MY LIFE IN INSTITUTIONS

What I've Learned From 40 Years of Working in Human Rights and Social Justice Groups

Gara LaMarche
Foundation Impact Research Group
Terry Sanford School of Public Policy
Duke University
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

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I'm delighted to be back for a second stint at FIRG, a distinction I learned that I share with only five or six other foundation leaders, including my friends Ed Skloot, Jonathan Fanton and Stephen Heintz. It's a privilege to be in such company, kind of like returning as a guest host on Saturday Night Live. I'll try to do well enough to be asked back again someday, and perhaps I can become the Alec Baldwin of the FIRG series. Now there is a cultural reference you probably don't find invoked much in these sessions, but as you will shortly learn from this somewhat autobiographical talk, I like television.

There are few forums like FIRG, where the practitioners of strategic philanthropy can step back from the day to day work and reflect on its challenges and lessons, and I am grateful for the opportunity, and for the chance that Lisa and I have to spend a few days on this beautiful campus.

I've had even a bit more opportunity to reflect than most of your other speakers, since I stepped down as President of the Atlantic Philanthropies a little over six months ago, and for the first time in over fifteen years I'm not running a significant philanthropic enterprise. I'm teaching, writing, advising, being active on several boards, and spending lots of time with my six-month old grandson – all things, except the last, that I did while having a very demanding day job, but things I hope I am doing a bit better because I can devote more time and focus to them.

I will probably return at some point to running, possibly even creating something, because I like doing that, I think I have done it reasonably well over the years, and I am not quite ready, at 57, to hang up my spurs. But for now I am really enjoying a period of liberation from the cycles of board and staff and docket meetings. I don't work for anyone, and no one works for me, for the first time in nearly forty years. On many days, I think: I could get used to this.

But I will probably end up back in an institution. No, not that kind of institution, although that is always an occupational hazard at the senior levels of

philanthropy and the not-for-profit world. I mean the kind of organizational structure that has evolved over the centuries from the templates set by churches, the military and government, with a high purpose and many or all of these characteristics: leadership and hierarchy, troops and adherents, constituencies and stakeholders. I'm most at home in an institutional setting not just because it is my familiar habitat, but because I believe that, far from being constrained by the institutions in which I have worked, I have been enriched and enhanced by them in pursuing what is most important to me. The organizational platforms I have occupied have come with tools I would never have on my own. I have learned much from the institutional communities of which I have been a part, and whatever authority or authenticity my voice has acquired derives in large measure from those communities and that learning.

All this may seem abstract as I set it out. But I want to make it more concrete by treating my talk today as a kind of autobiographical essay. Through telling my own story I hope to make a larger point about the character and values of certain institutions, and what that might have to teach us about the strategic philanthropy that is the heart of this forum.

Since 1972, when I came to New York as a college freshman, I have spent all but two years working with and for four significant institutions: the American Civil Liberties Union, Human Rights Watch, the Open Society Foundations, and the Atlantic Philanthropies. (I also went to college, taught nursery school, worked for two years at PEN American Center, served on numerous boards, and lectured as an adjunct professor at four colleges and universities. While all of them offered institutional lessons, I'm not going to deal with them, except in passing, today.) I have seen how institutional culture was formed – and, in founding the U.S. Programs for OSF, I got to form much of it myself – and how it was fostered and communicated from one generation to the next.

Everything I Know I Learned in High School

I did not start out as an organization man. I grew up in a small town in Rhode Island in a Catholic French-Canadian family that went to church each Sunday without being particularly devout, and followed politics without being sectarian. Neither of my parents had gone to college, though they were smart and literate people. It would be hard to trace a path from my upbringing to what has been my life's work since. Though it astounds people who know me now as a Joel Fleishman-like networker and connector, for most of my childhood I was a loner, likely to be found in the stacks of the local library on a Saturday afternoon, or in front of the television set most evenings and even summer days. I hung out with my brother and my close cousin. We played board games, followed the Red Sox – perhaps the best training, at least in those days, for the work I have since done trying to advance what many see as hopeless causes against all odds -- performed magic shows for our parents and their friends, and built models.

