

LISTENING AT THE GRASSROOTS

Reflections on 25 years of grantmaking in the world's greatest city

As I write this, in April 2003, the budget predictions at every level of government – and hence the health of the small nonprofit organizations I have learned to love – are as dire as any I can remember. I feel deep alarm, concern, and pessimism about our country, and about the interlocked fate of New York, this city that I love.

There have been frightening times before. As my father remarked dryly when I was lamenting the terrible state of democracy during the Vietnam War, “we didn’t know we were going to win World War II at the time.”

And I need to remind myself that when I was hired at the New York Foundation, in 1978, things looked pretty bleak.

It was more than a quarter-century ago that I was hired as the Executive Director of one of the country’s oldest foundations.

The New York Foundation was no youngster even then: it had been founded in 1909 with the bequest of one Jewish investment banker to another - his brother. It was an unusual thing to do: there were only 7 other foundations in existence in the entire country, and the tax laws did not yet make it an attractive use of private wealth. By the time the New York Foundation actually made grants, in 1911, it gave away \$31,000 in the first year. The city still had horsedrawn carriages and men who carried ice to your icebox. You took a ferry to New Jersey - construction of the George Washington Bridge would not start for another 20 years. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire was two years away. World War I had not yet begun. Women would not be able

to vote for another 9 years, although they had been fighting for suffrage for 63 years.

Now, in 1978, the city teetered on the brink of bankruptcy. The trustees gathered in a deeply carpeted and darkly wood-paneled room overlooking the fountain in front of the Plaza Hotel to hear the recommendation of the search committee charged with hiring a new Executive Director. Overwhelmingly white, all middle aged or more, its members had worked together for many years on the Foundation's Board. Nearly all were prosperous, nearly all were Jewish, nearly all were men. They were connected socially. They were one another's friends, bankers, personal physicians, and lawyers: they served on other boards together.

The Search Committee had reported: "We propose no specific age bracket, but we would look for a person who combined rich experience and mature judgment with the physical, mental, and emotional stamina to carry a heavy workload comfortably. Our executive should want opportunities for innovation and accomplishment, not an elder statesman's chair."

They found me.

Today, 1978 seems almost as far away as those ice trucks and horsedrawn carriages. Coffee was served to visitors in china cups. Elaborate lunches accompanied the regular quarterly meetings, the minutes of which were typed on long cream colored legal sheets and bound in tooled leather volumes. Electric typewriters had replaced manuals, and lift-off correcting tape was a great innovation, but any editing or changes to a document still meant retyping the whole document. Trustees were identified as "Mr. Falk" and "Mrs.

Straus," although by this time "Mrs. Rebecca Straus" was at least allowed her own name, no longer "Mrs. Nathan Straus." It sent a frisson through the Board when I referred to myself with the marriage-neutral "Ms. Lee." The Chairman of an early Nominating Committee could not be deterred from referring to a woman candidate as "a great girl." There was no pension plan: the Trustees simply decided what they felt would be a benevolent amount to pay ailing or retiring staff members and informed them of the decision.

There were no computers or answering machines or cell phones. When we had to make a report on how many grants we had made in some specific issue area, we read the minutes and counted. The grant tracking software was, shall we say, manual. Once an organization received a grant, it was assigned a number. That number identified the file for the organization, which would hold anything ever sent from that time forward, even if the Foundation made no further grants for 40 years. File # 6 was the sixth grant made by the Foundation, in 1911. The same number would be hand-copied onto a 3 x 5 file card: all subsequent grants would be added to that card, whether made the next year or in the next decade.

The city had just emerged from near-bankruptcy, and the Board was newly sensitive to the Foundation's importance to New York. They were concerned that the Foundation's resources had become too dispersed, as its historic concern with the rights of minorities had taken it into grantmaking as far away as rural Alabama. They proposed taking some large proportion of the grants budget - then \$1 million per year - and creating some "special project" in order to focus

and give greater impact to our grants. But there were no criteria that could help choose a subject, and tensions among the Board and between Board and staff can be detected even in the extremely polite minutes of the time.

I was hired with the understanding that I would focus our resources once again on something important in New York.

