

2002 Terrance Keenan Leadership Award in Health Philanthropy

Remarks by Tom David
The California Wellness Foundation
February 2002

It is a distinct honor to receive an award named for Terry Keenan. Native Americans refer to elders who are the transmitters of knowledge to succeeding generations as “Wisdom Keepers.” Terry is unquestionably one of the Wisdom Keepers of our field. I had the opportunity to spend some time with him almost ten years ago and that meeting has had a lasting influence on the way I do my work.

I was one of many pilgrims who have knocked on his door over the years, and he not only made the time to meet with me, but he received me as a colleague, even though I was a relative novice. He exemplifies not only a thoughtful “big picture” approach to our work, but he is also a wonderful role model who sees philanthropy as a vocation... a true calling. His insightful writing sets a standard for all of us and his graciousness is legendary. If others believe I am following in his footsteps in some small way, that is a compliment of the most profound sort.

Since this work is not done in isolation, I’d like to begin by recognizing my colleagues at The California Wellness Foundation with whom I have the good fortune of working every day. They are an amazing group of people. I also see this recognition as a “coming of age” of sorts for health philanthropy on the West Coast.

Twelve years ago, those of us doing health grantmaking in California were part of a small “village,” and could gather around a single table for lunch. Some of those wonderful colleagues are here today and deserve special notice because this is a journey we have taken together: Ruth Brousseau (who now works with me at The California Wellness Foundation), Ruth Lyn Riedel (Alliance Healthcare Foundation), and Dorothy Meehan (Sierra Health Foundation). Others who aren’t here today include Jan Eldred (California HealthCare Foundation), Mario Gutierrez (The California Endowment), Judy Spiegel (California Community Foundation) and Carol Larson (Packard Foundation) ... all are still at it today.

I’ve also been blessed with great bosses, who have been both teachers and mentors: Luz Vega Marquis at the James Irvine Foundation (who taught me how to do grantmaking); Dennis Collins, also at Irvine, (who gave me the space to learn how to develop a grantmaking program); Jess Erickson at the S.H. Cowell Foundation (who taught me much about boards and foundation management); and, of course, Gary Yates at The California Wellness Foundation. He is an inspirational leader who brings out the best in all of us....And, of course, I wouldn’t be able to do this work without the love and support of my family ... my parents, Fred and Loretta David, my wife Jane and my son Owen. To all of them, I owe a tremendous debt of thanks.

But I owe a special debt to the many non-profit leaders I have engaged with along the way, whether they were grantees or not. They are the most important reason I do this work and they are a continuing source of inspiration.

In the time remaining, I want to share a few thoughts about the work of grantmaking in health. After 14 ½ years at this work, I still consider myself to be a student. I have found it to be endlessly fascinating and challenging... and fraught with **paradox**.

One example: If you take the challenge of due diligence seriously, it's hard to make the right decision. But it's also difficult to make a really bad decision ... after all, most organizations that come to us for funding are worthy of some kind of support.

Moreover, I've found that the longer you engage in this work, the more there is to know...but that may simply be an admission of eroding cognitive capacity

A master of paradox in my book was Mies Van der Rohe, one of the giants of modern architecture. One of his masterpieces, the Seagram Building, is just down the street from here. As a student of architecture, he was one of my heroes and I once had a t-shirt that featured his impressive teutonic profile and his famous dictum "**Less is More.**"

I'd like to pose at least four ways in which I think that paradoxical statement applies to our work:

The first is **Money**...after all, that's where most philanthropic conversations begin and end. When I first started doing this work, I was startled to be asked the question "How big are you?" Fortunately, when I didn't respond quickly, the questioner usually continued by saying something like..."we're about \$150 million..." OH... they're talking about asset size!

And I think it's fair to say that the assumption is typically "bigger is better," as with most things in America. But is it? From what I've seen, the more money you have to give away the more pressure there is to do things that can disrupt the "ecosystem," if not violate common sense. For example, there's the temptation to give a small organization too much money too fast to help them "get to scale..." or just because you can (WE BIG... WE BAD)

But in my experience, many of the best grants I've made were relatively small ...but proportionately appropriate. To riff on Margaret Mead's oft-quoted remark about the power of a small group of committed individuals ... I'd say: never underestimate the power of a small amount of money in the hands of the right person at the right time.

I also think that when big bucks aren't on the table, there's the potential for a more honest transaction ... more realistic about what can be done with the money vs. mutual fantasies about the magnitude and pace of change that can be wrought with grant dollars.

Second is **Scale**. In this work, an organization whose mission is national, regional or at least statewide is frequently seen as having the potential for more impact than one that is focused on a single locality ... and it's frequently seen in that sort of descending order of significance. But I question that assumption. **Understanding context is essential in this work**. The more removed one is from the local context, the greater the tendency to think one can simply impose a common template, whether it be theoretical or organizational, on multiple locations... no matter how different they might be from one another in other respects. But the best theory is **grounded theory**, tested in face-to-face interaction with those on the front lines. Impact is very difficult to achieve absent that kind of deep understanding of local reality... and that favors the local funder over the national or regional.