I joined nothing, resisting entreaties to become a Little Leaguer, a Boy Scout or an altar boy. Somehow I ended up on the safety patrol in sixth grade, requiring a monthly evening meeting at the police station – a challenge to a TV junkie in the days before VCRs and DVRs -- but even the outpost I was assigned, decked out in my fluorescent vest with flag, was the furthest from my elementary school, and I saw few crossers.

Only when I got to high school did this change. My cousin had gone to a selective Catholic high school, St. Bernard's, about 30 miles away in eastern Connecticut, and I persuaded my parents to send me there, even though it entailed tuition and a long bus ride. I had enjoyed my elementary school, and made a few friends there, one of whom I am still close to, but I attended classes for eight years with the same 25 students, and we each settled early on in the unvarying roles we were expected to play. Mine was the short, smart, somewhat smart-alecky boy always picked last for schoolyard teams. As I got older, I was developing geeky interests in politics and, if I had been grandiose enough to call it that, public affairs, but I had no outlet for them, and certainly no kindred spirits at Immaculate Conception School.

High school was a different story. Suddenly there were hundreds of classmates, many elective offerings, and clubs that spoke to interests of mine that had been viewed as peculiar and personal in grade school – a newspaper, a student council, a debate team. I suppose this is almost everyone's high school experience – a widening, more diverse world – but St. Bernard's to me was incredibly liberating, particularly in those post -Vatican II days. In retrospect it was a short, magical window of time before the Catholic Church shut itself off again. There were, I was thrilled to find, other people like me. I watch TV shows – yes, I still like TV, just not as much of it – and movies about high school, and it is mostly portrayed as a place of conformity, where students obsess about fitting in. I certainly encountered my share of bullies and thugs in high school. But what really made an impact is that I could thrive <u>without</u> fitting in. I could be myself and there were others to do things with.

Why do I go on so much about this youthful period in a setting in which I am supposed to talk about my adult career, not to mention strategic philanthropy? I guess it is because I learned in high school how to choose a community, as opposed to having one chosen for you; because I recognized for the first time the power of collective engagement, not just the solitary life; because I found my voice and managed to attract others to it; and because difference could be explored, indeed at times celebrated, not suppressed. These have been, in large part, the themes of my professional life.

Making Academic Freedom Policy at 18, in Bellbottoms

I went from there to Columbia, but strangely from the time I set foot in New York, though I went to college for four years and graduated, despite my respect for Columbia now, it was not central in the formation of either my work or my identity. I was hungry for the wider world, and slighted my formal education in favor of it. Enter the ACLU.

Serendipitously for me, one day in 1970 or so my high school debate coach left the Christian Brothers religious order, moved to New York, came out as a gay man, went to graduate school, and got a part-time job as staff associate for the Academic Freedom Committee of the American Civil Liberties Union. It was then one of seven standing ACLU policy committees and the oldest of them, founded by Roger Baldwin in 1926. The committee, then composed almost entirely of old white men – or at least they seemed, in their fifties and sixties, quite old to me at the time – was under some pressure, following the campus uprisings of the 1960s, to be more relevant, and so it was they went looking to add a student member to their ranks.

You'd think a bunch of academics would have plenty of access to students, but somehow my former teacher, Phil Ryan, managed to convince them that I, not yet eighteen and not yet matriculated at Columbia College, where I never set foot before applying, would be an appropriate nominee. In those days, appointments to committees had to be ratified by the ACLU board, and on a visit to New York City from my Rhode Island home in the spring of my senior year in high school, I found myself in the ACLU's offices, then on lower Fifth Avenue, waiting to be vetted by the ACLU's Associate Director and czar of all things Board and policy-related, Alan Reitman.