Learning To Listen

I had a lot to learn. I had fierce but abstract liberal convictions about inequity, fairness, tolerance, and justice. I was an enthusiastic New Yorker, but not a native. I read the papers, but like a spectator, not a participant. A Manhattan resident, I had been to the “other boroughs,” but not often. I knew the Lexington Avenue IRT, and a little bit about the N and the R trains. But not much. I knew nothing about finance. And I had never heard of community organizing. I had been raised in genteel circumstances and nobody I knew ever talked to an official unless it was at a social event.

I remember a Brooklyn basement, an evening meeting, with close to a hundred organized, disciplined, ordinary New Yorkers who were really indignant about something. “What do we want?” shouted the leader. “Housing!” the group responded. “When do we want it?” “Now.” They committed themselves to joint actions directed at specific public officials. They took assignments and established deadlines. I was mesmerized.

It was largely out of ignorance and uncertainty that I did what has since become an important defining characteristic of the

New York Foundation: I listened. I asked the Board for some time, and set out to get people’s advice and opinions. “What would you do if you had a million dollars to spend in New York?”

I asked all the Board members. I asked staff members at other foundations. I asked the heads of non-profit organizations. I asked public school teachers, Legal Aid lawyers, community gardeners, doctors, landmarks preservationists, City Council members.

No one really had a good answer.

It’s not surprising to me now, but it was surprising then. Surprising then because a million dollars still seemed like a lot of money. Not surprising now because one of the things I have learned in 25 years of grantmaking is that money doesn’t often solve problems.

People solve problems. Money sometimes helps people.

The distinction is important. It is your inoculation against the arrogance that is like an endemic disease in philanthropy. Remembering the difference keeps you talking about what you have supported rather than what you have done. It’s pretty common in philanthropy to hear people say “Oh yes, we started that organization.” We did not. We gave money to the people who started it.

Learning from grantees doesn’t mean using them as instruments for your education – trying out something, for example, and then deciding it didn’t work so nobody else

can get funding for something like that. It means learning to listen.

They are not the instruments: we are. It is their work, not ours.

After I got nowhere by asking for suggestions on how to spend a million dollars, I decided maybe I was asking the wrong question. So I tried asking, instead, what the New York Foundation was already good at. The answers were quite varied, but there was a distinct theme. We were good at listening to the grassroots, to parts of the city that otherwise found it hard or impossible to get a hearing from foundations.

Over the next 25 years, the Foundation would develop many new ideas and programs, change the composition of its Board and staff, experiment with more flexible and responsive kinds of funds. But everything follows from that re-emphasis on people in our city's poor and working-class neighborhoods - how you answer the phones, how you spend your time, whom you hire, what your Board needs to know, what you wear to work, whom you spend your time with, what kinds of ancillary supports you should develop.

I analyzed for the Board – remember, this was done by reading through the minutes and keeping a handwritten list, crosshatches in columns, if I remember right – how much of our money was going to what were contributions rather than grants. Giving small amounts of money to large and very important organizations consumed nearly a third of our available funds. I recommended discontinuing such gifts, and concentrating on larger grants that “require an amount of funding to which a Foundation grant would make a substantial contribution [and] can show a clear role for the Foundation's

funds.” And I recommended explicitly stating our purposes to reflect that reputation for listening to grassroots people.

A special project, conceived in an effort to solve an internal problem, would not prove to be necessary. Pragmatically arrived at, this idea of listening to the people with the problem became deeply engrained in the Foundation's culture. It meant our job was not to decide, from the 11th floor overlooking Central Park, what issue area most needed our help. It meant our job was to try to find people deeply rooted in their communities who were doing work where grants of the size we would now make would make a difference. (We used to have a cartoon on the wall at the Foundation that showed a man drowning off the end of a pier. On the pier, another man is shouting “I can't swim! Would \$10 help?”)

