

CREATING SHARED DREAMS

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By Bryant L. Cureton

“Philanthropy is a catalyst for change.” So begins the invitation to Conversation 2010. At one level, this statement is a simple recognition that money makes things happen. But the metaphor is far richer than that. And like any good metaphor, it both contributes new insight and invites new questions.

In its original meaning, a catalyst is a substance that changes the nature of a chemical reaction without itself being directly altered. Imagining philanthropy as a catalyst clarifies its relationship to both institutions and outcomes. For the potential philanthropist, it may help inspire purposeful action. But the metaphor also points to other parts of the equation. If philanthropy is truly a catalyst, what are the reactants; that is, what are the elements that need to be in place in order for the addition of that triggering mechanism to set off the desired reaction?

An absolute minimum would seem to be an idea and some means to implement it. Change begins with a concept and is accomplished by people organized to do so. When these are present, as the metaphor implies, the addition of the necessary resources can initiate the transition of the idea into reality. So for institutions (or society) to be transformed, there must be transformative ideas and then there must be agents capable of the transformative action that implements those ideas.

The questions that flow from this model are important for all those who deal with philanthropy — the practitioners who seek resources, the philanthropists who provide them, and the institutional leaders who seek to pursue their institutions’ missions. Where do transformative ideas come from? What conditions stimulate or inhibit the generation of the best ideas? In what ways do our institutions foster or restrict meaningful creativity?

These are questions not about the strategies of fund raising but rather about the strategies fund raising serves. If we are to consider philanthropy as a force for societal transformation, we must consider how it is directed and focused. If as leaders of institutions we hope to lead the way to a

better world, we must accept responsibility for bringing both imagination and institutional effectiveness to the philanthropic equation. The trend toward “entrepreneurial philanthropy” reframes the issue by moving control over idea generation outside the institution, but it makes understanding how ideas develop even more important.

Let’s begin this exploration with an example of special relevance to the participants in Conversation 2010. On December 7, 1926, a telegram arrived in Williamsburg for the Rev. Dr. W.A.R. Goodwin. Goodwin had been dividing his time between teaching and fund raising at the College of William and Mary and had recently added part-time service as rector of Bruton Parish Church. Prying eyes would have been hard pressed to grasp the telegram’s importance, which was, of course, the point of the obscurity of the message. It read:

AUTHORIZE PURCHASE OF ANTIQUE REFERRED TO IN YOUR LONG
LETTER OF DECEMBER FOURTH AT EIGHT ON BASIS OUTLINED IN
SHORTER LETTER SAME DATE

DAVID’S FATHER¹

It was, in fact, John D. Rockefeller’s approval for Dr. Goodwin to purchase for William and Mary a property on Duke of Gloucester Street that had suddenly come on the market—we know it as the Ludwell-Paradise House—for \$8,000. In one sense it marked a beginning, the first of many purchases and restorations which would eventually lead to what we now know as Colonial Williamsburg. In another sense, it was the culmination of a long courtship during which an Episcopal priest turned college advancement officer helped an extraordinary philanthropist move from arms-length disinterest to deep involvement in a very big idea indeed. In the terms of our metaphor, it was the point at which catalysis began in earnest.

But what were the pre-existing conditions that awaited philanthropy’s trigger? First, there was an idea—an idea both elegant and improbable. It is no doubt at least as hard for us today to imagine what the village of Williamsburg looked like before the restoration began as it would have been for the citizens of the time to imagine what we now enjoy. Duke of Gloucester Street was a dreary progression of ugly store fronts, gas stations, and telephone wires partly obscuring dilapidated structures, with the newest addition being a public high school covering the site where the Governor’s Palace had once stood.

But from his earliest time in Williamsburg, during his first term of service as rector of Bruton Parish Church early in his career, Goodwin had seen something else. He had seen what could not be seen—ghosts, he sometimes called them. In a letter to a high school student who, before the restoration began, had asked him what he thought of their little town, he wrote:

¹ Dennis Montgomery, *A Link Among the Days: The Life and Times of The Reverend Doctor W.A.R. Goodwin, the Father of Colonial Williamsburg* (Richmond, Dietz Press, 1998), p. 173. Goodwin had struck up a special friendship with Rockefeller’s young son David; “David’s Father” was being careful to conceal his own identity.

