



New Voices at the Center: Strengthening Commitment to an Inclusive Society

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A healthy community is much more than a collection of individuals who reside in the same area. It is an extended family of people who are closely interconnected by common practices and traditions, shared values and aspirations, and who look to one another for support and respect. Boston is striving to be such a community, and at its heart lies the Boston Foundation, a unique philanthropic institution whose purpose is to nurture this sense of community among the people of Greater Boston.

These words were drawn from a draft of one of the first attempts made in the middle '80's to fashion a mission statement for the Boston Foundation. Since that time we have struggled to get at the deeper meaning of these concepts and to understand their implication for the work of the Foundation and its unique role as a community foundation. What do we mean by community? Who is our constituency? Who are the grantees?

We set out on this search against a backdrop of dramatic change in social welfare policy and funding by government that began in the Reagan Administration and that continues to unfold today. It was clear that we needed to change the way we were doing business: to develop new thinking and new leadership about poverty and about social justice that would help us to redirect our programs and resources. The work is ongoing, but I would like to share with you in the next few minutes what we learned in over a decade of experience.

The notion of a community of inclusion that is at once compassionate and just has been sorely tested in 20th Century Boston, although we have been working toward establishing such a community since 1630 when John Winthrop held up his vision of "a city upon a hill"...[where]..."we must delight in each other, make each others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor together..."

Boston and the entire Commonwealth of Massachusetts reflect a greater racial and cultural diversity than Winthrop and his Puritan colleagues ever could have imagined. Again and again, however, we return to the spirit behind Winthrop's words –that of Boston,

Massachusetts as a special experiment, a community that is called upon to be an example of civic enlightenment and creativity.

The quest to achieve diversity – to create a community that honors and embraces people of different races, creeds, genders, languages and economic means – has never been easy, and Boston's experience has proved to be no exception. Throughout the 20th Century, the struggle by the community's newest arrivals to escape poverty and to gain acceptance and a better standard of living has been virtually continuous.

The recurrent pattern of relegating newcomers to demeaning life conditions has challenged Governor Winthrop's ideal of a "city on a hill" to which Boston has aspired. We continue to struggle today with new and ever more daunting manifestations of poverty and injustice, just as did those who began the Boston Foundation in 1915. Building a genuinely inclusive community – a community that works for all of its people – has been and remains the essential challenge facing us, in our Commonwealth, in this nation and, now in the larger global community.

In 1985, to address this challenge, the Boston Foundation set out on a new course with the launching of a \$10 million initiative called the Poverty Impact Program, at that time, our largest, most pioneering venture. The program set an important precedent in taking direct aim at poverty as fundamentally unacceptable in a just society. Admittedly, it was a limited program with limited goals, more concerned from the outset with creating a stronger, more inclusive sense of community than dealing with the hard indices of poverty. It was, by design, focused on the poverty of spirit that results from economic hardship, abandonment and neglect.

The issue, as we saw it, was one of engagement – of calling attention to, and getting directly involved in, combating the disease of poverty that causes such inequality and suffering. Our overriding goal was to heighten the responsiveness of organizations serving the poor and to connect people, especially women and children, in more organic and powerful ways with the supports they need.

Four areas of intervention were given priority: maternal and infant health care; teenage pregnancy; employment and training; and urban parks and open spaces. The latter, which initially baffled some observers, represented our conviction that the quality of the environment has everything to do with poverty and the health of the human spirit.

Fully cognizant of the Foundation's limited resources, we chose deliberately not to declare a "war" on poverty, with its implied goal of victory. We did, however, seek to have an impact – "to make a difference," as the program announcement stated – in three connected spheres: the development of public policy to enhance the cause of the poor; the creation of more accessible and effective systems of support; and above all, improving the quality of life for those entrapped in poverty.

The more profound and unanticipated impact of the program, however, was on the Foundation itself. Dwight Allison, Chairman of the Board, spoke eloquently in the Foundation's annual report: "the Foundation has been concerned with the disadvantaged members of the community from its very inception in 1915. But the deliberate commitment to focus on poverty for five years has, in my opinion, irrevocably changed the Foundation...we are being told my many voices that poverty cries out for empowerment at the grassroots level and more resources from the rest of the community. Do we hear those voices? I am convinced that the Foundation does, and that it can assist in bringing them to the abiding attention of the community as a whole..."