Help That Helps

A \$35,000 grant can begin to address a \$35,000 problem: it isn't going to solve a \$1 million problem. Quite early, we tried to make our grant equal to someone's salary, so they didn't have to spend several months of the year of our grant searching for the rest of the year's pay. Over the years, the average grant size has increased, from about \$10,000 when I arrived to more than \$45,000 as I write this. This means, of course, that salaries in the world of community organizations are still awfully low, meaning that people make great sacrifices to do this work. (One of the most frequent sacrifices is fringe benefits – a misleading term. There is nothing “fringe” about health insurance or pension benefits, but they are not the norm in the barebones budgets of community organizations. Philanthropy needs to pay

attention to that. Most of us have health and retirement benefits: far too many of our grantees don't.)

The renewed emphasis on the city's poor neighborhoods was, of course, historically consistent. The first published reports from the Foundation use terms like "slum" and "charity wards." We don't use those terms any more, but we are still focused on the same people. As a former Trustee of the Foundation remarked to me recently, "What I always liked about the Foundation is that we weren't about giving money to rich people."

We also learned that we would have to give money for longer terms than might feel comfortable. When I first joined the philanthropic world, one-year grants were the norm. But it takes time to develop a small grassroots organization: the infrastructure and experience are just not there. Emerging grassroots groups need more time than our conventional philanthropic wisdom allows. We made three-year grants. Several years ago, we realized three years was now much more the norm, but once again, it wasn't right. We extended our time limit from 3 years to 5 years, and in several cases it has made all the difference between an organization's bare survival and a program that flourishes.

In supporting a view of social change, it is not enough to find talented people who want to give back to their communities, to do good and be paid for it. Betting on people is not the same thing as supporting individuals. The honor roll of local heroes supported by the New York Foundation, during my time there, and their stories, could make a wonderful book. But the less glamorous story, and the greatest part of our work, is supporting the establishment of organizations that will last.

There are pretty predictable stages in the development of a good community organization. A person, or a group of people, sees a problem in their community. Often they work without pay, volunteering their time, dragooning others into helping. At some critical stage, they realize this is what they want to do with their lives – and they leave the paid, safe, benefit-providing employment that they have been juggling. They write proposals, some of them get grants, and they set up an office and a board of directors.

That Board of Directors is often the wrong group of people for the job. They have been doers, not overseers, and they don't always find it easy to make the transition. A good Board member at this point supports the founder but also worries about cash flow, about the future, about the laws governing employment and taxes, about where the money will come from next year, about whether the program is developing in healthy directions.

The New York Foundation has a whole program of "technical assistance," offering small grants, consultants, workshops, and training in the many different challenges that will face new groups trying to become stabilized. The most important characteristic of the program is that, like everything we do, it grew out of listening. When one group after another had trouble distinguishing between allowable and non-allowable tax-exempt activities, we sought out experts and had them do a workshop. When it was clear that everyone needs to learn how to ask individuals for money, we partnered with another foundation and brought in the phenomenally successful Grassroots Fundraising training. This in turn put us in touch with technical assistance people who were start-ups themselves – we made

early grants to some of the organizations formed specifically to provide help to community organizations, and were part of the development of that whole field.

But again, some of the most important resources proved to be our own experiences. We are often able to put a new Executive Director in touch with someone who has been at it for five years – someone who can say with far less hesitation “Don’t put your friends on your board any more,” or “Don’t hire your bookkeeper because he needs the job.”

Coming Down to Earth

Remember Antaeus, the giant in the Hercules myth. In Robert Graves’s translation, “whenever he touched the earth, his strength revived.” Hercules conquered Antaeus by holding him high off the ground and never letting him touch the earth.

Foundation staff die that way, too. You can read about community based work. But don’t think you really understand it without physically visiting it.

It is a blazingly hot summer day in the Bronx. The ground around us consists of brick, rubble, the odd plumbing fixture, broken glass, discarded garbage. It has been bulldozed level, and we are in the middle of sites slated one day for redevelopment, but now a grotesque urban prairie stretching for blocks in every direction. In the center of all this, a small girl is sitting in the heat, on a railroad tie that marks the edge of a flower bed in a community garden, started with the help of the Bronx Green-up Program of the New York Botanical Garden. I am on a site visit with the director of the project, which helps people in the neighborhoods surrounding the

Garden develop their small green oases. We are late, and the child must have been waiting for nearly an hour. The child has stayed home from a day camp trip that day because “the lady from the Garden” is going to show her how to water her tiny marigold plants. We take a watering can and trek to a leaking hydrant nearby (the other choice is to walk up several flights to her apartment). The lady from the Garden shows the girl how to water – not too hard, being sure the water gets only to the plants.

