

Nonprofit

NOTE BOOK

Field Notes on the Social Sector

Melissa Mendes Campos

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Melissa Mendes Campos

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*To Mark, thank you for putting
up with so many first drafts.*

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*“The standard personality type for
a writer is a shy megalomaniac.”*

—John Lanchester

Author’s Preface

DOES THE WORLD REALLY NEED another blog post...about anything? Probably not, but in 2019–20, I went ahead and took to the keyboard anyway to share my thoughts about how nonprofits could and should (ah, there’s that writer’s megalomania rearing its head) play a role in the context of key issues of the day.

You see, having spent the better part of my career in the nonprofit sector—as a program staff, grants manager, and consultant—I’d developed *opinions*. And as a researcher at heart, it’s always been easy for me to find voices more informed than mine to help make a case. So, this book is a compilation of five blog posts written at the intersection of current events, external sources, and my own presumptuous musings.

Nonprofits and philanthropy—comprising the “third sector” (the first two being government and business)—have always struggled with being an afterthought, a channel for distributing “charity” and good works... *nice* but not *necessary*. And the sector is often hardest on itself, so my intent hasn’t been to pile on criticism. Rather, it is to share my hope and belief in all that it CAN do if it decides to transcend expectations and take a lead role in pulling this world out of the dumpster fire that is: gaping material inequity, the death of democracy, and irreversible climate crisis.

No big deal.

Nonprofits and HUNGER

1

HERE COMES GIVING TUESDAY AND countless year-end campaigns reminding us that it's a season for sharing. The hope is that these messages remind us that sharing is indeed caring and if we have a little extra to give there's plenty of people who could sure use it. And while there's no shortage of worthy causes, we can easily start with the basics: according to Feeding America, 1 in 7 Americans relies on a local food bank to eat.¹

Meanwhile, as the administration continues to undermine food stamp programs, proposing cuts that would reduce or exclude vital benefits for millions,² many of the food banks and pantry programs struggling to pick up the slack are small to midsize, local affairs that rely largely on volunteers. Yet some have also observed that hunger organizations are themselves playing into the problem by eschewing policy advocacy³ addressing root causes (such as supporting legislation to increase the minimum wage) for fear of alienating business sector board members.

Herein lies the rub: nonprofits exist within the systems that perpetuate the harm it is their mission to remedy. Scratch the surface of a values statement, and how far are organizations willing to go, how much are they willing to risk, to demand real change—or “be the change” they seek?

For example, back to the issue of minimum wage, many nonprofits participated in handwringing about what new Department of Labor

overtime rules⁴ would do to their business models, some arguments pitting employee pay against client needs. While that storm has since calmed and the sky has not fallen, nonprofit pay continues to be problematic on numerous levels. From wage gaps by gender⁵ and leadership gaps by race⁶ to overall low rates of compensation,⁷ the sector clearly has some work to do.

Working as an independent contractor in the sector, I can't afford to purchase the nonprofit compensation and salary reports to see just how close nonprofits' front line staff are to lining up at their own community food banks. But many struggle to make ends meet and are hungry not only for a living wage but for professional development and advancement opportunities.

As nonprofits gear up for the holiday giving season and set the proverbial table to share with their clients and communities, it is important to also consider whether employees have a seat at the table and to ensure that everybody eats.

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Nonprofits and ART

2

“WHAT IS ART?” IS A classic rhetorical headscratcher. “What is art in the nonprofit world?” is no less tricky a question. In the context of “public charities” and the tax status that comes with that definition, is art a basic need? A luxury? A human right?

Our biases and beliefs about the place of art and its worthiness of support among the hierarchy of needs addressed by nonprofits are complicated and sometimes contradictory. If art is a sublime form of human expression, it must be nurtured and preserved. If art is in the experience of the beholder, it is subjective, which can skew decisions about what art receives support. If art is cultural commentary or artifact, who does it represent, who does it exclude, and can it bring us together?

