

## **Each Day**

Dead low tide, the frenzy begins-  
Sanderling, Willet, Marbled Kowtit  
Work furiously side by side,  
Choreography synchronized.  
As each wave deposits fresh, rich nutrients,  
Irresistible to seething life forms —  
Sand crabs, beetles, worms, snails,  
All met by sharp piercing beaks,  
Birds who are bred for this work  
As we are bred for ours.  
Actors scatter, reconfigure or work alone,  
Wing around the cliff, down the beach,  
And in a blink, as though never there, are gone.  
Tidal flats and pools slowly fill - denizens  
Of the sand burrow down and wait  
To be called as we wait to be called.

In the poem, the actors are the birds, and the “denizens of the sand.” The listening is for a particular sound made by the waves as they move slowly up the beach, or for a certain stirring below the surface of the sand that the birds somehow sense. For Midori the

actors are those who have come before, the composers, the performing artists, and the listeners. In philanthropy the relevant voices, those that are important, are often not easily found — they may lie around the corner out of sight, they may in fact be just below the surface. As someone wise once observed "when Rosa Parks got on that bus in Montgomery, Alabama, there wasn't a (foundation) program officer in sight." The philanthropic art I am looking for is one where we do not drown out, with preconceptions, rhetoric or process, the very voices we need to hear. I do not want to miss the mark, miss the next Rosa Parks.

Some donors have figured out how to operate close enough to the ground that they do not run this risk.

Dan funds a special scholarship program, one with a surprise ending, for special kids, and we are interviewing a prospective student. She is a tall, angular, young black woman who wants to go to an Ivy League college, but has only marginal SAT scores and marks. She is the first person in her family to go to college and that she survived her circumstances in a very tough neighborhood to this point is a miracle. She is nervous, maybe highly-strung. In his very direct manner Dan asks, "Why are your SATs so lousy, and why Brown, why not U Mass?" The girl's response is bold, "My SATs are lousy because I don't test well and freaked out during the test itself, but I know I can do Brown, and I know if I go my world will open up in ways that would not happen at U Mass." "Ah ha," says Dan, "It really will, if you can do it." I watch as these two people, one a wealthy 70 year-old real estate man and a lovely 18 year-old kid from the poorest part of

the city, converse. When it is she who is talking, and Dan who is listening, his eyes really start to sparkle. The room is filled with a kind of hum, and what you feel is Dan's love for this person, and how she rises to his high appreciation of who and what she could be. At the end of the interview Dan shakes her hand and says, as he always says when it goes well, "I feel lucky and proud to know you, and I'd like to help you." It doesn't get any more concise than that. The "surprise" in Dan's special scholarship program is that if the student graduates successfully, all student loans will be paid off, but the students do not know that.

How would you describe the relationship in that room between the two? Perhaps tough but supportive and nurturing with a kind of positive tension based on high expectations. It was also one that left both parties feeling just right. It is hard to get that relationship right.

Let's try this:

Midori is conducting a Master Class, and the student is a tall young man who towers over the amazingly petite personage of the internationally acclaimed concert violinist. The student plays pieces of the Dvorak Violin Concerto with great passion and fluidity. He is excellent, and Midori says so, and compliments him on his obvious love of the piece and of playing the violin. She cautions that he is playing too much for himself and not projecting enough out to the audience and demonstrates what she means. She then spends almost an hour on the nuance of individual themes and has him repeat the same parts

several times. The student responds and the two of them enter into a kind of dance with Midori literally singing along in a lovely clear voice as he plays. Her body weaving to the music, her voice conducting his playing as it grows more interpretive with a wider range of mood, especially in the cadenza, pushing him to go where he wanted to go, but had not known how, or perhaps dared.

How would you describe the relationship between Master and pupil? Deep and analytical, respectful but demanding, supportive but not satisfied it was as excellent as it could be.