An emphasis on community empowerment also means getting your Board out of your office and into the neighborhoods. It took about a year to agree that our mission statement should reflect a renewed focus on New York’s “neighborhoods taking action for their own betterment, and population groups organizing to create a collective voice where they have not been heard.” But after all the staff reports and Board room conversations, I knew that if the Board was going to fully own the new emphasis, it was important for them to *experience* the grantees, not just to read about them. I didn’t want to have selected grantees come to our imposing offices and make polite and sanitized presentations. I wanted the Board to see what we saw when we got out on our site visits.

So, we invented the Grantee-Trustee Conference, which we have held every two years since 1980. We invite about 35 of our grantees to join the Board in visiting a project or a neighborhood, and then to spend a day and a half in close and open conversation.

It was a very radical idea at the time. I was warned that it was a bad idea to have so many grantees meet the Board in

person. Apocalyptic visions of Trustees mobbed by unbridled beggars danced beneath the surface of these warnings. Common wisdom had it that you never let your Board have unmediated experiences with grantees. Nothing I have done gives me as much pleasure as taking a group of neighborhood activists to the former home of a robber baron, and watching as recent immigrants, political agitators, Wall Street financiers, corporate lawyers, and retired businessmen meet on an equal footing and stroll through the grounds, talk, and discuss together the great city that they share. Former Trustees all speak of the conferences as important learning experiences. From them have come some of the best ideas we have implemented – small grants to help youth groups offer programs in the summer, internships in organizing for young people, technical assistance workshops. Coalitions and alliances have begun there, and personal friendships have formed. But most important, people have come to know one another.

Funding grassroots organizations demands some practices that don't fit a formal mode. The work we support is not always easily captured with guidelines and written procedures. The ability to write a convincing proposal is not necessarily a predictor of the ability to mobilize and represent poor people. Our work at the New York Foundation is constantly directed at finding ways to let people tell their story. This means making your own offices friendly and welcoming to people, not flaunting your wealth in your trappings, and having staff who reflect some of the diversity of the city we hope to serve.

I have never learned one fraction as much at professional conferences as I have learned in the streets of our cities. Meeting people on their turf is a major statement by a

foundation. It says you are not afraid, it says you are available for a direct relationship, it signals genuine interest in the grantseeker's work.

It is expensive. Even with a small staff, only two of whom are program officers, we visit any applicant whose proposal seems like a potential grant, and a program officer spends at least 3 hours in the field on each such visit. We visit every current grantee in every year of their grants. Personnel costs continue to be the largest percentage of our budget, after rent, but really they should be listed as our research and staff development expenses.

Funding the grassroots demands that you hire a particular kind of person. We have hired people with Ph.Ds and people with no college degrees. Some program officers have run organizations, some have started them. But whatever their own experience has been, program officers at the New York Foundation need to be predisposed to respect and admire community activists and neighborhood residents. They must not start with the assumption that their own experience and opinions are going to be a blessing to the grantseeker. They need to be trained to ask the right kinds of questions, to listen carefully, to draw people out so that they make their best case. They need to be advocates for programs they have visited – even if they think they would do things differently.

Humility does not come naturally to me, but work at the New York Foundation has given me such humility as I have. I learned keeping my thoughts to myself in order to hear the thoughts of people who work much harder than I ever have, who risk much more than I have ever risked, who

face lives far harder than mine, who, if you listen, will share their lives and their dreams in the most open and courageous way.

Our Real Leverage

It is extremely popular to talk about leverage in philanthropy today. Perhaps we should remember one of the more venerable statements about levers: Archimedes said in 230 BC, “Give me a long enough lever and a place to stand and I will move the world.” Where we stand is as important as our grants budgets.

