

Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Teresa C. Younger

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Teresa C. Younger, president and CEO of the [Ms. Foundation for Women](#), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

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Transcript begins.

[Teresa C. Younger, a Black and indigenous woman with natural black hair with a gray streak, wearing a periwinkle-blue shirt, sits for a video conversation with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing a red sweater.]

[on-screen text: Teresa C. Younger, President & CEO, Ms. Foundation for Women]

TERESA C. YOUNGER: My truth is that I understand the complexity of our lives and that we don't just get to hold any one identity. And our identities can't be determined from the outside. They have to be determined by us.

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Teresa C. Younger]

HILARY PENNINGTON: I am really excited today to be talking with Teresa Younger, the amazing, dynamic president and CEO of the Ms. Foundation for Women. Teresa is an activist. She's an advocate. She's a strategist and a proven leader in both philanthropy and the policy sectors.

So, Teresa, greetings to you.

TERESA: Thank you so much for having me, Hilary.

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

HILARY: Oh, well, thank you. And, you know, just—I have to ask you the most obvious question, starting out in a year like this. But, you know, as a person who has been a leader on the intersection of race and gender and justice, what sense do you make of the year we've just had and, really, you know, where we are as a country?

TERESA: We opened a conversation in this country around race and gender, democracy and privilege and justice and equity and equality that we didn't have going on 10 months ago. And now we are seeing philanthropy hold those conversations, education hold those conversations, corporations hold those conversations in ways that I don't think we would've gotten to if we had not reached a crisis moment.

At the Ms. Foundation, the work that we are trying to do is to lift up women and girls of color, because we know their brilliance is sitting and just needs to be recognized.

In the United States, we know that Black women have been in the forefront of every single social justice movement this country has seen. And we've been in the forefront and behind the scenes all at the same time, and I think only more recently. And, I think, as a reflection of where we are right now in this moment in time, are we really getting to lift up and see the names of where Black women's leadership has been directly impacting this country, its vision?

HILARY: Let's talk about that, because you really have centered those women at the center of the Ms. Foundation. You all issued such an important report, that *Pocket Change* report. You know, that—your statistic was that of the \$66 billion given annually in philanthropy every year in the United States, half of 1% goes to organizations led by women of color, Black women, which is astonishing. And it's hard to let the sector off, uh, for a rhetoric around supporting the leadership of women of color with statistics like this. So, tell us, you know, what you see and what went into that report.

TERESA: Wow, so I came to the Ms. Foundation about six and a half years ago. The Ms. Foundation has, for a long time, centered the work of women and girls, women and girls of color. They were not public about it. They were not vocal about it. And when I stepped into this role, one of the things I said is we have to actually tell our own story more effectively. And we have to be bold and intentional and unapologetic about who we are doing this work for. Because in the pool of inequality, we only have so much we can do. And we drop our pebble over women and girls of color and let the ripples affect everybody else, because we believe those are the most marginalized in our society. I started asking people, "You know, what do you think, uh, how would it look if we centered women and girls of color?" And philanthropy, at the time, was not so receptive.

HILARY: Really?

TERESA: Really, really. It was not so receptive. And, in fact, it was almost like I was asking an abstract question that wasn't—

HILARY: Teresa, let's just be clear. This was not that long ago. This was, like, 2014, right?

TERESA: This was 2014. This was the moment that we had our first Black president. It was coming to the end of his term, the last two years. And, you know, everybody looked at the Ms. Foundation and the legacy and me coming in and said, "Well, what are you going to do?" And I thought, the only thing that I can do is speak from my realities. And my reality is that I am a Black and an Indigenous woman who has two adopted siblings,

one who is Korean and one who is Japanese and Black. And I grew up in North Dakota. So my truth is that I understand the complexity of our lives and that we don't just get to hold any one identity. And our identities can't be determined from the outside. They have to be determined by us.

And so I started to ask, how truthful are we? And how do we work both with philanthropy as a call-in and as a call-out, right? And from there we knew what we needed to do. If we were going to be intentional about women and girls of color, we'd need to lift up their work. In that, we realized we didn't even have a baseline to hold a conversation with philanthropy about how many dollars were going to women and girls of color. So the *Pocket Change* report came out of our strategic plan to create a baseline and do some research around 4,000 women of color-led organizations, of folks who said they were moving money to women and girls of color in philanthropy.