With Midori and her student, and with Dan and his, the listening process is quite straightforward and the voices self-evident. Both Midori and Dan know exactly what they are looking for. In Midori's case she has spent 20 years developing her world class ear. In Dan's case, he has spent a lifetime "kicking the brick," intuitively sizing up whether this is a deal he wants to do, a person with whom he wants to do business. His "criteria" for what constitutes a good grant is internal to his life experience— he knows it when he sees it, he can tell if this person is someone he wants to support. Is he interested in the young woman's grades, scores and home environment? Yes, because he doesn't want her to fail. He also wants to know her well enough to provide the kind of mentoring and support she will need to succeed. What he is most interested in, however, is a certain spark within her— it is more important than anything else.

You don't know Dan but it would not surprise you that he likes to meet face to face and is not interested in funding what he refers to as "bullshit," which has no real definition but has something to do with too much process. If you put an intermediary between Dan and the direct experience of meeting the young student, it would not work. If the same student's profile were presented to him on paper, he would not be able to "listen." Would he do more of these scholarships? Without a doubt, the amount of money by Dan's standards is small, even though it is huge to the students. But the very hands on experience required imposes serious limitations. It takes Dan and his advisors an immense amount of time to discover, meet with and then nurture these students. In his book, he is getting far more out of the deal than the student does. His is a lovely story but it is his, in Midori's words, "sole property."

It is also not everyone's cup of tea. Many donors are unable or unwilling to put in that much time. Many would be uncomfortable, and even afraid to sit in that room the way Dan is able to. And many more do not know how to make the connection. Their world is too far away from these other worlds. I remember a friend saying to me once, "I would like to give some money in the Bronx, but I really don't know where it is and would be afraid to go there anyway." This comment came from an active philanthropist who is a lifelong resident of the NYC area. My guess is the same words are said, or thought, about Watts, the south side of Chicago, the Barrios of Rio, or any other very poor neighborhoods in the world. The gated communities that have become a common phenomenon even in parts of the country where it is unclear where and what the threat is, are a reflection of the even more widespread gated communities in our minds, and in the

way we live. Fisher Island may be separated by a seven-minute ferry ride from Miami Beach, but the symbolism and reality of that distancing is one and the same. A hard place to listen from.

As lovely as Dan's story is, it also illustrates what might be called the "beauty contest syndrome." Donors are drawn to the attractive "kid," the smooth, articulate "social entrepreneur," the great proposal writer, the better salesman. They are turned-off or even frightened by the sounds and smells of the messy, the difficult, those who mumble, those who offend or are radical even though these may be the most deserving or capable of making a difference. I remember a visit to an organization that worked with street gangs. We were seated in a circle and I was the only "suit" in that circle. These were tough, aggressive kids and I was on their turf. They were not an easy group to like. I think that most philanthropy is drawn to fund "poster child" people and organizations who in their own worlds may be the equivalent of "suits."

Any transaction, gift or otherwise, has its own nature and terms, but what every donor wants is the same sense of engagement and satisfaction that Dan got. What every potential donee wants is the same hearing and respect that the young student got. It is a donor/donee relationship that is perfectly balanced. Partnership, collaboration, a two-way learning experience are terms used today to describe this relationship and even though the power imbalance remains intrinsic, these terms reflect a pronounced change of attitude. The best working relationship is not a vertical one, from the donor down to the donee or the reverse; it is more horizontal, or lateral.

The reality is often a cacophony of voices and a moving target, as in the poem; "Actors scatter, reconfigure or work alone, Wing around the cliff, down the beach/ And in a blink, as though never there, are gone." The art of philanthropy is to listen closely to the swell of voices, to observe the acrobatics on the beach and in the sky, and at exactly the right moment, contribute the valuable nutrients that are distinctly your own.

The poem came from a time in Santa Barbara. To get down to the beach, we would navigate steep wooden stairs that had 144 steps, counted very precisely by my granddaughter Kaeli. Each day, at the foot of the stairs it was always different. Some days you can step easily onto the beach, other days the sea has been at work and a jumble of rocks and small boulders make the last step difficult, a small climb or jump. The tide is huge, and the waves rolling across the Pacific carry tremendous force. Even so, it is a bit of a surprise to see this daily rearrangement of a tiny speck of earth. The sea is relentless; it keeps track of time differently than we, counts its victories in infinitely patient ways, and keeps re-writing over and over again. That is what it takes.