It’s a pretty common lament among foundation professionals that we feel depersonalized when we realize how many people see us only as bearers of money. We should not make the same mistake. It is a mistake to limit our view of ourselves only to money we control. Money may be our most visible asset, but it is not all that a foundation can bring to bear on the ills it chooses to address. Foundations have much more than money – even small foundations. They have facilities, staff, Board members, a collective memory, experience, opinions, and access to many places of influence. Help, advice, connection to other valuable networks, suggestions and advice on approaching other funders - these are all assets that we develop as we work in the field.

We need to pay more attention to how we allocate our selves, our time, our passions, our values. Foundation people are invited to lots of interesting forums: they can be sure that the voices of people not invited are nevertheless represented there. Our individual voices, on behalf of the people we support, are

seriously underutilized resources. Our work takes us into situations where we can make a personal difference.

I joined the world of philanthropy when the young Turks and reformers were concerned that it was the plaything of wealthy individuals who gave capriciously and with no accountability. We decried the lack of clear guidelines and the virtually segregated character of Boards. We campaigned for more accessibility, more diversity, more open applications processes, and more transparency about how decisions were made. Much has changed from those days, and much is for the good.

But with the accumulated experience of 25 years, I think some of the field has now gone too far in our flight from Victorian charity. Far too much of philanthropy is concerned with distancing itself as far as possible from personal interaction, under the misleading banner of impartiality.

We can see this in the struggles of new program officers to understand and accept what appears to them to be a capricious way to make grant decisions. Most serious people coming into the grantmaking field today seem want to avoid personal bias at all cost. They devise ratings tables, criteria, screens, guidelines – all to protect themselves from the profoundly uncomfortable fact that they are making decisions that affect other people’s work and lives. Ever more specific criteria, they believe, will make things fairer. But the power imbalance is your responsibility, and it is your job to find a way to let people tell their stories. It is a mistake to shape your behavior to protect yourself against direct personal contact. Philanthropy is not a science. It

cannot pretend to develop rating scales and systems that will be “fair.” It will never be fair. You have limited staff time, limited grants dollars, and you have to ration them somehow.

Nailing down language, narrowing focus, and setting up rules ignores the most valuable asset a foundation has to offer, which is not our money, but our selves, our time, our passion, our values. At the New York Foundation, people with education, experience, and influence put themselves at the service of poor people who know what they want and need. Bridging the social chasm between rich and poor, between middle class and working class, between races, among religions, we are in fact living out the promise of democracy. We find ways for poor people to voice their indignation and outrage, their entirely legitimate aspirations, their insistence that institutions claiming to serve them in fact do so.

This sounds almost quaint.

At the heart of the desire to purge grantmaking of personal bias is a confusion between personal relationship and personal whim. Many foundation people avoid all relationships with grantees and grantseekers. There was a truism when I started in philanthropy that once you join the foundation world, “you’ve made your last real friend, you’ve had your last bad meal, and you’ve received your last sincere compliment.”

I can with confidence say that the first two are untrue. I have made too many good friends to name here, and they come from the world of grantmakers, successful and unsuccessful grant seekers, staff and Board. I have never been able to maintain that clear line between professional relationships and friendships, and I am much the richer for not having done so.

(We don’t need to dwell on the question of bad meals. There are a lot of conferences in the life of a foundation executive, and gatherings that bring hundreds or thousands of people together in the windowless ballroom of a hotel are not a pleasant dining experience.)

As to the third, about sincere compliments, I think it certainly has some truth. The imbalance of power between you and people who seek grants distorts the human interaction: you do get a lot of compliments that you know are phony. Once someone thinks you might be able to get them a grant, you become brilliant, wise, insightful, sensitive and helpful. Often, you suspect that once people are safely out of your office and in the elevator, they say “What a jerk!” or “She is really a pain!” But the fact is, they don’t often say it to you.

Arrogance – Old and New

Even when I joined philanthropy, grantseekers complained about the arrogance of people in power at foundations. The old arrogance included behavior like not making the foundation’s address public, making offhand comments to grantseekers like “We’re not interested in health care reform any more,” demanding three, four, or five revisions of a proposal, only to decline it; sending rejection letters with statements like “You should be seeking public support for this work.” It included giving jobs and board positions to friends and family. Foundation professional meetings were often closed to people actually doing the work – they were seen as “grantseekers,” and were ipso facto undesirable and threatening.