What was the nonprofit sector saying? And what was philanthropy saying, right? Sometimes there's a big disconnect. And there was. We saw philanthropy saying, "Well, we are serving women and girls of color." And then we were hearing from nonprofit leaders, saying, "They're not actually asking us the questions around racial equity." And it allowed us to really do an assessment.

Philanthropy has a built-in systemic racism that we actually have to look at. What we found was that the average grant to women organizations was \$50,000. The average grant to women of color organizations was \$35,000.

HILARY: I think that there's so much learning to do for all the kinds of reasons that you just talked about, especially, you know, will we have the ability to listen to them, to center the organizations themselves. And I think that's going to be a really challenging journey for philanthropy.

TERESA: Absolutely.

HILARY: You know, you have a very unique identity as both a fund giver and a fundraiser. What would you lovingly say to the foundations from which you raise money? What should we know that we don't know?

TERESA: We have to understand that philanthropy is still built in a capitalistic model and a patriarchal model. We have to look at what the measurement is going to look like, not over 3 years but over 7 or 10 years. Philanthropy can be a fickle friend. We need philanthropy to stay with the movement building, with women and girls of color, for a long time. Not just in the hot moment. Not just when we have a vice president-elect who's a woman of color. Okay? We need to look at this over a lengthy period of time. And we need to reconstruct what our measurements of success really look like.

One of the conversations that I continue to have with philanthropy is, what are you trying to do? And how much true risk are you willing to take?

HILARY: And risk as defined by who? It is generational work. It's not common for foundations to be very long-term partners. And I think we've got to really call that

question. What are we trying to do? And what are we trying to do is going to take long-term trusting relationships that we don't get to come in and out of.

I want to ask you a last question, which is a completely different kind of question.

TERESA: Okay.

HILARY: I read something you wrote in which you had this powerful, beautiful sentence where you talked about, you know, the nature of the work we're called to do in the work of justice requires you being uncomfortable, learning to become comfortable with discomfort and with making other people uncomfortable. So, for you, right now, as a leader in your work, where are your places that you feel most uncomfortable?

TERESA: I don't sit in a place of uncomfortableness about philanthropy, but I do still sit in a place of being uncomfortable around money. And, because it's nothing I was raised with, so to be in a conversation about money, particularly because it's a determiner for judging other people—how much money they don't have, what they're doing with their money—and the idea of, like, asking white people for money for women of color, because it puts me in the position to have to justify the work of my sisters.

I'm also learning how Ms. really does need to sit in the role that bridges not just philanthropy and the nonprofit sector, but how do we bridge the conversation around women of color and white women? How do we continue to bridge a conversation around gender equity that actually pushes feminism to be more inclusive of trans and gender-nonconforming folk? And so, you know, I think I'm sitting on that edge of—I'm comfortable with it, but, like, convincing others that they need to come into the conversation.

I still get a little uncomfortable walking into rooms where I don't know anybody. And I think that's primarily a reality of, I don't get to leave anything outside the door. When I walk in a room, I am a five-foot-nine Black woman—it doesn't get confused in the room, right? I have to come in and I'm expected to sit at the table, and I want to be at that table and I want to bring people to the table, but I also have to bring a voice to the table. I cannot just sit there. And there are parts of my personality that would rather sit and listen, but I actually have to be able to ask the question. And sometimes asking the question is uncomfortable because it will make somebody else uncomfortable.

HILARY: I think the things you describe are such powerful gifts. I mean, that is a really hard set of things to span. But I think, you know, you are describing the kinds of discomfort and the kinds of resolve to just stay with that, that are really what make progress possible.

And we're so lucky to get to partner with you, Teresa, and learn with you and learn from you. And I just want to thank you so much for making the time for a conversation like this. It's really a gift to connect with you. Thank you.

TERESA: That's wonderful. Thank you so much. It's been great.

HILARY: Thank you.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

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