

Tread Softly

Organizing communities is a complex business, and needs to be governed by the phrase, “tread softly.” Here is a story that supports that admonition.

My friend Fred, the lawyer, was also the moderator of a Unitarian church and in the early '70s found himself in the middle of a classic church fight, a congregation divided into two opposing communities of interest. In the aftermath of the death of Martin Luther King, the many denominations, including the Unitarians, were approached to invest endowment funds in Black economic development schemes. Fred's church, which was also my own, was solicited to do just that by purchasing ‘bonds’ that were to be invested in minority owned businesses. The request struck deep into ongoing divisions within the church that had been festering for some time. The long-term older members, whose money supported the church, had for some time been increasingly uncomfortable with the large number of new, young, and more liberal congregants. They were outraged with the idea that money left to the church by caring parishioners might be invested in high-risk investments in the inner city. To them, it was an affront to both legacy and the prudent stewardship of funds. The whole idea only reaffirmed their suspicion that the new church members, who contributed very little money, were in for a free ride and were irresponsible as well. The newer members backed and led by a young and passionate minister, were equally committed in their belief that making this investment was the right thing to do. They became even more convinced than before that the older members of

the church were basically reactionary and racist to boot. Both sides were using this issue to reaffirm their worst fears about each other. A classic church fight was in the offing.

This kind of struggle has played out countless times, not only in churches but also within many other kinds of organizations where cultures of young and old, liberal and conservative, affluent and otherwise, meet head on. Both sides organized for battle by soliciting support for a big meeting at which the church would take a vote. I will never forget that night. The vestry hall was packed. In amazement, I noticed a number of people in wheelchairs and realized some elderly members of the congregation living in nursing homes had been convinced to take an ambulance to the church so that they could register their vote! This was serious business, and there was Fred as moderator, presumptively assisted by me as a member of the Investment Committee in the role of explainer of what these non-rated, non-investment quality by any definition ‘bonds’ were all about.

That experience was a lesson to me in how fragile social organizations are, how easily they can be destroyed when polarization runs rampant and there isn’t enough goodwill or good process, to bring it back on course. In this story, the Minister, who could have been a bridge-builder, made the decision to throw everything he had on one side of the issue. He did so for his own reasons based on his own beliefs, but it was a disaster for the community called the church. The big vote was a non-event— a modest commitment that satisfied no one was made to purchase the bonds (which in this case were never invested and ultimately returned to the church). Many of the older members ultimately

resigned from the church, including Fred. Many of the more strident younger members drifted off, and as you could assume, the minister resigned. It took years, and a very different kind of ministry to rebuild the congregation. Many organizations that suffer a similar experience never recover.

This story illustrates the challenge of creating, nourishing, supporting, and sustaining communities of solidarity and cautions us as we go about the work of advocating for what we believe in. Remember the dictum, that "the first rule of life, and philanthropy, is to do no harm"? Yet I can also hear the echo of another piece of kitchen table wisdom, "in order to make an omelet you have to break some eggs." And therein lies the art of crossing the bridge from a "community of one," to a "community of many." It is part of the paradox.

Such stories and experiences are part of the reason so many people do not even try, or dare to cross the bridge. I remember a comment made many years ago by my friend Norman at one of those endless board meetings, this one in connection with a halfway house for adolescents. We were moaning about how hard it was to recruit new board members, which we badly needed for all kinds of reasons. Norman made a memorable comment- "Where the hell is the rest of the community when you need them. It's always the same 10 percent that show up all the time, the same ones at every meeting!" Norman was right, the activists in any community tend to talk to themselves, literally they are the ones in the church basement. How to bring in the rest is very much the name of the game.

As I think about the balance between one's mission, and it wouldn't be a mission if you didn't strongly believe in it, and 'doing harm,' the more critical it becomes. No one 30 years ago in that church wanted to hurt, and almost destroy the institution yet that is what almost happened.

If there is a common thread to the work/work of philanthropy it is how to mediate different points of view, retain your beliefs, and still accomplish the end goal.