There is, unfortunately, still plenty of the old arrogance. Philanthropy remains a largely unexamined field. There is little open discourse about its members. Very rarely does any of us within the field criticize another foundation in public, and then only when it is one whose good will you are never likely to have or need. Still less do we talk about individuals. Bad behavior to grantees is legendary: foundation staff members lose proposals, lead people on, don't return phone calls, don't answer their mail; they are imperious, rude, officious; they meddle where they don't belong. There are people who are scandalously overpaid. There are people who do not work hard. We hear the stories and sigh.

In one area, philanthropy seemed to recognize its limitations. Many years ago, a group of "veteran" grantmakers assembled for a conference. (It makes me smile now to think of myself as a veteran then – I might have had all of 6 years experience.) The most startling thing to come out of the weekend was a conversation about what we looked for in hiring people. Here we were, leaders of foundations interested in all kinds of different things – mental health, reform of prisons, public education, public policy, early intervention programs to prevent child abuse, neighborhood revitalization – but there was striking agreement on one thing: in hiring new staff, we avoided people with prior foundation experience.

Over the years, there has certainly been a change in the diversity of foundation staffs, but even today, when there are meetings of large foundations about some crisis, the room can sometimes include nearly all white people and most of them men at that. Worse, and more damning for the field, when the meetings evolve into some kind of working group where daily work has to be done, they morph into an all female group.

Admittedly, this is better than when the embryonic group that was to become the New York Regional Association of Grantmakers held its meetings in a club where women had to go up a back stair case. But that's a low standard.

The new arrogance is that of people who consider themselves professionals, who act as though they believe their knowledge and experience give them the right to treat other people like instruments, or just treat them badly. It is not the old gouty robber baron saying "It's my money and I can do what I like with it." It's a newer breed – people proud of their dispassionate overview of the field, their lack of personal bias.

Bearing Witness

These are privileged jobs. Most foundation staff don't have to raise their own salaries every year. Most can safely assume that the rent will be paid. That certainty alone sets us apart from a significant portion of the human population. And as we labor to eliminate the gap between our having money and seekers not having it, a still important task, I believe, is to take the information and experience we gain of other people's lives and represent it, passionately and indignantly, in places where it is not always invited. The Quaker concept of "bearing witness" and of speaking truth should be a part of our obligation in foundation work. Some time in the 5th century BCE, Thucydides observed that "There will be justice in Athens only when the uninjured are as indignant as the injured." From unique positions of privilege, we have an obligation to become informed.

It is an early evening, and we are visiting a hotel on the West Side of Manhattan that houses welfare clients and their families. A mother and her two young children live in a single room, with a mattress on the floor, a hot plate, a table with a TV, a naked overhead light bulb, and a single plastic trash bag of clothing. From this room, the children are expected to set out for school. In this room, they are expected to play, to do homework, to get a good night's sleep and a nourishing meal. I am very conscious of being an intruder into this family's life. I am immensely touched by the mother's willingness to talk to me. I am ashamed that I have ever talked about the difficulties of being a single mother.

You have to see these things for yourself so that you can repeat them in places that need to hear them. Private foundation grants were for a long time considered the steppingstone to government funding. Foundations took risks that government couldn't take, and then government grants and contracts could support the no-longer-fledgling organization.

That has changed. The current conservative thinking attempts to relegate the non-profit sector to a purely service role, more akin to the charity of the 19th century. In a continuation of what was first called "defunding the Left," "liberals" and foundations that support them are held responsible for joblessness, teen pregnancy, drug addiction, and most of the ills of modern American life. In a grotesque application of business maxims, non-profits are urged to tighten their management, and do more with less. In my experience with over 2500 nonprofits, most of them do a lot with very little. They can't do more with less: with less, they do less.

The decisions that re-allocated tax dollars to the country's wealthiest Americans were political decisions. They have huge implications for what private philanthropy does: None of us is immune from the effects of the massive income transfers now underway.

If hospitals struggle harder with uninsured patient costs, what happens to funders who concentrate on gifts to capital campaigns? A museum will no longer receive help with operating costs. How does that affect a special exhibit, a single acquisition? State tuition rises, and tuition aid is cut. How does that affect the supply of musicians for a symphony? Or the workforce we need in the future?