When Reitman came out to greet me, he was accompanied by a visitor to the office that day: Roger Baldwin, the ACLU's founder. I don't remember what exchange Roger and I had that day, or that I was even very aware at the time of what a significant person he was. But I got to know Roger in the last ten years of his life – he died on my 27th birthday in 1981 – and remember most of all his keen interest, to the end, in what I was doing, in what all younger people were doing. He was the first great example in my life of successful aging – a topic I was focused on in my work at Atlantic Philanthropies, among many other things. I think in his mid-90s Roger began to have more trouble with stairs -- causing him to curb his daily use of the New York City subway -- after he fell from a horse in the German Black Forest. As Bill van den Heuvel likes to remind me of what I said on his passing, he was the only 97-year old man of whom one could lament, "why was he taken so soon?"

I managed, after my interview with Alan, to be nominated and elected to the Academic Freedom Committee, and a week after my 18th birthday and a few days into my freshman year at Columbia, I took up my seat, in long hair and bellbottoms, at the first meeting of the fall season. We met in those days in the posh conference

room of the ACLU's new offices, the former corporate headquarters of the Johns-Manville Corporation on Madison Avenue, with a hot meal served and a full bar running. I had no idea what I was doing, of course, and don't think I opened my mouth for six months – among other luminaries, my college dean had been a member of the committee—but in time I got comfortable, was elected vice-chair, and I have rarely stopped talking since.

ACLU: A Country in Which Principle is Sovereign

I went on to do a variety of odd jobs at the ACLU while at college and for a year or two after, from taking minutes at national board meetings to spending a summer holed up in a back office, with the highly sensitive assignment, of poring through thousands of pages of the ACLU's freshly-received FBI files, in which we discovered the betrayal of several former ACLU officials.

I mention all this because the ACLU was the most fantastic education I have ever received, far more than anything that ever took place in a classroom. To sit for hours at board meetings listening to the likes of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Norman Dorsen, Osmond Fraenkel, Harriet Pilpel, Monroe Freedman, Pauli Murray and so many others; to hear them grapple with tough ethical issues like how to deal with the release of the organization's FBI files, or conflicts between rights like fair trial and free press; to have a ringside seat at the time of the Skokie case and debates over a provocative Klan rally at a newly-integrated school in Mississippi – to take all this in was the most rich and formative experience in my intellectual and moral development. In the ACLU I had entered a country in which principle was sovereign, in which for any matter the most important consideration was not "how will it affect me," or "how does it advance my ideology, or party, or identity group," but what outcome is dictated by neutral principles, regardless of whose interests are momentarily advanced.

This above all is what sets the ACLU apart from almost any other group of the many I have been affiliated with since. It is this commitment to principle, more than any other factor – more than the good fortune of visionary leadership, from Roger Baldwin to Aryeh Neier to Ira Glasser to Anthony Romero; more than the strong base of small donors that gives the ACLU a bulwark, a base and a reach that is the envy of every other cause organization; more than its sometimes maddening but vitally central commitment to its own internal democracy, an endangered species among today's non-profits – more than any of this, it is adherence to principle that has provided the ACLU with its never-flagging strength and endurance.

I was blessed to touch, in my early years, the ACLU's founding generation. I don't know if the Brahmin Roger Baldwin could have envisioned a street-tough Puerto Rican gay man sitting in his chair, but I feel confident he would have admired Anthony Romero's stewardship of the national treasure that he, Crystal Eastman and others bequeathed to us.

No one in the founding generation is alive today, and those of us who knew them are increasingly few in number. I was asked a while back to speak at the ACLU's 90th anniversary event, and the room I looked out at, mostly full of board members, was almost a completely different room than the one I left when I stepped down from the board and executive committee fifteen years ago, and a room that would be almost unrecognizable to the small band of patriots who came together to start a permanent civil liberties organization in 1920. But the extraordinary thing is that the DNA of the ACLU in the last decade of its first century is so strong that with all the changes in those many years, in the gender and skin color and geographic and life diversity of those whose energy and commitment pulse through its work today, with technology and globalization and challenges undreamed of in 1920, one thing has not changed. It is that the women and men who form this community of values still place principle at its core and judge everything they do, from their own institutional policies and practices to those of a President most of them voted for but who they do not hesitate to hold to the fire, by fidelity to the rights expressed in -- but not bound by --the U.S. Constitution, no matter where the chips fall.