Art straddles two worlds: it is a commercial industry contributing some \$763.6 billion to the U.S. economy¹ yet it is priceless for its “public good” in enriching education and youth development, preserving cultural identities and traditions, enabling therapeutic healing from trauma, nurturing vibrant communities, and more. In some contexts, it smacks not only of capitalism but colonialism. In others, it belongs to all of us.

Nonprofit arts organizations are on the front lines of change to reclaim art from exploitative traditions that have rendered invisible artists of color, women, LGBTQ+ and other culture keepers. Throwing open the doors of our museums, concert halls, and the philanthropies that support them is not only a moral and cultural imperative but an

economic and existential one. Arts organizations will not survive if they cannot prove their relevance² to diverse communities (not just “audiences,” but participants).

This is forcing arts organizations to get creative. Success will require not mere tinkering around the edges with “outreach” to “diversify” audiences; it will take reaching inward to make changes in leadership, curation, and programming. It will require power sharing. And it’s going to feel risky. But it’s also going to be exciting—and beautiful.

Countless books and articles have drawn the comparison between nonprofit leadership and jazz music, noting that navigating adaptive change requires well-developed improvisational skills. But it’s important to recognize that it’s not a solo act; this kind of leadership takes knowing how to step forward and step back. For many leaders and organizations this takes courage.

If you haven’t yet watched the documentary *Blue Note: Beyond the Notes*,³ do yourself a favor and check it out. There’s an extended scene in the studio with Herbie Hancock and the Blue Note All-Stars where Kendrick Scott shares with the camera: “Being in a band with Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter...I’m looking to them but they’re waiting for me to do something. They want to see what you have to offer. This is very important. Everybody has a voice. You have to be courageous.”

In interviews, Hancock credits bandmate and mentor Miles Davis with teaching him that same brand of leadership and speculates that it was passed down in Davis’ own jazz lineage: “He never told us what to play. He was just the opposite; he wanted to hear us do what we wanted.”⁴ Hancock also keeps an eye to the future, expressing keen interest in learning from the next generation: “I have ideas I’ve come up with and share those with musicians of today...I am also inspired deeply by them. They don’t know that, even though I tell them. They go ‘Yeah, but no! You’re the one that’s inspiring us.’ Really I’m learning all the time from them.”⁵

Imagine if our arts (and other) organizations could be as brave to share leadership and take risks to get to what Hancock calls “that rawness, that newness, that courage and compassion” that “puts us all on the road to being better human beings.”⁶ How courageous is your nonprofit willing to be? Can you hear the music?

Nonprofits and HEART

3

“LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED.”

Sounds simple enough, but is it true? I think it’s more like love is the baseline. Without it, not much else has meaning. With it, we can do anything.

What does love mean for nonprofits? In translations from the Greek, *agape* is translated as “charity” equally as often as “love,” indicating how closely aligned altruism—or service to others—is to loving. As problematic as it can be to call nonprofit work charity (a beautiful concept that’s become pejorative in a society bound to the delusion of bootstrap individualism), we should be proud to be doing the work of love...the work of the heart.

In their 2019 brown paper, *Measuring Love*,¹ authors Shiree Teng and Sammy Nuñez challenge the social sector to look love in the eye and hold ourselves accountable for demonstrating how love makes a difference for the most marginalized. They ask, “Are we loving bravely enough?” and center Martin Luther King Jr.’s timeless observation of the necessary combination of love and power:

“Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

In a similar way, charity without love is little more than a tax dodge. We see this in the criminal example of the Trump Foundation and in the indefensibly lazy phenomenon of tens of billions of dollars² languishing in Donor Advised Funds at for-profit brokerages instead of being put to work for the community.

Love is the essential ingredient. Because love is transformative. As movement work takes center stage at the intersection of populism and protest characterizing the late 2010s and marching with us into the new decade, we are learning (or relearning) about making a place for love in our work. If the modern nonprofit sector was born in early 1900s progressivism, it came of age in the passion of the Civil Rights Era, before becoming professionalized in the 80s and 90s. It is perhaps now finding its way back to passion—or a deeper compassion.

