, for change. We will only realize that full strength, however, if we are not fragmented, isolated, or parochial.

IV. ONE PART OF A LARGER ECOSYSTEM THAT INCLUDES BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT

As we shape our own social ecosystem, we are also part of a landscape of other ecosystems – those of business and government.

Nonprofits, business, government– these are the three pillars on which American society stands.

And while declining faith in government, and in business too, may seem removed from our immediate work, it should concern us greatly that those pillars are not as strong as they can—and must—be.

We look to business and government to create opportunities and meet their responsibilities, and in so doing, complement and amplify our efforts.

Our work is easier when the economy is strong and decent jobs are available to those who need them. An effective, responsible, and compassionate government facilitates our achievements.

¹ Aristotle (384 B.C.-322 B.C.), *Politics*, Book II, Chapter III, 1261b; translated by [Benjamin Jowett](#) as [The Politics of Aristotle: Translated into English with Introduction, Marginal Analysis, Essays, Notes and Indices](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), Vol. 1 of 2

Government's essential value is enhanced by its collaboration with business and the nonprofit sector – weaving together strands of the social safety net, educating and enriching our communities, creating opportunities, protecting individuals and our *natural* ecosystem, and strengthening the structures and bonds that hold the elements of our society together.

Government and business also benefit from active engagement with the nonprofit community. Our organizations pair with government to provide services to the most vulnerable members of society. We partner with business to provide relief when natural disasters strike. Along with government and business, we conduct research that offers hope to millions around the globe, and enlightens us all. Our support for creative expression inspires in countless ways—as I am sure our resident Angelenos will attest.

While everyone agrees that government, business, and the nonprofit community all have major roles in society, there is less agreement about what those roles should be. Unlike the oxpecker and the buffalo – where each has a distinct, unchanging role – our parts are less clearly defined.

Expectations for government are shaped also by the public's perception of what it wants and expects from its civic bodies. Even after more than 200 years, Americans have not quite decided how much government they want and what the responsibility of the individual is in our society. Nor have they decided what services should be provided by the public sector and what properly belongs in the domain of the private or nonprofit sector.

Today, those issues are exacerbated by the view held by the majority of Americans that government is simply not up to most tasks. It has become fashionable to dismiss government, to continue the reasoning that President Reagan laid out in his first inaugural address: “Government is not a solution to our problem, government is the problem.”

We know otherwise. Notwithstanding many flaws in our political system, it is also true that our national, state, and local governments offer services admired around the world: public health and safety projects, a national highway system, some of the best public universities, breathtaking parks and museums.

Attacking government neither solves problems nor helps communities. It weakens government and discourages good people from entering public service. What *will* improve government is working together to hold government accountable where there are failures, writing a better story about government where there are successes, and engaging with government to set our national priorities together.

The solution is not to raise our reputations by stepping on government. Hold them accountable--yes--but also direct our energies toward building a sturdier partnership and advocating for smarter policies and stronger priorities.

I was recently reminded of the power of such partnerships when I met a remarkable entrepreneur by the name of Ron Sher. After years of profitably developing shopping centers, Ron decided that it was possible to both make money and improve community life through what urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg has called “third places” – gathering spaces outside the home and the workplace that foster broader, deeper, and more creative interaction.

At one shopping center, near his hometown of Seattle, Ron got to work. He brought in trees, created small gardens, and added sculptures. He mixed in an independent half-price bookstore, a public library, and a branch of the local City Hall. He invited an arts center run by the Children's Museum to set up shop, arranged a series of events open to the public, and built a large chessboard for people to match wits, all while successfully renting out commercial space to national chains and local businesses. He even managed to get a police precinct to move in. And he made a profit.

Ron described his views this way: “I am not talking of the ‘state-centered’ democracy that we most often think of, but rather the society-centered democracy. Placemaking creates livable cities with safe, civil Third Places where democracy happens, can be learned, and modeled. The question is how we are going to have a sustainable world where the quality of people's lives is improved and where people have greater joy, greater meaning, and are more considerate of one another.”²

Ron’s work demonstrates how one person’s belief in the value of harnessing the distinctive contributions of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors can create a better community. How much more powerful the change we would bring to our communities if charities and foundations harnessed some resources from **all** nonprofits and civic institutions and helped cultivate our common space.

V. CONCLUSION

Combining a commitment to the particular and the general, the parochial and the public, was brought into sharp focus for me last month when I received a call from *The New York Times*. The reporter asked me about the ads the American Cancer Society had begun running in major newspapers, calling for universal health insurance. He asked why the ACS might focus on such a broad issue when their purpose was to eliminate cancer as a major health problem.

The tone of the question indicated that the reporter expected me to disavow efforts like this one.

Instead, I said that to my way of thinking, there was a clear link: For the American Cancer Society to achieve its mission, more people required better health care, preventive care, long before cancer was detected. Preventive care is simply not an option for the near 50 million people without health insurance. It made sense for

² Ron Sher, Welcoming Remarks to the PPS-Project for Public Spaces, reported in March 2005 newsletter

the American Cancer Society to call for universal health care coverage as part of its mission.

I applaud the American Cancer Society's leader, John Seffrin, for his boldness, his recognition that the its success hinges on embracing action that would benefit its work, but would also redound to strengthen other parts of our nonprofit community and, with it, the American people.

John, lest you think your work is complete, I challenge you to go further. For universal health insurance to be even an option, our government has to have sufficient resources and a budget that works. To have a budget that works, the American Cancer Society – and everyone else – will need to be engaged in the debates about adequate funding, priorities, and budget allocations. We dare not, in the words of Aristotle, “Neglect the duty which we expect another to fulfill.”

John Seffrin's work suggests a vital way we can pave a better path, create a more effective outcome. It begins by defining our own work by moving beyond the parochial and engaging with the issues and organizations that extend past our more traditional partnerships. It recognizes that we are part of a larger chain of events that affect our work, and that those events can, in turn, be shaped and changed. It represents the difference between a narrow focus on what is right before you, and a vision of the horizon that lies ahead.

Put another way, the virtuous cycle I've discussed today – a cycle in which each part of our sector bolsters the others, who then further strengthen society -- depends on our being flexible, generous organizations, working together to build a stronger sector that will help to build a stronger social ecosystem and, as a result, a stronger society.

I know that in your day-to-day work, you are faced with the urgent need to serve your mission – the people and organizations who depend on you. There are abused and neglected children who need you to give them voice. There are neighborhoods crying out for the community centers you build, and there are millions around the globe, steeped in poverty, turning to you to provide a bright ray of hope where before there was not even a flicker. The list – like our work – is endless.

So please know that when you devote work to strengthening our ecosystem, you are not abandoning those who depend on you. In actuality, by serving one another, we **are** serving our individual missions all the more effectively—all while improving lives the world over.

After all, saving or changing a life means securing a future. And that is a goal we can only achieve together.

Thank you.