

NEW GOSPEL OF WEALTH / THE FUTURE OF PHILANTHROPY

## This is what a philanthropist looks like featuring Shonda Rhimes and Darren Walker

Shonda Rhimes, writer, producer, author, and founder of Shondaland, on using culture to create change and the importance of representation.

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.**

[This is what a philanthropist looks like. Darren Walker, president, Ford Foundation. An African American man wearing glasses and a light blue dress shirt with gray pants. Shonda Rhimes, writer, producer and creator of “Grey’s Anatomy” and “Scandal”. A Black woman wearing a black turtleneck and skirt.]

**ANNOUNCER:** Please welcome Shonda Rhimes and Darren Walker.

[applause]

**DARREN WALKER:** Shonda Rhimes. You have transformed how we think about media and entertainment, and you have used the narratives of LGBTQ, women, women of color, of course. But you have also made issues that are often invisible, and people who are often marginalized—you put them and their narratives at the center of your work. Talk a little bit about how you, Shonda the creator, sees narrative.

**SHONDA RHIMES:** I think that storytelling really is a powerful, powerful way to make change. And I don't know that I saw that at the very beginning as much as I saw a need to tell stories that mattered to me. I was really trying to say something in a way that I wanted to see. I wanted to tell stories I wanted to see. And what I wanted to see was myself at the center of a story. And the moment you do that, you know, you feel seen and you know that other people feel seen. And I started to hear from other people that they felt seen, too. And that expanded, kind of, the stories I started to tell. And you realized the power of that. So, suddenly I was telling LGBTQ stories and hearing from the HRC, and we were just making progress in a way that felt powerful. People felt their stories were being told, and they felt it gave them a way to talk to their families. It felt like we were making progress in a way that I was hearing from senators saying, “Oh, that was interesting.” Suddenly they knew somebody who was coming out because Callie Torres was coming out on television. Narrative should feel personal. I think that's what makes philanthropy interesting in a lot of ways, is most philanthropy that catches people, that makes people say, I'm going to give money. It's something that feels personal to them.

**DARREN WALKER:** So what does Shonda Rhimes, the philanthropist, look like? Because you actually have given a lot of money. You've given it quietly. You've not sought, you know, any notoriety for your philanthropy.

**SHONDA RHIMES:** I think that in the beginning I gave because it mattered to me. You know, I gave to Dartmouth College, because they said that they were going to start making college free for kids whose parents made under \$100,000 a year, which really moved me, because it would have changed my life when I was going to college. So I started giving money to that and I started giving money to organizations that I cared about. I remember giving to the Smithsonian. And I gave them because I really cared about the idea that we were going to support an African American visual arts gallery. And Lonnie Bunch said to me, "You know, you have to put your name on it and you have to publicize that you did it." And I felt really uncomfortable doing so. I really didn't want to. And he said, the act of you putting your name on something and the act of you letting people know that you did this sets an example for other people and makes them understand that it's okay to give. And that really struck me because it hadn't ever struck me before, that that's why you say you're doing something. It always felt very—I thought like the idea of me saying that I was giving money made it seem like I was trying to make it about me. And he said, "No, you're setting an example."

**DARREN WALKER:** How do you think about the kind of giving you're going to do in the future?

**SHONDA RHIMES:** First of all, I'm giving to the arts, which I think is very important. You know, Los Angeles, which is where I spend most of my time, is a cultural desert in a lot of ways, especially if you're a person of color. I've been really trying to find places that provide young artists with places to work and working with a theater company called IAMA, for instance. And one of the things they've been doing is, really, finding young playwrights and providing them with a living wage to do the writing that they need to do. Which is huge. And rare. I've been working with Debbie Allen Dance Academy, and that has been an amazing situation because, you know, data provides kids with everything from kids show up who can't afford shoes, and she puts shoes on their feet, and takes kids from ages of 4 to 18 and trains them in every form of dance in a way that doesn't exist in anywhere in Southern California. When they go tap ballet, African jazz, modern gangnam, like, all of these different forms of dance. And turns out, some really amazing dancers. And it's a powerful thing.

