

## Remarks for Women Donors Network Panel 2/24/06

*by Christina Desser*

The invitation to participate in this discussion today was a great gift because it provided, in fact necessitated, reflection. I am by nature a reflective person, I think, but preparing to articulate the logic and energy that motivates my life and my work and my philanthropy for this discussion required a more systematic and integrated exploration and analysis than I might have otherwise pursued on any given Friday.

I could, and at some point would, like to discuss my conception of an analytical structure and strategic rationale for progressive philanthropy, but that is not what was proposed for today. Nor am I going to try to define “Progressive”(although I know one when I see one.) Rather, because you asked, well Amanda did, I am going to tell you how I understand the world, how I think that understanding was engendered, how I seek to deepen that understanding everyday and how that understanding leads to and informs my engagement with the world—how, as the academics would say, I move from praxis to practice.

I understand the world in both a physical sense and a socio/cultural one as interdependent and interconnected. For me this is not solely an ecological truism or a spiritual bromide; my behavior—from how I work in the world to how I spend and give my money, to the way I treat other people and things living on the planet flows out of, and reflects that understanding (however imperfectly). To a great extent, this world-view is rooted in the values imparted to me by my parents and grandparents

and the life experiences they made possible. My father's family was Jewish, politically liberal, well educated and financially comfortable with a strong sense of social justice, responsibility for others, and an appreciation for the natural world. My Grandmother Rose, believing that understanding the world and other cultures was essential to personal development, traveled extensively and exotically and saw to it that I did, too.

My mother's family was from a similar social milieu. They lived in Mexico for many years while I was growing up and I spent a lot of time with them there visiting remote and undeveloped places. They were especially generous, compassionate and open people. Auntie Mame pales in comparison to Nana, as I called my maternal grandmother. At her house, people of all ages, social strata, nationalities and sexual orientation came and went for a day or a week or a month. Her door was always open and it was always interesting. She lived a version of "all my relations," and everyone was.

While my childhood conditions and experiences perhaps predisposed me to a perspective of connection, it has evolved through other factors: my direct experience and observation of the natural world; the study of Buddhism accompanied by many hours of sitting in silence on Buddhist meditation retreats noticing how things arise and pass away; my reading of smart and wise scientists, philosophers, artists and historians, and others whose writings helped me clarify and deepen this world view and its intellectual vicissitudes and political mandates and consequences; and the reverberations of the most mundane daily encounters-- a stranger

smiling at me as I wait for in line for my coffee at Peet's or some jerk flipping me off in traffic.

The philosopher and scientist Jacob Bronowski describes the process of science—the process by which we gain empirical knowledge-- as that of decoding a “completely connected world.” This decoding requires dividing that completely connected world into what is relevant and what is not relevant to the matter at hand. But in so doing, Bronowski says, we do violence to the connections in the world. We must always bear in mind that we are “certainly not going to get the world right, because the basic assumption that [we] have made about dividing the world into the relevant and irrelevant is in fact a lie. When we practice science (and this is true of all our experience), we are always decoding a part of nature which is not complete. We simply cannot get out of our own finiteness.”

But, when I am paying attention, each experience of connection requires me to expand that “finiteness,” to extend the boundary of what I think is relevant. This can be uncomfortable because it often requires me to confront the question of how my behavior and my choices affect other people--those nearby as well as those on the other side of the world--and this interconnected whole, all my relations. It is the process, by which, for me, experience is turned into knowledge, and knowledge into action. As a result, my behavior--the way I act upon the natural world; the choices I make in the humanly constructed environment—is altered.

It is through these experiences of connection and the insights that they have engendered, that I have discovered the purpose and passion of my

life: doing what I can to ensure that our planet continues to be a place where all people have the opportunity to experience the power of connection that can help them discover their own passion and purpose in life. And further, that our social, political and government structures provide the necessary support and freedom for them to do so.