The message that we heard was powerful and singular in its emphasis. Let me quote specifically: "All around us, there is an atmosphere of nihilism and decay that is crushing – particularly of the spirit. Only the powerful mobilization of people at the grassroots can counter this – can turn things around."

And again: "The key to countering poverty is to equip – to really educate – the poor to act for themselves and those they care most about in community and in common interest with others."

And yet again: "I believe in what might be termed 'downward mobility.' The was 'up', by which we mean advancement, is really 'down' – to the local neighborhood level, and on the streets, where the people are."

Our conclusion at the Foundation was that we had to act decisively to alter our policies and practices. Who is our constituency? The answers were now more clear. The community itself. Who are the grantees? Those organizations and initiatives that grow directly out of concerns of the members of the community at large. What is the focus of our interest? Building community capacity to address those concerns through projects that empower neighborhood residents, particularly the poor, to act on their own behalf.

Following close on the heels of this new wisdom the Boston Foundation was selected by the Rockefeller Foundation to participate in an innovative planning and action project that would develop long-term strategies to address persistent poverty. Combining academic research with the practical lessons of local community initiatives, the Rockefeller project sought to address the growing trend among policymakers to view urban poverty as an inevitable legacy, which is handed from generation to generation, creating a permanent underclass.

The Boston Persistent Poverty Project, as it has come to be known, was formally launched with the publication of *In the Midst of Plenty*, a qualitative survey of some 17,000 households conducted in 1989 by the University of Massachusetts Center for Survey research using a questionnaire developed by Professor Paul Osterman. The survey profiled the current status, identity and concerns of poor people in the city of Boston. Moving out on what had been learned in the Poverty Impact Program, the Foundation convened six evening citizen seminars. Roughly 80 to 100 people attended each meeting, representing every sector and stratum of community life, to consider

the findings of the survey, and, stimulated by the thoughtful presentations of leading scholars and practitioners in the field, to talk about what could be done.

What grew out of this dialogue was an intensive process of community soundings and outreach at the grassroots. In its final report, entitled *To Make Our City Whole*, the Boston Foundation outlined key findings of this process, carried out over a two-year period by a diverse and broadly representative community group of about 40 people.

This group, the majority of which had experienced poverty and/or discrimination first hand, set out to examine the structural nature of urban poverty and its causes; to explore the interrelationship of race, gender and ethnicity across the experience of poverty in Boston's neighborhoods; to reframe the public debate about chronic urban poverty, and to begin to develop long-term strategies to address its debilitating effects.

The group carried out this work through a series of retreats, roundtables and focus groups, which involved several hundred Boston residents – primarily poor and low income – adults and youth, male and female, from a wide variety of racial and ethnic groups. The participants in these sessions willingly shared their private lives and thoughts in frank discussions of the obstacles and indignities they faced in their struggle for economic mobility. They challenged widely-held assumptions that too often dehumanize those living in poverty, assumptions that give priority to specialized social and remedial services. What we heard, repeatedly, was a plea for dignity and respect, for opportunity, and the right to participate fully in the life of the community.

What we discovered anew, through successive rounds of stirring personal witness, was that the poor are capable people – working, raising families – and a vital part of our community. To paraphrase an expression made popular by the daily comic strip poet and philosopher, Pogo, “We met the poor and found that they are us.” Like you and me, their deepest aspirations are focused on jobs that pay well enough to

maintain a home and all that involves; quality education and training opportunities for their children and for themselves; health care that is appropriate, accessible and affordable; and the expectation of finding a productive place in a community that cares about them.

Listening to these community voices was a powerful and moving experience. Again and again, voices raised in anger, frustration, and dogged determination struck chords of common humanity, chords that sounded and resounded – through statements of tenacious faith and hope – in God, in family and in the promise of our democratic way of life. Reflecting on what they had heard, the members of the convening group, through countless hours of animated, analytical dialogue, struck again these cadences of shared experience and aspiration, developing new themes of trust and motifs of common resolve.

Brought together without an appointed leader, this group of 40 people was set up as an experiment to discover whether new thinking could be forged from its diversity: whether, through a process of dialogue and deep listening among themselves and with the broader community, consensus could be reached about strategies to effectively address poverty in Boston and to make whole a deeply divided city. The result of this dialogue was both process and product, an emergence of new thinking that provided a fresh approach to combating poverty.