Teng and Nuñez—along with adrienne maree brown,³ Brené Brown,⁴ and others—are inviting us, beckoning to us, to put love at the center. Unabashedly. To make space for emotion and heart connection. To invest in relational work as core to our work, not a distraction from it. What was once dismissed as “touchy-feely” must be given a place of prominence. After all, touching others’ lives is the whole point!

But just as love must be coupled with power, love must also be tough. The threats and injustices we are facing compel us to bring a fierce love to the work. This is no time for the faint-of-heart. This is a time of courage (from the French *cour*—literally, “heart”).

Nonprofit Quarterly’s year-end editorials “Taking Responsibility for our Collective Future”⁵ and “Let’s Talk about What to Do”⁶ lay out for the social sector some of the ways we must take heart—and then take action. As part of this, the ways we communicate must change, as described by Alice Sachrajda and Lena Baumgartner in *More Than Words*,⁷ a study on values-based strategic communications for social change that cogently lifts up the need for emotional connection to change hearts before minds.

Finally, if change comes from the heart—from within—we may well ask how often we get at the “heart” of things in our own organizations. Are we allowing, even encouraging, the space for real authenticity, vulnerability, emotion, and connection? And do we have the courage to make this our sector’s strength?

Nonprofits and DEMOCRACY

4

DEMOCRACY WILL NOT BE TAKEN for granted.

Despite intensifying offenses against our democratic values, norms, and structures,¹ democracy is not “dead.” Nor is it merely “in flux,” as though it were a cultural curiosity to be passively observed. Yes, our democracy is being undermined in new (and not so new)² and troubling ways, but if we’re being honest, it has always fallen short of the ideal it represents. Democracy is distributed inequitably—voter suppression, the role of big money in politics, gerrymandering, and other machinations of the powerful to retain their power have seen to this. And yes, we are also seeing democracy expressed in increasingly fluid, populist forms through movements demanding immediacy on issues like climate change and racial justice, but to realize that potential we must continually challenge ourselves to not simply watch or “like” from a comfortable distance (for those of us with the privileged illusion of distance from these issues) but to meaningfully participate.

What this tells me is that our democracy is in fact at risk, AND that it is exactly this potential breakdown that creates the imperative and the opportunity for us to rebuild it for the new world of challenges we face. No longer can we take it for granted.

Nonprofits, engaged as they are in the “private pursuit of the public good,” have a unique opportunity to help us remake our democracy in three ways:

1) by ensuring we can in fact CHOOSE our democracy in free and fair elections

At its most basic, this means getting people to the polls on Election Day. Countless nonprofits engage in voter registration and mobilization efforts, a low-risk (for those concerned about lobbying restrictions) and potentially high-impact strategy. Many of these are national or state partners in Nonprofit VOTE, a consortium of more than 100 nonprofit associations and networks providing conducting nonpartisan voter participation and election activities. Whether targeted to young or other low-propensity voters, disenfranchised communities, or the public at large, the work to increase voter turnout is crucial because in our democracy, you're not guaranteed to win—the cards may even be stacked against you—but you can't win if you don't play.

However, voter mobilization is not enough when voter suppression tactics erect barriers to exercising the right to vote. Stacy Abrams' voting rights organization Fair Fight, now \$20 million strong and gearing up for 2020 in several key states, was inspired by her encounter with voter roll purges, mishandling of absentee and provisional ballots, and unannounced Election Day relocation of polling places when she ran in the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election. A relative newcomer, Fair Fight is in good company with numerous other nonprofits active on the front lines to protect our votes.