I spent nearly twenty years with the ACLU, becoming Associate Director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, the largest state branch, at 24, and Executive Director of the Texas ACLU at 30, and for some years after my return from Texas as a national board and executive committee member. There is no question that the grounding I got there has been central to everything I have done since.

Human Rights Watch: We Got It Right Because We Had To

When I got back from Texas in the summer of 1988, I won a Charles H. Revson Fellowship at Columbia. Though I was only 34, it was billed as a "mid-career" award. I hope that math was wrong, since by now I would be in "post-career" mode. Once again I squandered the formal education part of the fellowship, as this time I had no incentive to stay in classrooms if I was bored. But I learned a great deal from my fellow fellows, and from the Revson Foundation's insight that you can do a lot to recharge activists' careers by giving them time and space to think about their future and connect with people they might not meet in their everyday lives. I drew on those lessons many times in creating fellowship programs in my eleven years at OSF.

For me, Revson was a chance to pivot to international work. Initially this was through a brief stint running the Freedom-to-Write Program at PEN American Center. But in 1990 I was invited by Aryeh Neier, who had followed my work when he was ACLU Executive Director, to come to work for Human Rights Watch, which he had helped to found, and of which he had become Executive Director. Originally I ran a freedom of expression program, and in a few years I was promoted to Associate Director, overseeing a broader swath of programmatic work as well as many aspects of the organization's operations, from finance to development.

It was exhilarating to have a central vantage point on the growth of Human Rights Watch to what I think most will agree has become the world's premier human rights organization. We dealt with the usual growing pains of rapid growth – how to adjust the governance, moving from a founding, policy-focused board to a fundraising/stewardship board; how to assure that necessary infrastructure kept pace with growing program; and how to maintain the original passion as we inevitably and steadily "professionalized."

What was most distinctive to me about Human Rights Watch was the profound commitment we had to the integrity of evidence. Human Rights Watch, then and now, had, like ACLU, a strong commitment to principle and to the rule of law, and we were careful to ground all our reports, particularly the affirmative recommendations sections, in the appropriate conventions and treaties and customary law, and we were sophisticated in figuring out the right forums – the U.N., the various regional commissions on human rights, and so on – where human rights violations should be considered. But what we were really best known for was marshaling the facts. When villagers had been massacred by government or rebel forces, when prisoners or women or children were abused, when playwrights and dissidents were imprisoned – in all these cases, we went to the scene whenever possible and got the information first-hand. We vetted it intensively, and we published and advocated only when we were sure.

How did that become our modus operandi? I believe it was forged in the very early years, mainly through the work we did in this hemisphere. The first building block of what became Human Rights Watch was Helsinki Watch, founded in 1978 to monitor the Helsinki human rights accords that provided a measuring stick for its signatories, particularly countries in the Soviet sphere. In those days, many of the organization's allies were conservatives and anti-Communists, happy to have a credible non-partisan organization calling out the Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia on the persecution of dissidents.

But in a few years we started an Americas division, and there, for many years, the work focused primarily on what you might call U.S. client states – authoritarian, often repressively violent regimes like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Chile. Particularly with respect to Central America, the abuses we were monitoring and reporting on were highly contested ground, and for some years quite central in American politics, as the Reagan administration did its best to look away from, dispute, or outright lie about what its favorite dictators were doing. Human Rights Watch learned to get the facts right because we <u>had</u> to. There were many eyes upon us, from the media to the White House to Congress, and if we screwed up -- if we overstated the number of refugees in a camp, or bodies in a mass burial ground, or wrongly attributed responsibility – that would be used to discredit us in a heartbeat. If we hadn't in those pressure-cooker years forged an unshakeable reputation for playing it straight, for scrupulous adherence to the evidence, there would have been terrible consequences. I'm not sure the organization would have survived.