The creative personality, according to Bronowski—whether an artist or a scientist or an activist—is “one that looks on the world as fit for change and on himself as an instrument for change.” She understands that the world she paints or studies or acts on is but a fragment of a connected whole, and the integrity and truth of her creative act depends upon operating and acting within the truth of that connection. Nobel prize winning biologist S.E. Luria distilled Bronowski’s message to this: “that the integrity of the doer should be matched by the vision of the thinker; that such vision consists as much of what the viewer projects outward as of what it receives; that passivity before the supposedly inexorable march of events—whether the Industrial Revolution or the mechanization of society—can only lead to slavery; and that freedom must be created by the interaction between human wisdom and the physical world.”

So, I do look at the world as fit for change and myself as an instrument of change. The change I want to foment is towards a more just and sustainable society. I believe that such a society cannot exist without a healthy natural environment, and that the diversity and complexity essential to the evolution of a healthy ecosystem have cultural analogues similarly necessary for the evolution of society itself. So my philanthropy and my work support both environmental and cultural conservation, and

social evolution. My efforts thus require political engagement and activism because environmental and social policies are made by elected officials and implemented by government and I want my government to embody and reflect the highest and best values that I work so hard to advance. Philosopher Robert Nozick articulates this well:

. . . We want the institutions demarcating our lives together to express and saliently symbolize our desired mutual relations. Democratic institutions and the liberties coordinate with them are not simply effective means toward controlling the powers of government and directing these toward matters of joint concern; they themselves express and symbolize, in a pointed and official way, our equal human dignity, our autonomy and powers of self-direction . . . Within the operation of democratic institutions, too, we want expressions of the values that concern us and bind us together.

Since, for the most part, my values are not currently finding expression in our civic institutions, I need to participate in the activities of government as I can, pressing for change from within when the opportunity arises, as when I sat on the California Coastal Commission, and other times pressing for change from without, like co-directing Women's Voices, Women Vote.

The tools at my disposal are diverse: ideas, money, time, organizing skills, and people and organizations engaged in the same endeavor—fellow travelers. I take a multivalent and interdisciplinary approach toward the pursuit of a more just and sustainable society. I have worked in and

funded the environmental movement, political organizing, science and technology policy and public service because in an interconnected world, interdisciplinarity makes sense. It reflects the way the world really is. I also fund in the arts, because I believe that cultural expression can powerfully shift perception. I agree with Richard Rorty who avers that, “a talent for speaking differently, rather than arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change.”

I fund grass roots activism, national policy-making institutions, and organizations that fall along the spectrum in between because meaningful interventions exist at myriad levels within a system. And while I am interested in results and will sometimes fund with an eye to the short term (campaign contributions most notably), I adhere to the long view because I know that everything that is done now creates the conditions for what is possible later. I see my work in a temporal and corporate continuum, as part of an effort that can only be truly meaningful if it exists across space and spans time. My work, our work, is grounded in the work that has preceded us, and in turn, provides the ground for the work that will follow.

Currently I am allied with others to develop the concept of the commons as an organizing principle. “The Commons” refers to all the things that we inherit and create jointly for universal use, and that we should protect for the benefit of generations to come. The Commons also includes topsoil, biodiversity, the airwaves, roads, mathematics, the law, DNA, wisdom, languages, democracy, quiet, art, seeds., oceans, museums, blood banks, sidewalks, medicine, jazz, social insurance, the sun, the wind,

rivers and jokes. And activist work as apparently diverse as defending the biological integrity and availability of potable water, organizing to keep the internet free public and WIFI publicly owned, and advocating for open access to the information generated by the California Stem Cell Research Initiative and paid for by California taxpayers are all connected by their relationship to the Commons. So is the public library. Canadians consider their universal health care system to be a Commons.

The question we commonsers are exploring is how each piece of the wide range of work we do reinforces the whole by building a popular consciousness about what we own together. How we are, in fact, interconnected. And how our effort can help to create the narrative of a “WE” politics that is so sorely missing from our social discourse.

The narrative of a “we” politics is necessarily a narrative of interdependence and interconnection. My challenge, our challenge, is to make the notion of what constitutes “we,” and thus, “me,” ever more inclusive. My work, my philanthropy, and my personal evolution all arise out of that task. Robert Nozick states this beautifully: The size of a soul, the magnitude of a person, is measured in part by the extent of what that person can appreciate and love.” All my relations indeed.

