

NEW GOSPEL OF WEALTH / THE FUTURE OF PHILANTHROPY

## On using power and privilege for change featuring Jeff Raikes

Jeff Raikes, co-founder of the Raikes Foundation, on getting uncomfortable, listening, and what leaders in philanthropy need to do to advance equity and justice.

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.**

[Using power and privilege for change. Jeff Raikes, co-founder, Raikes Foundation. A white man in his sixties with wavy gray hair and goatee, wearing a navy blue jacket with a rumpled pocket square.]

**ANNOUNCER:** Please welcome Jeff Raikes.

**JEFF RAIKES:** This is a quick talk for white people.

[laughter]

Now, let me explain. I first met Darren Walker right after he was named head of the Ford Foundation, when I was still the CEO of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. I felt an immediate connection, but our deeper friendship developed a few years ago when we shared the stage with Michele Norris at the Aspen Ideas Festival. Darren and Michele and I were talking about race and, in particular, how philanthropy needed to ditch this color-blind approach that was and is still so prevalent in the field and, more broadly, in society. It was really a fascinating conversation, and toward the end of the conversation Darren said something to this effect, “When I see a bunch of guys who look like Jeff driving around in a golf cart in Dallas, having this very same conversation that we’re having on the Aspen stage, I’ll know that we’ve won.”

[laughter]

The crowd cracked up, but that comment stuck with me. And Darren has repeatedly reminded me since then that if we are to have an open and honest conversation in this country about racial justice that will lead to healing and inclusive prosperity, white people like me have a big role to play, and we cannot be coy about it. I needed to get over my fears of saying the wrong thing or saying the right thing in the wrong way, and just jump in. And I still have a lot to learn. I am still guilty of centering white people, white perspective and expertise, white comfort as a first impulse, and I have to catch myself, stop, and remember that my experience is not the only one

that matters. And I know that sounds painfully obvious, but when the world has been built to accommodate you, it's a hard habit to break.

[laughter]

Privilege is invisible to those who possess it. And that lack of awareness undergirds the myth of color blindness and leads to a sense of entitlement that is debilitating for society. So I am speaking out and sharing what I'm learning about white dominance and its invisibility to those of us who are white, and how that harms and distorts society in a way that creates a more steep uphill climb for people who don't look like me. Because once you recognize it, the myriad ways that we've created an obstacle course with setbacks and steep hills to climb for people who are not white, the more that we understand what we need to do. This has to change if our nation is to prosper. Now, like I said, the world has been built to accommodate guys like me, and the systems that support our young people are designed for my kids. But let's take a step back, and let's think about the life of a black boy in this country. He is born to a mother who is less likely to receive high-quality prenatal care and more likely to die in childbirth. He lives in a household shrouded by the legacy of redlining and housing discrimination, preventing his ancestors from building the wealth that comes from owning a home and passing economic security onto children and grandchildren. He attends a public school that is financed by local property taxes, so he gets far less funding for his education than a child attending a public school in a wealthy neighborhood. His teachers, who are overwhelmingly white, carry the implicit biases that all of us carry. He is tagged as dangerous or angry from the time he is in preschool. He is suspended, expelled, and otherwise disciplined at a rate his white peers would never experience or tolerate. His teachers and administrators believe he can't be as successful as a white child, so he is tracked into less rigorous coursework that will make him far less likely to attend college. If he gets to college, he is far more likely to drop out, because his public school didn't prepare him, and kids like him are not made to feel that they belong on a college campus. When he applies for a job, if his name sounds black he is far more likely to end up in the reject pile. He is more likely to be a victim of violence, and he is far, far more likely to end up in the criminal justice system, either as a youth or an adult. He is more likely to be homeless. These are not outliers. These are data. These are facts. This is America.

Unfortunately, when we see these outcomes that repeat and often worsen, year after year, we, as a culture, tend to blame the victim and not tackle the system. Now, I think that's because, as Americans, we love the term "equality." Everyone gets the same thing and everyone has the same shot. But let's be real here—that is just not true. If we are going to reckon with our history and dismantle systems of oppression once and for all, we must ground the bootstraps narrative in an equitable context or retire that narrative once and for all. And we're going to have to think differently about how we make policy that actually helps people who have been shut out. We must change the life trajectory for the black boy I just described. And we don't do it by changing the boy. We do it by building systems that support his healthy development.

Now, how do we do that? We design it for him. This is an idea that is gaining traction in policy making. It works like this. Design the solution to the systemic problem you are trying to solve for

the person who is least well served by the system you are trying to fix. Chances are, if you get it right for those who have suffered most, others will benefit too. That is the power of equity.

Many of the systems, products, and infrastructure we all interact with, from public schools and courts to medicine and technology, were designed mostly by white men to work well for people like us. They were designed at a time when we had antiquated and destructive ideas about race, gender, identity, and disability. And they are holding us back. And they won't change unless people like me take our privilege and our power, share it, seed it, and transform it into a force for changing our society for the better. We must align and work toward a day when race and expressions of othering are no longer predictors of life outcomes for young people in our country. Can America reimagine itself as a society with equity as a transformative, animating force, so that all individuals have what they need to achieve their potential, and prosperity is more widely shared? Yes. This is what America can be. 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.**