**DARREN WALKER:** And so, when you think about the state of America today, and the state of the community, the African American community, and the impact you want to have, how do you frame that? How do you think about that?

**SHONDA RHIMES:** For me, I really want to spend my time making sure that, you know, arts is protected for young people, because I feel like having a creative place to put yourself and to put out into the world what's going on, is important because when you put the narrative out there, you can change how people feel about things. So for me, making sure that's available for people is important. Education is hugely important. And for me to be able to fund opportunities for people to get educated is everything. And just making space is important. Making sure that

there are spaces for people to go and be creative are important. I grew up in a family where the arts were just a given. You know, I played the oboe for 17 years. I know. I know.

**DARREN WALKER:** Shonda, you played the oboe?

**SHONDA RHIMES:** I played the oboe. I know. I don't have an armature anymore, but I played a mean oboe. I was good. I was good. Yes, but mostly I read and I wrote. That was who I was. It was really that I was a shy kid and that was important to me. What I thought was interesting for me, like, when I look back on it now, yes, it was a refuge when I was younger. When I got to college, the fact that I was so creative and then I could write like that, was an equalizer. It became a social equalizer in a way that, like, nothing else could.

**DARREN WALKER:** So Dartmouth College, you arrived.

**SHONDA RHIMES:** I arrived, and I had a talent that nobody else had. And it became an equalizer. Like, other people's families came from this. Other people had that. Other people dress like this. I had the same five outfits, you know, but I could do something that none of them could. And it was an equalizer in a way that was very interesting. When I got to Hollywood and it was me in a room full of, like, lots of guys who all look the same named Chad, it was an equalizer.

**DARREN WALKER:** And because your writing was just so powerful that Chad had to listen to you.

**SHONDA RHIMES:** Yeah, it just provided me with something that made me as, you know, the thing that got people in the door, simply because of who they were, you know, it got them in the door because of who they were. It got me in the door. My writing got me in the door, when it generally, like, who I was, was never going to get me in the door. So to me, it was a very powerful equalizer. I didn't know anybody. Nobody was going to let me in based on like, oh, she looks like us. And that's the color of my skin. Being a woman. Hollywood was just not that place. It was an equalizer because nobody's going to deny your talent.

**DARREN WALKER:** So, in wrapping here, I would love for you to talk about: what's your call to action? What do you say to America, to an audience of philanthropists that you hope will motivate and mobilize us to build a more just and fair world?

**SHONDA RHIMES:** Wow. So there's a lot there. I think that there's a couple of things. One, I think that in this room, you know, we're all preaching to the choir of each other, which is lovely. Next time something like this happens, I feel like every person in this room should drag along with them somebody who doesn't agree with you or who doesn't necessarily think fully the same way you do about philanthropy. Maybe who gives differently, who has a different agenda about any of this. Just to say, come, listen, because maybe, I feel like their minds would have been changed by some of the most amazing things that they heard here today. One. Two. I think that a lot of the things that we all try to do is to, like, rebuild the wheel. We all try to rebuild things, as opposed to finding amazing organizations, big or small, and uplifting those. One of the things that I find very inspiring about a lot of the things I've learned about giving, from you, from a lot of

the people I've worked with, is you don't go out and start your own organization. You go out and find an organization where people who know what they're doing and have been working with their, you know, boots to the ground, sleeves rolled up, for years and years. You find them and you put your money in them and you support them. And you let them grow. You give them the opportunity to grow. And you put your influential spotlight on them, so that they can really do what they need to do. Versus saying like, oh, look at me, I'm going to build an organization and create something. I don't need to create something. I'm a writer. I don't know what I'm doing, but other people do. And at the very least, I know what it looks like when something's working and I can put my money there.

**DARREN WALKER:** Wow. Well, Shonda Rhimes, you make us all hopeful, because you have demonstrated the power of creativity, of narrative, of storytelling, to help lift up voices, and people who, in the narrative arc of this country, have often been left out and left behind. And you have made America better.

**SHONDA RHIMES:** Well.

**DARREN WALKER:** We are all better because of Shonda Rhimes. Please join me in thanking Shonda Rhimes.

[applause]

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

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