Additionally, we must be diligent about ensuring that an informed electorate makes it to the polls. We live in an age of disinformation where separating fact from fiction and policy from propaganda is vitally important and increasingly difficult. Social media and access to vast fields of digital data has proven a keen political tool that can be wielded for good or for ill. Nonprofits have stepped up their media role, and nonprofit journalism has been on the rise over the past decade,³ but if it is to help turn the tide on disinformation in the public sphere, the nonprofit media must prove wrong critics who view it as catering to a left-leaning "elite" or looking more like for-profit outlets than independent newsrooms in service of the public good and demonstrate itself to be more inclusive, incisive, and authentic than ever.

2) by helping us CHANGE our democracy through civic engagement and advocacy

A democratic government must be accountable to its people. Given the current state of our Union, that may sound quaint, even laughable, but it's at the heart of what drives countless nonprofits that advocate for change in public policy to advance the causes they champion. A crucial complement to direct services, advocacy by nonprofits helps to amplify community voices on issues that matter to their daily lives—not the least of which is protecting democracy itself by ensuring our civil rights, the most profound of which is preserving and protecting life on this planet from ecological collapse in the face of global climate change.

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This work is being carried out online, on the streets, and in the courts. While ten years ago many of us were bemoaning the state of online activism as a distraction from "real" organizing, research now suggests⁴ that online platforms have become particularly important for Black activists and other underrepresented voices to find community, reshape the cultural and political narrative, and build networks for change. We have seen hashtags translated into mass mobilizations and marches as well as online exposure amplifying demonstrations in remote communities like Standing Rock that would otherwise not be visible to many. Finally, litigation is another tool in the advocacy toolkit, as nonprofits like ACLU, Earthjustice, and Center for Biological Diversity serve as plaintiffs on our behalf in suits against federal agencies enacting harmful policies. To rebuild our democracy, every nonprofit should consider the capacity it has to use its voice to engage in advocacy—whether online or on the ground, and if not alone then in solidarity with others—to promote and preserve the public good.

3) by challenging us to CHAMPION our democracy by claiming leadership roles within it

Beyond choosing from among the same set of candidates we are fed by the political machine, beyond advocating to change policy when our representatives fail to represent, we need to take democracy into our

own hands. Ours is—ostensibly—a “representative” democracy, where rather than having an individual say in the policies that affect our lives, we elect decision makers to represent our interests. But when you look at our elected officials, they often don’t reflect the population at all. Structural barriers like the cost of mounting a campaign and needing access to “insider” social networks, etc. tend to keep the powerful in power, making governance—from our local and state to federal levels—mostly white, male, old, and upper-middle-class. That said, 2018 is viewed by many as a “historic shift” that has proven that, once on the ballot, diverse leaders can run and win.⁵ This should be considered momentum to build on.

Nonprofits like Vote Run Lead and She The People (supporting the political leadership of women and specifically women of color), Arena (preparing first-time candidates to run for office), and many more are working to challenge and change mindsets about who is a viable candidate and to unleash the potential of diverse leaders. As organizations created, led, and governed by the communities they serve, nonprofits have access to (and employ!) talented leaders deserving of being encouraged and properly resourced to step into public roles of greater responsibility and impact.

Often, the unique competitive advantage nonprofits are said to bring to the table is their neutrality: being prohibited from engaging in partisan political activities and driven by mission over profit used to make them trusted institutions. But in today’s polarized landscape, neutrality holds little value and trust is in short supply. What, then, can nonprofits do to regain the trust needed to do the work described above on behalf of our democracy?

Look inward. The social sector is at a pivotal moment calling it to examine its own relationship to white privilege and the power and wealth that are its ill-gotten gains. Calling for reflection on the influence of large donors on nonprofits, *Nonprofit Quarterly*’s Ruth McCambridge wrote, “In the end, it comes down to whose voice and definitional power are being amplified through the work done by a nonprofit.”⁶ To help rebuild our democracy for a new age, nonprofits themselves might just look at how democratic they can possibly be in representing, responding to, and engaging with “we the people” about our needs and dreams.