To this day, whenever Human Rights Watch speaks out against abuses, whether they come from the U.S. at Guantanamo or the Lord's Army in Uganda or the Israelis or their Middle East neighbors – strenuous efforts are made to discredit the messenger. But now, as thirty years ago, while reasonable people can differ about the selection of subjects, the content of recommendations, or the implications of analysis, no one has ever successfully challenged the organization on the integrity of its research. It is, unquestionably, with all the other assets Human Rights Watch can bring to bear on its concerns, the pillar of its strength.

Open Society: Not a Creed, But a Doubt

By 1996 Aryeh Neier had moved on to become the first President of George Soros's Open Society Institute (it only changed its name to the Open Society Foundations in the last year or two), and he knew I was getting restless after six years at Human Rights Watch. So he asked me if I would be interested in coming to work for him and Soros, who I had never met, to establish a U.S. Program at the foundations. (Aryeh and his influence on my career make several appearances in my story, and I will get back to him again before I conclude today.)

I had dealings with foundations at ACLU, particularly in New York and Texas, and at Human Rights Watch, where I oversaw our fundraising, but little in my experience had made me aspire to work in one. I saw them as big piles of money that I wanted to get me some of, not as sources of strategic direction and inspiration for the work I was doing.

I was also afraid that foundation work would be a step or two removed from the "action," which is where I had spent my career up to that point, in activist organizations that were doing, not just talking about or funding things. But I went to work for OSI anyway, since I was at that point eager to work on a wider range of societal challenges, not all fully addressed by the rights focus that had been my exclusive lens up to that point. In a few short months I learned that a foundation is capable of being quite an activist institution.

Particularly in those early, heady days of creation, OSI was an stimulating place to work. Soros burst on the scene as a philanthropist in the late 1980s, establishing foundations in newly democratic societies – mostly in the former Soviet sphere, but also in South Africa, Haiti and Guatemala -- wherever he saw opportunities to seed and strengthen key civil society institutions like the independent media and bar.

When he started his foundation, George Soros didn't think of the United States as a "closed society" in need of his attention, and indeed, in the classic sense of that term, it wasn't. But by the mid-90s, not long after the "Contract With America," Soros came to feel that the problem in the U.S. was not so much the overwhelming power of the state as it was the overwhelming power of the market –

that commercial values had eroded professional and ethical values in law, medicine, journalism, the justice system, education and even politics.

So Soros did what he ordinarily did when trying to think through a set of problems, he gathered a group of philosophers at his home in Bedford over a weekend. The short summary of that meeting that I was handed upon going to work at the Open Society Institute a few months after it took place was hardly a blueprint or a strategic plan for the work that would become our U.S. Programs. Indeed, there was an allergy in the foundation, from Soros on down, to conventional notions of planning, and certainly to the cottage industry of consultants who do it. I had to turn these insights and observations about what was wrong with American open society into a set of programs pretty much on my own.

As it happened, that fit my style pretty well – maybe that was how I ended up at OSI in the first place. In a dazzling first year, we went from a handful of staff and a putative $5 million budget to over a hundred staff and over $100 million in spending, creating programs on criminal and civil justice, youth and education, money in politics, immigration, and reproductive rights, and launching an urban debate league and a local office in Baltimore to focus more intensively on the connected challenges of drugs, crimes, schools and employment (kind of a foundation version of "The Wire," for those of you who haven't tired of my TV references.)

What made all this different from the normal foundation approach, beyond the lightness of bureaucracy and process and the constant bias for action, was two things. The first was the regular invocation of doubt. George Soros was a follower of the philosopher Karl Popper, and for him the notion of fallibility is central.

Indeed, once I came to understand this upon more sustained exposure to Soros in my first few months, I reflected it in a white paper I did laying the basis for the U.S. Programs in July 1996:

> The concept of an open society is based on the recognition that our understanding of the world in which we live is inherently imperfect. Foundations often forget that they are fallible and grant applicants are unlikely to remind them. We shall try to remember that actions have unintended consequences and good intentions are not sufficient to ensure good results. In pursuing the goal of an open society, we shall follow a process of trial and error rather than a grand design. We are willing to take risks but we shall resist the temptation of proposing a solution just because there is a problem. We shall rather refrain from taking actions rather than run the risk of doing more harm than good.