Third is **Complexity**... and this is closely related to a belief that grantmakers should exert maximum control in order to achieve the desired results. The more we intellectualize the task at hand, placing importance on our own "value added" and focusing on refining our multi-dimensional theories of change requiring multiple simultaneous grantmaking components, and fine-tuning budgets, etc. ... there is a tendency to forget that PEOPLE will implement these plans (or not) ... and the real-world environment in which they operate is constantly changing.

After years of experience with some very complicated grantmaking programs, I've come to the conclusion that **synergy cannot be engineered**. When it does emerge, it tends to flow from simple, open structures that leave maximal space for adaptation and change.

While being mindful of the complexities of the fields in which we operate, the paradoxical challenge for grantmakers is to approach our work with the freshness of perspective of the novice ... what Buddhist practitioners call **shoshin** or "beginner's mind."

In the words of Shunryu Suzuki, one of the first zen teachers on the West Coast, "in the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few."

A fourth, related topic is **Innovation**. Most people who do grantmaking would justify their existence by saying that they are investing in innovative approaches to solving problems. But the more we insist on new ideas or demonstration projects as a pre-condition for funding, I believe we may be unwittingly limiting the creative potential and ultimately weakening the organizations we hope to help.

The most thoughtful non-profit leaders I know are engaged in an unending struggle for sustainability of their efforts in an unstable, uncertain funding environment. Virtually every one of their organizations is undercapitalized. Unless they are fortunate enough to enjoy a base of individual donors, they have a very difficult time raising unrestricted dollars that are not earmarked for a specific project or program. All too often, funders dangle the "carrot" of dollars only for new ventures that can take them outside their core mission ...and perhaps ultimately to their detriment. But how many can afford to pass up on such an opportunity?

Yet I'd argue that dollars for core support are exactly the fuel for creativity. It's what permits staff to step back from their day-to-day pressures to reflect on their work, learn from their experience and that of their peers, and implement changes in their programs. By providing that kind of unrestricted funding, foundations might paradoxically be most likely to support the kind of innovation we so highly prize.

As a final metaphor for the paradox central to our work, I'd like to share a bit about the story of the Polynesian Voyaging Society. It was founded in Hawaii in 1976 by three individuals – an anthropologist, an artist and a lover of the sea. Their aim was to show that the ancient Polynesians could have purposely settled the Polynesian Triangle in double-hulled voyaging canoes using **wayfinding** or non-instrument navigation.

Their first project was to construct a replica of an ancient voyaging canoe, the first to be built in Hawaii in over 600 years. That canoe, Hokule'a, was launched in 1975. The following year, guided by a master navigator from Micronesia (Mau Pilaug), Hokule'a left on her maiden voyage to Tahiti, arriving in Papeete 33 days later to a rapturous response from nearly half the island's population.

Subsequently, Mau's Hawaiian protégé, Nainoa Thompson has piloted voyages to islands throughout the Pacific totaling more than 16,000 miles, including most recently, a trip to Rapa Nui (Easter Island) of more than 1400 miles against prevailing winds.

To the "modern" western mind, this story defines paradox. Navigating a dugout sailing canoe across the open ocean to arrive at a tiny island without instruments? How is that possible?

It is through the transmission of indigenous wisdom of the most profound sort. The Hawaiian star compass is the basic mental construct for navigation. The navigator memorizes 220 stars and their "houses," i.e. where they come out of the ocean and go back into the ocean. It is also used to read the flight path of birds and the direction of waves. During the day, the position of the sun, wind, and swell patterns provide additional information ... but that only hints at the total concentration and refined consciousness required of the navigator. After twenty years of navigation experience on the open ocean, Nainoa Thompson still refers to himself as a "student navigator," noting that, "the principles of wayfinding are simple; the practicalities are very complex."

The story of Hokule'a's voyages has been shared with schoolchildren and others throughout the islands and the work of the Polynesian Voyaging Society has been an instrumental part of the rebirth of traditional Hawaiian culture and a multi-generational healing process... helping contemporary Hawaiians recover and reclaim the wisdom and values of their ancestors.

While much of our work may seem mundane in comparison to that kind of spiritual power, it is connected because the most profound paradox of all is **hope**. In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, committed individuals and organizations are struggling

to provide healing and hope every day in communities where they are desperately needed. If we choose to, we have the privilege to support them in their work in some small way. It's been my good fortune to do so for the past 14 ½ years and I look forward to more ... because although the principles of grantmaking are simple, the practicalities are very complex.

February 28, 2002
New York City