My dear Margaret,

If you have ever walked around Williamsburg late on a moonlight night, when most of the people who now live here are fast asleep, and felt the presence and companionship of the people who used to live here in the long gone years, and remembered the things that they did and the things they stood for, and pictured them going into or coming out of the old houses in which they once lived, and remembered the things which they said in the House of Burgesses and at the old College—you would then realize what an interesting place Williamsburg is. You would realize it is about the most interesting place in America.²

Goodwin was certainly not the first to find something interesting in the run-down village. The women who got together in the late nineteenth century to save the nearby Jamestown site and purchase the old Powder Magazine to save it from destruction—and who eventually created the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities—had begun their work well before his arrival. But the scale of the dream that was percolating in Goodwin’s mind was beyond what anyone else had imagined.

The first explicit sharing of the vision that we know of was a conversation between the Doctor (as Goodwin was universally known by then) and John Stewart Barney, a New York architect who had been invited to give William and Mary advice on the construction of a new building. Goodwin had hoped Barney would be able to persuade the College’s president, J.A.C. Chandler, to adopt an 18th-century style in new campus construction, but that was proving difficult. As the conversation is reported,

After a disappointing meeting with Chandler, Barney walked with Goodwin across the yard to College Corner—the triangular intersection where Duke of Gloucester Street meets Jamestown and Richmond roads. Looking east into the city, Goodwin brought up the notion of restoring Williamsburg’s houses and public buildings. Barney, the Doctor said, ‘was the first person with whom the Restoration thought was shared.’³

Later, Goodwin would recall that Barney’s “sympathetic and enthusiastic endorsement contributed courage and conviction and a more determined purpose to find some means for its fulfillment.”⁴ And so began the search for a philanthropic partner that led, through many twists and turns, to Rockefeller’s commitment to back Goodwin’s “Restoration thought” with “three or four, or even five millions of dollars.” Over the following 32 years, it would turn out to be more than \$68 million.⁵ And the result would be an evocative history classroom for the nation

² Ibid., p. 153.

³ Ibid., p. 121.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 194.

that revolutionized how we deal with our past and provided a model of transformational philanthropy.

What hypotheses might we draw from the story leading up to the arrival of the Rockefeller catalyst? First, one is struck by Goodwin's single-minded focus on the problem presented by Williamsburg, by the steadily disintegrating structures—so much still there yet so likely soon to disappear forever—and the drama of the history they recalled. He had wrestled with the issue for years, from at least his involvement with an early renovation project at Bruton Parish Church that he found stalled in controversy when he arrived as a young rector in 1903. For years he lived the problem, attacking pieces of it in his mind, communing with his “ghosts” on long night walks, training his eyes to see deeper.

On the other hand, he was also learning about all the potential obstructions—all the reasons why others would have thought his emerging dream foolish. Out of this internal dialog between an emerging concept and a keen sense of context came an expanded view of possibility. Goodwin understood the barriers better than anyone, but he held them in tension with his growing sense of opportunity. When the grand concept finally jelled, it was a creative assembly of pieces—a central role for the College, a place for local businesses in Merchant Square, a revenue stream from rentals, and so on—each contributing to a coherent whole while diffusing some obstacle.

The idea continued to develop and mature long after the catalysis began, and Goodwin himself could not have imagined how rich the concept eventually would become. Very importantly, the emergence of Colonial Williamsburg was increasingly shaped by Rockefeller himself, along with the team of experts he assembled. The later story is tinged with sadness as Goodwin watched the project grow beyond his own leadership. But the initial formation of the vision had characteristics we might find in other stories of transformative ideas:

- A single-minded focus on a problem, by a single creative individual;
- A deep understanding of context and the obstacles to be overcome;
- A grasp of the separate pieces of the puzzle and the dynamics of each, and finally;
- A synthesis that imagines a way forward, solving the problem by assembling pieces and overcoming obstacles in creative ways.

Over the decades, buildings were restored or reconstructed, an old city emerged, and generations fell in love with what had been accomplished in Williamsburg. But underneath—first for Dr. Goodwin and then for Rockefeller—was the truly creative part: an imagined outcome. The genesis and genius of Colonial Williamsburg was one man's devotion to an idea. G.K. Chesterton once wrote that “The whole difference between construction and creation is exactly this: that a thing constructed can only be loved after it is constructed; but a thing created is loved before it exists.”⁶ The story of Colonial Williamsburg has a lesson to teach about the

⁶ *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (1911), Chapter III, “Pickwick Papers.”

inspired and inspiring dream—the loved creation—that precedes transformational philanthropy.