The substance of this new approach was captured in a set of seven Guiding Principles, couched in language that transcends the usual pessimism of anti-poverty initiatives, and designed to provide a new framework for both action and debate:

1. Incorporate those directly affected by policies at the heart of dialogue and community building;
2. Value racial and cultural diversity as the foundation for wholeness;
3. Promote active citizenship and political empowerment;
4. Build on community strengths and assets;

5. Restore access to fundamental opportunities and remove obstacles to equal opportunity;
6. Support and enhance the well-being of children and their families; and
7. Foster sustained commitment, coordination and collaboration based on a shared vision.

At its heart, this approach seeks to build community to end poverty. It calls for a fundamental shift from servicing the deficits of low-income communities and the poor as “clients,” to investing in the strengths and assets of the poor as “citizens.” It is based on a deep respect for the capacities of the people who find themselves living in poverty, on an appreciation of the difficulty and the richness of their lives, and as understanding of the desire of all people to live in healthy, safe and neighborly communities.

As with any tool, the value of these principles will continue to be measured by their effective use, and the first test began within our own institution. Using these principles and the research from which they were drawn, the Boston Foundation developed a new framework for its discretionary grantmaking. This framework places children and their families at the center of holistic community building strategies to end poverty; it reaffirms the arts as vehicles for building bridges of understanding between communities of diverse racial and cultural heritage; and finally it makes support for technical assistance more readily available to those agencies that, in a variety of ways, want to strengthen organizational capacity to identify and address the concerns of their constituencies.

The work of refocusing our efforts also involved an ongoing developmental process with board and staff members, to strengthen awareness of our joint responsibility for infusing the community empowering mission of the Foundation with new life and meaning, both within our own institution, and in the community at large.

With newly focused and intensive effort the Foundation was successful in modernizing – and democratizing, if you will – its organizational structure. With approval, finally, of its trustee banks and the Attorney General of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts the archaic trust instrument was retired, management of the Foundation’s assets was put out to bid and ultimately restructured in a more contemporary, highly diversified portfolio. The board, now free to select its own members, moved with deliberate speed to strengthen representation of an increasingly diverse community.

Now supported entirely by the Boston Foundation, the Boston Persistent Poverty Project, reconstituted as the Boston Community Building Network, has continued to unfold its agenda of convening, constituency development and capacity building. Working closely with indigenous community leaders to promote the new thinking outlined in the report, *To Make Our City Whole*, the Foundation developed and disseminated a Community Building Curriculum which provides training in organizational skills for emerging grassroots leaders through a series of interactive workshops.

In a collaborative effort with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, Northeastern University, several public agencies and community-based groups the Foundation spearheaded development of the *Boston Children and Families Database*, a compilation of more than 1400 data points of community health and well-being that has been distributed on disks to several hundred community groups. The database is updated biennially.

A powerful new community building tool, unveiled in October 2000 in an ambitious report entitled *The Wisdom of Our Choices: Boston’s Indicators of Progress, Change and Sustainability*, provides a roadmap for ongoing public and private cooperation to promote the healthy growth of the city of Boston and its region. The report was produced over a period of three years by the Foundation’s Community Building Network in partnership with the City of Boston, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, local businesses, residents, community-based organizations, local universities and other civic institutions, and represents an agreement about a way to guide and measure positive, effective growth

and change in our communities. Through the year 2015 the project will sponsor research and ongoing dialogue to assess and report on progress every two years.

We are finding, as the Foundation reaches out in ever-widening circles, that the Principles and the new framework they provide for addressing urban poverty are strengthening and stimulating creative new ways in which people in our community go about their daily lives and work.

Let me pause here again and give you a flavor of what we have heard – and I quote: “Imagine what it would be like always to present yourself through your problems – to introduce yourself to someone by saying, ‘I have a weight problem; my husband is an alcoholic, etc.’, rather than mentioning your good points first. Soon, you would be defining yourself through your problems ... that is what we funders have asked our communities to do for a very long time. But through the work of the Boston Persistent Poverty Project and our own parallel thinking, we are beginning to turn that deficit-based kind of thinking around. We are asking agencies to tell us about the potential that exists in the people and places they serve.”