Welfare grants and food stamps are cut. How does that affect education? How do failing schools affect our streets, our work force, our jails? How does our prison budget affect how much we have available to repair our schools? Maintain our parks? Educate our children? Feed our elderly?

The New York Foundation's decision has been to fund people to speak for themselves. We do not ignore the needs of poor people, but we recognize that there is no way we can meet those. And so we chose to focus on grantmaking that would widen the debate. Our support of community organizing and advocacy in poor communities is often described as radical: I think it's conservative. It affirms democracy and says that what is wrong is not something wrong with people, or with certain kinds of people. It says that what is wrong is that not enough voices are being heard.

The greatest threat right now is to democracy itself – America’s most precious gift to the modern world. Among all the victims of the present political situation, I worry most about the fate of democracy. What happens when people stop voting because they have given up hope that any level of government cares about their concerns? Who despairs, who gives up, who is not counted – these are the questions the New York Foundation holds in its mind as it makes decisions about grants.

Here’s a story for you. The government is considering a major policy change – let’s say, universal health insurance. All around the state, citizens are invited to meetings to hear about the proposal, and to discuss their reactions. When they have questions about the facts, they are told where they can get the information. They decide on their preferences and recommendations and invite their senators and their Congressional representatives to meet their constituents to hear what the people think. At those meetings, something resembling conversation occurs. Someone asks a question, the representative answers, and the questioner is allowed to say, “But wait, you didn’t answer my question” or “Our research indicates that your facts are wrong.” No photo ops are allowed. Follow-up questions are encouraged.

Why is this only a story?

The work of the New York Foundation tries to support some of the characters who belong in this story, the people who do the work helping immigrants and refugees from places as diverse as Tibet, Roumania, former Yugoslavia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Struggling to preserve and provide affordable housing. Being sure people know their rights. Feeding hungry people.

Offering legal representation to taxi drivers, sweatshop workers, street vendors, elderly people denied their Medicare benefits, prostitutes, homeless people, subway riders. Monitoring and reporting police brutality in the city’s neighborhoods.

These are the people who belong in the room when decisions are made. And New York is the epicenter of the struggle to put them there.

A Final Word

Regarding the chauvinism of the subtitle:

I love Paris. I love London. I love Chicago, for that matter, and Boston has its charms. But they just aren’t New York.

One morning recently, my husband and I were wondering about the date of Russian Mardi Gras (“fat Tuesday”), a day of dairy excess that ushers in the deprivations of Lent in many different countries.

You can always tell when Roman Catholic Lent starts in New York: it’s the day you invariably put your foot in your mouth telling someone they have a smudge on their foreheads. Too late, you remember that it’s Ash Wednesday. But the orthodox calendar differs from the Roman Catholic calendar.

The Foundation had once had a Russian-born secretary who brought Paske to share with the staff – rich sweet cheesecake made just for Easter – but she had retired. You could go on the net, of course, but we were walking on the

street. And finding out something like this is simply not a problem in New York. A living encyclopedia of religion and culture surrounds you. For orthodox Easter, just ask at a coffee shop, because Greeks will know. We stopped in for breakfast at our neighborhood coffee shop, the waitress told us all about what her family ate before Lent, other patrons kibitzed, and we had our date.

For Diwali questions, you might try a cabdriver. Lunar New Year, you'd ask a waiter in the Chinese restaurant. About Yom Kippur, you'd ask in a kosher deli. Muslim questions, probably a news stand. Korean questions? A fruit store or a dry cleaner.

What a city.

New York's greatest resources are the people who make its neighborhoods pulse with energy, hard work, and the smells and sounds of the whole rest of the world.. The Greeks, Thais, Ethiopians, Pakistanis, Russians, Haitians, Boukharan Jews, Roumanians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Indians, Nigerians, Liberians, Dominicans, Mexicans, Bosnians, Yemeni, Afghans - and the Italians and Puerto Ricans, the Irish and the African Americans. A vibrant American democracy will find ways to hear all these many voices. For the 25 years that I was lucky enough to lead it, the New York Foundation gloried in those voices and sought to amplify and broadcast them.