The towering figure of Dr. Goodwin might lead us in this case to overlook the other element in the equation of catalysis: an institution capable of implementing the vision. While many contemporary leaders might envy the Doctor's relative independence, he was not a completely free agent; there were certainly institutions involved. At first it was the College. Goodwin's formal position as director of the endowment campaign at William and Mary provided the initial introduction to Rockefeller, and the first specific proposal put to Rockefeller was for help with the restoration of the Wren Building.

Through the early stages of their work together, Rockefeller clearly saw the College as the appropriate entity to eventually own the property being purchased. As he wrote to Goodwin, "this proposition would not interest me unless some complete thing could be done and so tied up with the University and its historical department as to insure not only its permanent maintenance but its permanent use as a centre for the study of American history."⁷

Nevertheless, the Williamsburg case is atypical in that the human infrastructure needed to develop and implement the dream was ultimately built independently of the College, combining a management team provided by Rockefeller with the organizational structure that eventually became the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. More familiar in the history of transformational philanthropy is the situation where a pre-existing institution provides the setting both for the emergence of the vision and for its implementation once the catalytic force of philanthropic support has been added.

This organizational context adds another set of issues relevant to the exploration of the source of transforming ideas. The Goodwin saga invites inquiry into the institutional environments in which we work. We have come to assume that a core leadership function is the discernment and articulation of the vision that will drive our institutions in their mission pursuits. But the question of whether our institutions foster and support the individual creativity that underlies transformational visioning is very much open. To sharpen the focus, imagine a Doctor Goodwin in a leadership position in your organization. What is the likelihood of something like the "Restoration thought" emerging, taking hold, and becoming the goal of serious fund raising?

We might hypothesize some working principles to test against our experience:

- We need leaders who are thoroughly grounded in their institutions, but who maintain as well the capacity to think independently, beyond the constraints of day-to-day management and the current limits on the capacity of their institutions.
- We need organizations that provide their leaders with the time and tools to think deeply about what might be accomplished, to wrestle in sustained ways with big problems, and to study with care the context of possible breakthroughs.

⁷ Montgomery, op. cit., p. 171.

- We need leaders who are especially skillful at building within their organizations a sense of shared ownership of daring ideas. Listening is certainly an essential part of leadership, but so is inspired teaching.
- We need approaches to strategic planning that go beyond the traditional model of a bottom-up accumulation of the suggestions of everyone in the organization to discern common threads. The risk of such an approach is that it easily dissolves into a least-common-denominator process that drowns individual creativity.

So the back story of Colonial Williamsburg brings us face-to-face with some central paradoxes of leadership.

- The leader must be both within and outside of the institution.
- The leader must be fluent in the prose of near-term steps but also eloquent in the poetry of long-term goals.
- The servant leader must be as well the master of imagination.
- In the equation of catalysis, philanthropy is key and a capable organization is essential, but both are meaningless without the idea.

In the end, Dr. Goodwin's "Restoration thought" reminds us to pay attention to where philanthropy's great purposes come from and challenges us to raise our sights and take on the demanding work of true creativity. A stroll at dusk among the ghosts of Williamsburg leaves us with the sense of wonder and promise Carl Sandburg expressed in "Washington Monument by Night":

The Republic is a dream.

Nothing happens unless first a dream.⁸

⁸ From *Slabs of the Sunburnt West* (1922).

ABOUT GHC CONVERSATIONS

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals from throughout North America for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about philanthropy, organizational leadership, and the sector as a whole. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the philanthropic environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each GHC Conversation, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek new dimensions of philanthropy. This essay is one contributed for *Conversation 2010*.

Leadership Learnings Future of Philanthropy Organizational Effectiveness Leadership Learnings Future of Philanthropy Organizational Effectiveness



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Bryant served for fourteen years as president of Elmhurst College, a private, liberal arts college in the Chicago suburbs. During those years the institution made significant progress in enrollment, academic strength, financial resources, campus development, and reputation. Keys to this progress were a steadily-evolving strategic plan, innovative program development, strengthened fundraising, and a successful capital campaign.

Prior to his presidency, Bryant was a professor of political science and provost at Hartwick College in New York State. Early experience included service with the US Marine Corps Reserve and the international division of the Irving Trust Company. He is a graduate of Maryville College (where he currently serves on the Board of Directors) and holds a master's degree from American University and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, as well as two honorary doctorates. He and his wife Jeanette now live in Williamsburg, Virginia.

This is Bryant's first *GHC Conversation*.

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