And another: “I have served on a number of local boards and have been involved particularly in issues related to job development and health care. I became concerned...that we were dealing with pieces of people’s lives, rather than the whole picture. The project is right on the money when they speak about supporting holistic strategies, because...those are the kinds of strategies that will really work over the long run.”

Again: “I think it’s important to tell you that you shouldn’t be fooled by the seemingly platitudinous nature of these Guiding Principles. Like all large truths...they keep on getting deeper. It’s like peeling back an onion – as you go on, increasingly you get to the...structures behind these truths and find that they are really quite profound. Even though I am a member of the group that developed these Principles, I find that I am constantly having to remind myself of their wisdom. Just this

morning, and as soon as we started looking at the assets involved, we could start to build on them, and the issue looked solvable.”

And yet again: “I asked whether it was possible for us to create coherence out of diversity...I discovered that the vision that emerges from mutual understanding and consent is the source of coherence, and that it must be constantly renewed.”

What did we learn at the Boston Foundation during this ten to fifteen year period of intensifying organizational introspection, experimentation and development about our role as a community foundation? Community foundations are a unique kind of public charity – not private foundations. They are by definition dynamic institutions with special mandate guiding their relationship with the communities they serve. Take, for example, this statement of purpose from the website of the California Center for Regional Leadership:

“Community foundations are dynamic institutions, with the influence to generate and leverage endowment funds and donor advisors, distribute grants, and mobilize leadership and resources to meet the current and future needs of their local communities. With the advantage of being trusted third parties, the 600+ community foundations in the U.S. collectively play a powerful role in linking business, government, nonprofit and the media, and effectively enhancing social capital and the quality of life within their regions.”

It sounds like a great prescription for what could be the quintessential democratic institution. While the vast majority of community foundations would subscribe generally to this statement, you can imagine that, across some 600 such institutions, there is a wide variety of individual interpretation. What, then, are the operating principles, the substantive values that give real meaning to such a mission? In closing I would like to share with you what I have learned from my years of experience at the Boston Foundation: lessons that I feel are important in guiding us as we move forward in our work as nonprofit institutions.

First, to be effective we need to be sure that our institutions remain open and flexible. In every sector of our society, there is a growing sense of the need to reinvigorate our institutions, both public and private, by putting the concerns, the creativity and commitment of citizens at their center. Over time, institutions tend to become bastions of the status quo and to perpetuate a model of detached, expert professionalism that seeks approval only from professional peers. We need continually to question, to rethink what we do, putting the people we care about at the center of the inquiry, understanding that new voices not only bring new perspectives, they can change the conversation completely. By keeping what truly matters in sight, we will come to understand that success is not measured merely by a series of programs, but by changes in how we relate to one another in community.

Second, one of the greatest perils for a community institution is to operate without a vision – to act without a thoughtful sense of what the future holds, and how the quality of people’s lives can be enhanced in meaningful ways. Simply to proceed with business as usual – to follow pathways that have grown familiar with time – is not sufficient, even if the outcomes have a certain appeal and style. The ever-popular model of the gun-slinging hero, for example, who purports to solve all with a silver bullet is no longer credible.

Serving as we do within a special public trust, we at the Boston Foundation became newly mindful of our need to create shared vision, a caring colloquy with people across our community. We recognized the crucial importance of listening to others, and the arrogance and ultimate futility of acting alone.

I firmly believe that progress does not come from solutions imposed by institutions from above. Instead it comes when people are given the opportunity to assume responsibility for their own lives. At the Boston Foundation we seek to support this progress by encouraging a dialogue that includes all of the voices in our community, by building new alliances, and by challenging ourselves and others to reach out in more penetrating and culturally sensitive ways.

History reminds us that the traditional role and responsibility of the nonprofit sector has been to provide a voice for under-represented groups, a vehicle for advocacy by those who are under-served, and a resource for support of those in need. Our continued progress will depend largely on our ability to revive this spirit of activism that has enabled this country to come to grips with major social and economic issues.

While no single institution and no individual can possibly be the guardian of society’s human values, each of us needs to be accountable to finding ways – in the ordinary circumstances of daily living and doing – to affirm those values that define and form the basis of a vital and compassionate democratic community.