Nonprofits and SCIENCE

5

AS IF THE DENIAL OF climate science weren’t enough of a threat, COVID-19 has brought the war on science literally home to many in a more immediate and personal way. As those of us with the privilege of doing so¹ shelter in place, our information diet is dominated by communications that have brought complex epidemiology, virology, and immunology concepts into common parlance, even as they must share the platform with a leader who lacks the capacity for complexity and prefers to trade in alternative facts. As science continues to be politicized, we can deny—but cannot escape—that we are all relying on it for our survival.

Nonprofits’ role as both service providers and employers takes center stage in timely dialogue across the sector and calls to action to ensure that health and economic policy responses to the crisis meet the needs of communities as well as the capacity of our organizations to continue to serve them. But nonprofits’ role as messengers and champions of science is also crucial. In a recent piece on *Philanthropy.com*, Communications Network CEO Sean Gibbons urges nonprofits and foundations to use their voices to amplify those of qualified health experts in an increasingly crowded information space, citing poll results showing that public trust of nonprofits is strong relative to other sectors and sources, giving them an advantage in this endeavor.²

As seemingly straightforward as this recommendation may be, science is (as noted before) complex, challenging communications strategists to

simultaneously wield the authority of scientific data while humanizing what it means to peoples' everyday experience. A few things make this even more difficult:

- Each day, we see evidence that extreme political and religious views regard acceptance of science as a capitulation to liberalism or secularism.
- It is also clear that industry interests (and policymakers they have bought and paid for) defund, censor, and blatantly disregard science because their profits are derived from an extractive economy that science tells us is unsustainable.³
- What may be less obvious is that science poses a cognitive threat to those of us who are simply uncomfortable with uncertainty and the unknown. A 2018 report on public perceptions of science in the U.S. indicates that 69% of respondents without a high school diploma agreed with the statement “science makes our way of life change too fast”—36% of those with a bachelor’s degree concurred.⁴ In short: science is blamed for the pace of change.
- Science also has a troubled relationship to race, bearing a history of exploitation and extraction at the expense of indigenous people and people of color. Further, it mirrors other patriarchal institutions in maintaining and exacerbating gender-based and other inequities. These faults remain unresolved, as calls for the decolonization of science seek to ensure that it stops doing harm and starts doing better to serve all of us.⁵

Perhaps there is a lesson in the interplay between knowledge and belief, explored in Jonathan Safran’s book *We Are the Weather*. In arguing for plant-based diets, the author admits to a human tendency to be able to know a truth intellectually (in this case, climate change, its causes, and what can be done to curb it) and yet still not “believe” it, at least not enough to act on. In the pushback on science, whether on global warming or coronavirus, many are passionate in knowing what they believe—they just can’t believe what they know.

Does this mean embracing science is an act of faith? In a way, yes. As we’re seeing in our evolving understanding of the new virus, science does not deliver all the answers, unequivocal, on demand. Science is a process, not dogma, and the process takes time and is iterative. Yes, a result is

a result, and we need to base decisions on that—the best information we have at the time—but this doesn’t mean further probing won’t yield better data down the road. In uncertain times, it can be frustrating to hear “this is the best information we have now.”

Nonprofits are trusted in ways no other organizations are...as such, they may be best positioned to help cultivate our faith in people, in the scientists among us, and in our amazing capacity for discovery.

People want simple, and science isn’t simple. Communicating and amplifying messages about important science—science that is essential to our survival—needn’t be about dumbing it down, but about helping people better manage uncertainty, whether you want to call that developing the capacity for faith, belief, or something else.

Nonprofits are trusted in ways no other organizations are because they’re seen as being “above” profit and politics—they’re about people. As such, they may be best positioned to help cultivate our faith in people, in the scientists among us, and in our amazing capacity for discovery. We are all stressed out, feeling that we’re in a petri dish as COVID-19 plays out in our families, communities, and organizations, but we can also choose to be there in spirit with the clinicians, learning with them in real time—believing them and believing *in* them. In doing so, we are all in this together.

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NONPROFITS AND DEMOCRACY

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