I was fond in those days, in trying to convey OSI's values, of paraphrasing G.K. Chesterton's line about Buddhism, calling open society " not a creed, but a doubt." Did we always succeed in this Hippocratic oath approach to philanthropy? I'm sure

we didn't. At times we became too sectarian or directive. But we never lost sight of the intentions, our first principles, or the hard questions that come with them. We always managed to get back on course. For as with anything in life, the key challenges in philanthropy are not whether you ever make mistakes, even big ones, but whether you recognize, acknowledge, and learn from them. The ruthlessly self-critical tone set by George Soros served us well.

A second distinctive feature of OSI was a belief that the best decisions are made closest to the source, by or with the meaningful participation of those most affected. I tried to capture this belief in my white paper in the following paragraph:

> Closely related to our interest in fostering debate and discussion is our desire to enhance the capacity of marginalized groups to be heard – to affect public events and decisions through their own voices, and not simply through reliance on others as advocates. We will also try to reflect this concern in the advisory structures we create to assist the development of our programs.

And I think we did. In the realm of structure – structure that reflects core values – the Soros philanthropy is unique, in my experience, in devolving decision-making to regional or content-focused groups close to the action. The Project on Death in America, which transformed end-of-life care in this country, was always self-governed, as was the Baltimore office. Our foray into the U.S. south was launched only after a careful listening tour, and was always guided by a multi-racial group of activists and thinkers from the region. In these respects we followed the pattern set by Soros globally, in his national and regional foundations.

That our grantmaking, even when not directly controlled by communities most affected, had a strong bias toward initiatives run by traditionally marginalized groups themselves – organizations of drug users and former prisoners, immigrants and students and the like – reflected the stamp of Aryeh Neier, who at OSI as in his previous leadership posts at ACLU and Human Rights Watch (you might say most of my career was simply following Aryeh around) always moved these organizations away from a traditional "elite" focus to projects focused on the rights and empowerment of ordinary people victimized by status or circumstance, from women, children and gay people to prisoners, mental patients and civilians caught up in war.

Groucho Marx, Goliath and George Soros

I think I may have given the impression here so far that most of what I learned in these institutions was positive. And in the main, it was. But it is also true, as with people, that each organization's strengths were closely related to its weaknesses. The ACLU respected debate and ferocious intellectual inquiry, but at times took it too far, and the culture of the organization, particularly on the board level, often seemed contentious for the sake of contention. The ACLU board has a

few too many people, in the Groucho Marxian sense, who don't want to be part of any club that would have them as a member.

The high standards of quality at Human Rights Watch, which have earned it its dominant position, have also made the organization at times arrogant and pettily disdainful of others in the field – an unbecoming attitude, a little Goliath-like. And we all know what happened to him.

At the Open Society Foundations, the strength of the donor's vision and presence had the tendency for many years, despite his best intentions and his periodic efforts to "empower" his governing boards, of rendering them at times irrelevant and unprepared to assume stewardship when the moment comes that he is no longer active or alive. Significant strides have been made in the right direction at OSF, but the next few years, with a transition to new leadership, will be critical in telling us whether the bold and entrepreneurial spirit of the foundation's first twenty years were mainly a feature of the extraordinary partnership between George Soros and Aryeh Neier or have found their way into the DNA of the organization in a way that will thrive without them.

A Word on the Atlantic Years: (Spoiler Alert – No "Kiss and Tell")

Before I close, I ought to spend some time on the fourth key institution of my career, the Atlantic Philanthropies. Those of you who have waited patiently through my journey from high school to the podium here today may have done so in the hope of a kiss-and-tell, since it is a matter of public record that I ended my Atlantic tenure earlier than I had once planned, due to a divergence of my interests and the donor's. I am sorry to disappoint you. For one thing, I am too close to the experience to have the necessary perspective. But I will say a few things.

