



Democracy is Dying. Philanthropy Needs to Stop Its Toxic Intellectualizing.

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[Image description: A large colorful mural on a building, by artist Shepard Fairey, featuring a person looking into the distance, with the words "voting rights are human rights" painted in black on red background. Image taken by [Tom Barrett on Unsplash](#)]

Hi everyone, just a quick warning that this post will likely burn a few bridges. But as colleague Aubrey Alvarez quoted from a novelty flask, "May the bridges we burn light the way."

Today I had breakfast with my friend Seth Ehrlich, an executive director who told me that for the third time during the pandemic a funder invited him to attend a forum where nonprofit leaders were asked to give feedback on how to improve that funder's grant process. Foundations, please stop doing that. Here's a [checklist](#) you can use for free. Stop

wasting everyone's time asking them how you can improve your process.

At this point what is left to say about grant processes that we haven't said thousands of times across decades: Give multi-year general operating dollars, increase payout rates so you can give more, accept grant proposals written for other funders without all the ridiculous customizing, let us use our own budget templates, fund faster, support advocacy and systems change work, streamline your reporting requirements, send nonprofit leaders occasional gift baskets, and get the hell out of the way. If you don't agree with these things, fine, but then stop asking us to give you recommendations that you don't want to implement.

It has been the nature of philanthropy to be in a constant state of toxic intellectualization, and not just about grantmaking, but about everything. Last week, for example, this article came out on the Generosity Commission, a new \$3.8 million, 2-year effort funded by the wealthy to study why lower-and-middle income people haven't been giving as much; it aims by Fall 2023 to make recommendations to get them to give more. You read that right. And if your eyes popped out of your head in bewilderment, or your screen reader exploded, here's an article by the incisive Allison Carney called "Why the Generosity Commission is a Waste of Time."

Funders, especially left-leaning ones, love commissions, white papers, summits, logic models, surveys. This is a self-reinforcing cycle where commissions lead to surveys and focus groups, which lead to white papers, which lead to summits, which lead to commissions. And we all just accept this as par for the course, a best practice. This is a destructive habit, harmful in the best of times, but now we are in the worst of times.

I've been watching a lot of TV shows and movies. Mainly because I am exhausted and these forms of entertainment give me needed reprieve. The best ones provide a sense of hope and optimism we all desperately need from time to time. In shows and movies where the forces of good are fighting the forces of evil, there is a trope where during the final battle, when all hope is lost, everyone who is on the side of justice and equity shows up at the last minute, and they work together to save the world from death and ruin. Think of Lord of the Rings. And Star Wars. "I love the

part in Avengers: Endgame when everyone shows up to fight Thanos,” says my colleague Seth, “I wish our sector were like that. We’re at Endgame.”

Our society is at endgame. Democracy is dying, and we have a few years left before climate change is irreversible. Conservatives are passing hundreds of bills to suppress votes. They are sweeping the January 6th insurrection under the rug, as if one of the most treasonous and dangerous events in [US] history never happened, which will likely allow it happen again. Meanwhile, they are rolling back the rights for everyone who is not a rich white man, curbing efforts to address climate change, gerrymandering to consolidate unearned power, and simultaneously (and brilliantly) implementing numerous other acts of injustice so we are too overwhelmed to fight.

Instead of working to address these critical issues, we see left-leaning institutional philanthropy, who for better or usually for worse sets the tone and strategies for our sector, continuing to engage in its delusional, out-of-touch practices. It still rationalizes foundations existing in perpetuity by protecting endowments for the future instead of spending out to solve issues now. It still refuses to engage in crucial battles, thinking that protecting basic and vital civic rights like voting is too “political.” It still wastes nonprofits’ time and energy through archaic, burdensome grantmaking practices. It still opposes efforts to advance even the mildest of reforms, like the ACE Act. It still remains a vehicle for corporations and wealthy individuals to avoid taxes and hoard wealth, while funding commissions to spend years studying why poor people haven’t been giving as much to nonprofits.

Imagine if Avengers: Endgame were set in our sector. Iron Man decides that he’s just going to spend 5% of his wealth to fight Thanos, because, you know, he wants to save 95% for future problems. S.H.I.E.L.D releases an RFP for soldiers to get funding to engage in the final battle; the application process takes eight months, and funding can’t be used on weapons or armor. Captain Marvel flies around the universe to recruit different aliens to join a think tank that after two years of focus groups and surveys releases a white paper indicating that poorer alien civilizations were more than twice as likely to be killed by Thanos. Dr. Strange stays out of the fight because it’s too political. Only Black Panther and the Wakandans show up.

Because of entrenched power dynamics between those who have money and those who need it to do the work, we have been putting up with toxic intellectualizing from funders for decades now. It then infects the entire sector so that we nonprofits do it all the time too.

We have to snap out of it. We do not need more toolkits and logic models; we need to significantly fund the organizations and movements working to protect voting rights and prevent the worst of humanity from getting elected. We do not need more commissions and white papers on giving patterns; we need corporations and wealthy individuals to pay their fair share of taxes. We do not need more discussions on grant processes; we need to release the trillions of dollars warehoused in foundation endowments and DAFs.

If you think I and others leaders from marginalized communities are overreacting, if you don't think democracy is dying before our eyes and that we need to rally before it's too late, then you're in denial because your privilege has shielded you from the consequences that those of us who are from marginalized communities have been facing.

If we were in an epic movie, ***this is the final battle***. This is the moment now where all of us should put aside our individual whims and hang-ups, focus on what really matters, overcome the exhaustion and self-doubt to summon the last of our remaining strength and determination, and work together to save our world and our democracy as both teeter at the brink of destruction.

Go here to find and email your elected officials to encourage them to enact legislations preventing foundations and Donor-Advised Funds from hoarding so much money.

Write an anonymous public review of a foundation on grantadvisor.org

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