

The Hard Way

It is 1968, a week after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Cities across America have erupted in violence as black communities explode in anger and frustration. Boston is one of those cities and I have driven to Blue Hill Avenue in the middle of the area where the riots took place. I park and enter a storefront with the name Roxbury Development Corporation on the door. The word "SOUL" is scrawled, in soap over large surfaces of the plate glass windows. Carol, a tall, heavy-set young black woman, is at her desk. She is the secretary for this struggling little operation that runs a Headstart project, and rehabs apartments.

"You okay?" I say. "Yup, at least we were not hit like so much of the block," Carol responds. "Amazing, I wonder why we were so lucky." We talk for a bit about one of the apartments that is now vacant, and as I am leaving say, "By the way Carol, what does SOUL mean?" I will never forget the look in Carol's eyes— it was sheer amazement and spoke volumes. How could this white guy who has been coming to this community for years, doing work here, supposedly one of the good guys, not know? "Soul means Black," she said, "and that is why we were not smashed by the jerks who were tearing the city apart last week." Carol turned away, her scorn evident. The phone rang and I walked out, embarrassed. It was not the first time.

A year earlier I was in a meeting at the local office of the NAACP. My colleagues and I were complaining about the lack of support in the "community" for our work. In the early

60s, nine of us, all young professionals, white but for one Asian, and suburban, began a modest but earnest attempt at community development, a term not yet defined and promoted by the Ford Foundation and others. This was before the days of Community Development Corporations and organizations like Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the Enterprise Foundation. Our target area was a 36 square block area in a Roxbury, a very poor Black neighborhood in Boston. The goal was to rehab apartments, rent them at a low price and, at the same time, acquire key real estate to attract social service programs into the area like a big new multi-service center (which eventually would hold the first Headstart project in the city —operated by our group). The idea was that we would fix up the houses and at the same time fix up the people who lived there. We never said it exactly that way, or meant it that way, but our actions clearly sent mixed messages. We would drive into the city once a week and during confusing and endless Monday night meetings struggle to make these complicated projects work. For years, the one consistent complaint was "Where is the community?" From time to time, a neighborhood person would wander into our meetings and wander out. After more than six years, we had been successful in bringing onto the Board not one community resident.

At some point, the exchange in the second floor walk-up of the NAACP office became heated. We were challenged as to who the hell "we" were making these allegations about the "community" and that we, not of this place, were known as patronizing at best and insulting at worst. In addition, were screwing up the work— we were accused of being incompetent. The NAACP Vice President, a man known for his temper, got so angry he

suddenly stood up and threw his chair at me! We left the meeting angry ourselves, and frightened and confused.

At the time I didn't understand what was wrong. Now with the perspective of the years, our behavior, my behavior, seems outrageous, the hubris palpable. With the best of intentions, it was a fair question... who were we, and what gave us license to presume so much in a community that was not ours?

The death of Dr. King had a powerful effect on our society and among other things it led to a bright spotlight, Time magazine cover and all, on the long-neglected status of African-Americans. Concepts like Black Power became actualized in many cities including my own. Among the responses were new organizations in both the Black and White communities dedicated to the support of economic and social development. One of those organizations was the Fund for Urban Negro Development. FUND led others and me on an unusual four-year odyssey into more than 500 suburban homes. At highly energized 7AM breakfasts, we engaged in a remarkable 'in-your-face' dialogue about racism and the pursuit of social justice. It ended with a pitch for \$1000 and a day a week of time. We raised money, and some consciousness, but I learned how hard it is to talk about such issues in polite company, how ill equipped we are to hear things that we would rather avoid or deny. How hard it is to change our thinking.

These experiences for me, now long in the past, with their mix of naïveté, good intentions, youth and inexperience, coupled with a healthy dose of guilt raised a set of

questions that I struggle with to this day. These are not principally questions of what impact or results we achieved, which were modest and not long lasting, although that remains the unfinished business. Nor is it about my own motivation and involvement that contains both positive and negative elements of ambiguity. They are simply part of life. The bigger questions center around the immense difficulty in bridging different worlds. The sociology of those who live in newly remodeled kitchens in the suburbs juxtaposed to a family living day-to-day on the street is like Mars to Pluto and beyond. How we talk to one another, how we relate, how we listen as citizens, may be the most important thing of all. If we do not get that right, what we do will not work. It is also about what we take away from such experiences, to what extent we have learned. It comes back to whether we choose to “walk-by,” or “walk-in”.

These events were 30 years ago, but the same kind of mistake is repeated, sometimes on a much larger scale. There is a neighborhood in Baltimore called Sandhurst. In the early 90s, Sandhurst was the site of a comprehensive, neighborhood community development effort. Conceived by the Enterprise Foundation, and funded by a number of national foundations, especially the Annie B. Casey Foundation, it was very ambitious. Unlike our rump effort in the 60s, there were many sophisticated actors in the Sandhurst story. After a lot of money, and several years of frustration, the project failed for essentially the same reasons ours had failed 30 years before. It lacked the filter, the lens of the community, and the voices of those most involved. Not to say that it is easy to define what the “community” is and isn’t. Perhaps that is the very first step in tackling any serious philanthropic or social change work.

And through it all, that hard question from my memorable night long ago in the NAACP office in Boston, hangs in the air - 'Who are we, who am I, to come to a place that is not my own and presume to do good works?

It hangs there still. It is from these experiences, and this question among others, that precipitated the establishment in 1989 of The Philanthropic Initiative, as well as this Reader and the essays that follow.