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Breathing Through Injustice: Philanthropy's Call to Action

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Photo by Koshu Kunii on Unsplash

Breathing is central to life; an involuntary, yet critical act that we do 23,000 times a day. As we struggle to come to terms with where we are as a society in this unsettled time, it has become achingly clear that many of us are struggling to breathe.

Some of us labor to catch our breath as we fight tears from a loss to COVID-19. Others battle a tightened chest borne from the stress of living under leaders who seem to relish fomenting racial, ethnic, and economic violence. Still others focus on taking deep breaths to remain calm, hoping to avoid being the next victim of racist stereotypes or biases while dealing with the daily frustration of deeply ingrained systemic racism; a system that has devolved into something that, in many cases, allows murder without consequence if the perpetrator has a badge.

As a society, we are at a point of potential suffocation. The asphyxiation death of George Floyd at the hands of police has become a rallying point, a point of contact for the hundreds of other abuses of power and aggressions against people of color and other marginalized communities.

Marginalization, which manifests in financial, health care, and familial or community support systems, can stem from circumstances into which one is born, or an inability to cope or adapt. It can also be caused by how one is perceived by others due to race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Each of these factors is further exacerbated when, as in this moment, those with power and position intentionally divide us and inflame racial tensions for personal and political benefit.

Individual Action and Systemic Problems

There's an inclination among many, unfortunately, to attribute individual action or inaction to what is a systemic problem, whether through metaphors like "a bad apple" or by labeling something as "unique." So many of our coping mechanisms are about separating ourselves from outcomes we fear; finding the differences between "us" and "them." Without recognizing that these are systemic problems—no "us" or "them", just "us"—we won't be able to hear, and much less, feel, what those we seek to help are going through. And without empathy and understanding, there is no hope of moving forward.

Among many of the more privileged such as most of us in philanthropy, there is no understanding of how deeply entrenched White supremacy is in the roots of our society. Like an invasive perennial weed, offshoots of this foundational principle permeate all American institutions, beliefs, and individuals to varying degrees. While we have made some progress, the latest events show how tenuous that progress has been, and how far we still have to go.

A Call to Philanthropy

As members of the philanthropy sector, we have the rare opportunity and responsibility to step in and be the oxygen in the room. Given our reason for being—to provide goodwill and to actively promote human welfare—we must act relentlessly to do all we can to promote, pursue, and support equity and justice for all. As a sector, we must find more and better ways to understand where the weeds of racism show up and the impact they have on individuals, groups, and society as a whole.

Many of us are currently engaged in discussions about listening to communities with whom we work; about bottom-up approaches, root-cause analysis, and systems change. What is less commonly addressed is how our own perspectives limit our ability to listen, to hear, and to truly relate to those who have different realities than we do. If we continue to think in terms of "us" and "them" it becomes easier to ignore the system and blame the individual, thus absolving us of responsibility. *"If only they hadn't worn a hoodie, had taken a step to the left, had moved faster, hadn't had diabetes, hadn't played with a water gun, had answered the*

door, had spoken louder, had eaten better, hadn't gone bird-watching..." There is all too often a separate, higher standard for those who are unwarrantedly expected to be violent, criminal, or "savage".

Where Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors Stands

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors condemns all forms of racism, as well as the systems, structures, and individuals that allow it to continue and flourish in our society. The convergence of COVID-19, the economic crisis, and the very public and visible dehumanization of Black people, as well as other people of color, has created an unprecedented crisis for our country.

The inequities that are now front and center in our collective conversation are exactly the place where philanthropy needs to play a role. Because the beliefs and systems foundational to the current way of life have their roots in racism, every individual working for the benefit of humanity must also be part of the solution. Regardless of where we sit, what we look like, and the position we have, we need to educate ourselves about the roots of the current situation and how that impacts where we are today. We need to challenge ourselves to think differently, to reevaluate our own perspective. We need to listen, to hear, and to feel the pain of those who are suffering. With understanding comes empathy; with empathy, we can together create better solutions.

As we strive to make a difference in these turbulent times, RPA is committing to starting these conversations and reflecting both internally and with our clients and partners on what we need to change. Included here are a few questions to help guide us and others in that reflection.^[1]

Questions for Reflection

- What assumptions are we making consciously and unconsciously about what other communities and individuals should or could be doing?
- What structures do we have in place organizationally that prevent further understanding or create a divergence of interests? This could include leadership, staff, operations, charter, and relationships with others.
- What structures are inherent in philanthropy as a sector that inhibit deeper understanding and empathy?
- Is our internal leadership, and that of our grantees and partners, diverse enough to give necessary viewpoints—including from personal experience—to gain a better understanding of conditions, situations, aspirations, challenges, etc. that allow us to truly take a bottom-up approach?
- What voices are we most in touch with regularly and what credence do we give those voices?
- What role do our comfort level, personal experience, and privilege play in how we analyze information, evaluate programs, and work with partners and grantees?
- How have we sought to understand and mitigate the power dynamic between and among ourselves and grantees or communities? Do we recognize their positions relative to us, and create conditions where they can speak freely to us? Do we recognize the filter, or lens, that we apply as we relate to them and their situations? What are we doing to reduce the communication and empathy barriers that our lens and the power imbalance cause?
- As individuals, to whom are we in proximity on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis? With whom do we live in community—emotionally, intellectually, personally, and professionally—and does this include those whose perspectives and life circumstances are dramatically different than our own?

We have the chance to help people breathe more easily; to be the source of oxygen in a polluted landscape; to help ease the stress and tension of living in a divided society. As those who have taken on the challenge of existing for the sole purpose of doing good, we should strive to fill this potential by truly understanding the perspectives of those we seek to serve.

[1] Please also see [*Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens*](#), a guide available at [RacialEquity.org](https://www.RacialEquity.org) that provides practical guidance, frameworks, and tools for donors seeking to advance racial justice.

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