

NEW GOSPEL OF WEALTH / THE FUTURE OF PHILANTHROPY

## The privilege of perspective featuring Elizabeth Alexander

Elizabeth Alexander, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, on art, activism, and acknowledging adversity.

This video is part of a collection of conversations with leaders, thinkers, and activists from philanthropy, business, the arts, tech, and beyond outlining bold visions for the future of philanthropy.

### **Transcript begins.**

[Elizabeth Alexander, poet, cultural advocate, and the president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. A Black woman wearing a black dress and gold jewelry.]

**ANNOUNCER:** Please welcome Elizabeth Alexander.

[applause]

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:** Good morning. It is wonderful to be here with you, and it is wonderful to be back here. Let's take, as a starting point, that when there is an excess of wealth in one place, there is need in another place, and thus there is a moral obligation to share. That is essential, just as a principle of our work in philanthropy. And as a steward of immense resources, moving outward with an eye toward making meaningful difference in the world, each philanthropy and its staff have an obligation to know the communities they work with deeply, so that we can trust that glorious work is happening.

For us to be able to be partners in a positive and rigorous way, thinking about how we learn from each other and how that is a value of our work, we have an obligation to staff properly with people who have real grassroots experience in fields. Those fields could be classrooms, small arts organizations, community activism, making art itself, and through their lived experience, walking through the world with a particular orientation and set of eyes on the world.

I think that right now, what's really exciting is that there's a generation of philanthropic leaders with a different set of experiences, professional experiences, life experiences, and we're trying to bring some new tools to help people move through uncomfortable conversation and hopefully experience what I think is the real joy, the lifetime joy of doing work that has a justice orientation. That is joy. That is sustainable. I know no other. The poet Lucille Clifton said, "I come to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." I think this is not about wanting anyone to dwell in discomfort. Rather, I believe that if we trouble the water, we will move more inexorably in the direction of justice.

I always ask myself, how can we be helpful, in addition to the money that philanthropy has to offer, to the empowered communities that we work with? What are the resources and insights and collaborations that we can offer? I think partnerships can be very fruitful if we remember with humbleness where our expertise lies, as well as what we are learning from the people that we work with. At the end of the day, we know who the work belongs to and it is those communities in whom we entrust the hard work of making durable change in the world. But I think that partnership is what lets us be helpful with our acumen to make good relationships.

At the Mellon Foundation, we are devoted to the humanities, arts and culture, and higher education. The value of higher education—and I can hardly believe this now—in public opinion is no longer a given. Public opinion has been evaluating the value of a college education in a steeply, steeply dropping fashion, to the point where some are questioning whether it is meaningful for folks to go to college at all, which I think is actually related to increased access to college. You give more people a thing and then you say it doesn't matter very much. If excellent and exquisite higher education is of value to anyone, it must be available to everyone. And in higher education, if the ideas and visions of groups of people, civilizations of people, countries of people, types of people, have been excluded from our understanding of the human experience, then, as a foundation, we must support work that gives a more complete picture of where excellence and ideas and felicity have been found throughout history and into the present. Who will teach our young people to be critical thinkers? Who will vision a just future? I must admit that right now I'm very dissatisfied with some of the uses of diversity, language and thinking in higher ed arts and culture and philanthropy because I know that many of us have expressed and enacted and embodied diversity as a bottom line value in how we do things all our lives. As Shonda Rhimes says, "The world I create looks like who's in my kitchen."

But as the culture changes, some mainstream organizations that have been used to their centrality and to their funding sources sometimes feel that they can't necessarily see themselves in some of those new definitions. I don't look at that in an adversarial way. Organizationally, though, I don't want to say, "Okay, so now diversity is important. That's today's news." So I'm going to run over to these people and say, "Let's pay for the diversity that we should have been doing all along, crucially, that others have been doing matter of factly as best practice." I think that I would rather take us to the uncomfortable place to invoke Darren, to let us look back at the words of James Baldwin that he wrote in the mid-1950s. He was not being hostile or adversarial when he wrote, "This world is white no longer and it will never be white again." And this is what he meant. Let's look at the United States. This is a beautiful, complicated, multi-voiced, difficult, thorny, gnarly, multi-experienced nation that actually holds together, I swear, even though sometimes it feels that those ties are very tenuous. We are a community. We are one thing. We are many things in one thing. That is a fact. There is richness and beauty and power and knowledge and wisdom and solutions at the kitchen table. And Baldwin is saying, let's acknowledge that. Let's say what the world actually is. The rotation of our resources is a democratic way of addressing the potential foibles of what we can sometimes see inadvertently through our blind spots. And I think here we are interested not so much in bringing marginal voices to the center of discourse.

Rather, I think that we need to be supporting the margins as the center shifting, and I should say, the so-called margins, shifting the center of balance and supporting the work of those people and organizations who have long been thinking about how to represent and empower our diverse communities. I think about the word philanthropy and its roots. *Philo*, to love, anthropose people. And I carry that as a guide—the animated love of humankind. And that's what drives me—thinking about the root of that word in our work and what it means. I think another important principle, especially when thinking about resources, is that sometimes bigger is good, but bigger is not always better. One thing that I think is very interesting about money and the arts is that it doesn't always scale. You don't always need millions and millions of dollars to make an impact.

Sometimes it costs a lot of money to make a thing, but sometimes it doesn't cost a lot of money to make a thing that has lasting value and that can change who we are and how we see the world. One of the great fortunes of my life, one of the great honors of my life, was being asked by Bryan Stevenson to write a poem that would then be set in stone at the Equal Justice Initiative Memorial. That poem, that thing cost exactly zero. And hopefully it will make people think and feel and give them a moment to meditate and take in and make meaning of all that they see at that extraordinary place. There are sculptures there that are extraordinary. And yes, it costs money to make those sculptures. Those artists were paid. That is appropriate. But when you think about what the lasting value is from that investment in art, it's quite extraordinary and it's very, very economical.

In addition to justice, I think that our work in philanthropy should explicitly have, as a value, freedom. I want us to add that to thinking about justice. And I think that freedom is something that I understand out of what the African American tradition has taught all of us about freedom, about what it is to be free, and about what it is to be human. Something we understand best from the experience of African Americans in this country in particular, denied both of those values, freedom, and humanity. And so I also think because I understand things better when poets give me the words for them, I understand the principle of freedom in the words of the poet Robert Hayden, in his poem, "*Frederick Douglass*." A poem dedicated to that great freedom fighter. He describes freedom, thus, "We are visioning a world where none is lonely. None hunted, none alien." That is how Robert Hayden helps us understand freedom. What would it mean if none of us felt lonely or hunted or alone? And when we learn from each other and make ourselves stronger and make our community stronger, a final word is something that I've learned from the poet Gwendolyn Brooks. I think that a way of embodying this justice principle that we're thinking about today is to think about what it means, in her words, to be each other's business. She says, "We are each other's business. We are each other's magnitude and bond." And that's what I think justice and philanthropy is all about. Thank you.

[applause]

[New gospel of wealth. What does #GenerosityToJustice look like to you? Ford Foundation dot org forward slash new gospel.]

**End of transcript.**