In a donor-driven foundation, whatever the formal governance structures, and whatever the legal and moral calculus, as a practical matter it is not possible, nor desirable, to try to prevail against the wishes of the one whose generosity has made the foundation's very existence, and your employment, possible. In the few closing years of Atlantic – which, as most of you know, is spending down its assets by 2016 -- Chuck Feeney, one of the most generous and visionary men in philanthropic history, is eager to see his priorities more closely reflected in the foundation's work. My principal experience is as an advocate and public policy specialist, and the institutions I have lived in and helped to strengthen in my foundation work are ones seeking to change the social order or preserve essential underpinnings of it such as human rights and civil liberties. Mr. Feeney is also an institution-builder, but the institutions are almost always those of medicine and higher education, as can be seen in the enormous gift he pledged, a few months after I left Atlantic, to Cornell University for the groundbreaking Roosevelt Island Science Center.

Atlantic will likely be judged, and rightly praised as a foundation for its catalytic role in initiatives like that and the decades-long effort to invest in improving the quality of higher education in Ireland, both of which bear Chuck Feeney's indelible stamp; the work in Harvey Dale's and Joel Fleishman's time to help birth and build key institutions of the non-profit sector, like Bridgespan and City Year; the work in John Healy's time to establish a stronger field devoted to tapping the potential of older citizens; and the work in my time to seize the policy openings to expand the social safety net in the United States to include health care for all, protect Social Security, and toughen financial regulation. That these do not add up, in the end, to a consistent, coherent strategy over decades -- that they reflect swings in the donor's engagement and the board's embrace, at different times, of very different kinds of leaders, agendas, and theories of change -- does not detract from Atlantic's considerable impact and achievements. Nor does it make Atlantic very different from many of its colleague foundations.

Lessons: Values as a Guide to Legacy, Going to Church, It's Not About YOU

I promised in the title of this talk that I would draw from these autobiographical musings some lessons for strategic philanthropy, so let me take a minute to home in on those before I close.

The first lesson is that core values – clear and well understood -- are more important, and a much better guide to focus and impact, than formal strategy. None of the organizations I worked in before Atlantic, at least in the period I worked in them, were very big on planning or formal strategy. But each of them is crystal-clear about its core values, both in what it does and how it does it, and you would be hard-pressed to find more effective organizations, that have done as much to influence the course of American and global life, than the ACLU, Human Rights Watch and the Open Society Foundations.

The second and closely related lesson is that core values are also key to assuring that the essential character of an institution survives from one generation of leadership to the next – the "DNA" I talked about in discussing the future of the Open Society Foundations a little earlier.

The third, which I haven't talked about much so far, but which is worth noting, is that culture is also carried and preserved by ritual, and all the great, enduring organizations have some version of church, no matter how formally secular they may be. The ACLU board, for God's sake, meets on Sunday mornings! Human Rights Watch had, since the early days around the huge wooden conference table at Bob Bernstein's office at Random House, a Wednesday morning meeting, open to all, where you could hear first-hand reports from visiting human rights activists or U.S. lawyers and academics fresh from investigating abuses from Peru to Turkey. Where does George Soros say he got his human rights education, and where

did he meet the man who would give shape and direction to his philanthropic empire, Aryeh Neier? Around that table.

The fourth lesson is about never losing sight of who or what is most important. In each of these institutions, it was never about us – or at least, at our best and most effective, it wasn't. It was about the work, and more particularly, the people –- the Rwandan human rights leader who hid for safety in her ceiling when they were coming door to door with machetes; the undocumented straight A student seeking to take her place in the American pageant through the Dream Act; the lone Jewish kid in a rural West Texas classroom who calls the ACLU because she's made to feel a pariah when the principal – in flagrant defiance of the Constitution – reads the Christian Bible each day over the public address system. Whatever specific tools these organizations have – whatever tools I have been privileged to employ, whether a lawsuit, the media spotlight, or a foundation grant – they have only one purpose, to enable and support people on the front-lines taking the reins of change.

That, as I reflect on it, has been the greatest privilege of my unlikely career, and one I hope I can continue to have no matter what shape its next chapter takes.

Thank you.