

Steven Burkeman, a UK-based philanthropist, gave the opening keynote address at Philanthropy New Zealand's biennial conference held in April 2011 at Te Papa in Wellington. He was asked to be thought provoking and 'a little provocative'. This, slightly amended by him to make it suitable for the printed page, was what he said.

Thank you. I feel very privileged to be here. I suspect that we in the UK have much to learn from you, and I look forward to taking some of that learning back with me.

Before I begin, I want to say how moved we were back in the UK as we read of what you have been through as a result of the earthquake in Christchurch. We have happy memories of a visit there when we were last in New Zealand and we were greatly saddened by what's happened. And I think it's tough to try to come together to discuss strategic funding and the like, when you are faced with an immediate tragedy like this. But I will speak about what I think I know.

I want to start by treating the conference title almost literally, and gazing into the looking glass back through time. Do you remember the movie *Sliding Doors*? As you may recall, Gwyneth Paltrow rushes down the steps of a London underground station, and just squeezes on to the train before the doors shut. And then she rushes down the same steps, and just misses the train. And then the film follows her subsequent lives in parallel – which are very different depending on whether she catches, or misses, that train.

One reason I love the movie is that I think there are 'sliding doors moments' in most lives -- for me there was one 36 years ago when, as a callow 27-year old, I got one of those letters which will, though you don't know it at the time, change your life; would I like to come and meet some Rowntree trustees to help them explore some issues on which I might have relevant insights? I thought about it, cancelled a social engagement or two, and decided I may as well go. Of course, this was another way of saying "*We want to suss you out, to see if you could be one of us*". I said 'yes', they did their sussing, and the rest was a – so far – 35-year 'career' in philanthropy, moving from trusteeship, to becoming director of the trust, and eventually back to trusteeship, but this time of a sister trust.

Looking back through that mirror, I see a field of work which has changed dramatically, both in the UK and globally. For a start, by the time I started paid employment in the field in 1982, my peers were still almost all elderly white men working in philanthropy after retirement from distinguished careers in the military or the Foreign Service. They brought with them considerable wisdom and insight, and I was to some extent in awe of them. But, if I avert my gaze from the looking glass and look around me, I now wonder why. Those who run foundations now are younger, of both genders and a wide range of ethnicity and skin colours, and come with practical experience. I see a field which is restless, keen to use all its assets and not just its money, organisations which are much more connected with each other and with the wider world. In short – a vibrant and exciting field which has much more to offer those in it and the world at large than the one into which I stepped, all those years ago.

So let's now reflect on the nature of the problems that contemporary philanthropy is faced with; the resources we can bring to bear on those problems; and how best we can work on them. When we look into a looking glass, what we see is ourselves transposed. But Alice, when she found that she could step through the mirror, stepped not only into another world, but also moved through time. And if we look back through time, we gain the so-called wonderful gift of hindsight. But *is* hindsight such a wonderful gift? How far does looking at the past really help us to predict what we will have to cope with in the future? Did history teach us how to predict, protect against and plan for religious zealots prepared to lose their own lives while killing many others on 9/11 and, in my own country, in July 2005? Did history teach us how to predict and plan for political zealots who set out to murder millions of Jews, gypsies and homosexuals in the Nazi Holocaust? Did history teach us how to predict and plan for the near collapse of the international banking system arising from dodgy mortgages in the USA? Did history enable us to predict the ubiquity of personal computers, or the internet? Or, indeed, that a policeman hassling a market trader in Tunis would lead to popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and who knows where next?

Of course, there are always those writers and thinkers who would say – “*yes – I predicted that. Just read such and such.....*”. But by and large, as societies, we do not always learn practical lessons about the future from history beyond the fact that prediction is a mug’s game; the only sound prediction is that the future is unpredictable. And yet, now that we look back, of course it’s all obvious. There is a body of literature to support this idea. You may have come across some of it, especially the famous book on Black Swan theory by Nassim Nicholas Taleb¹. The origins of the title are interesting. To quote from a UK newspaper article: *The label evokes an old philosophical observation: you might believe in the truth of the statement "all swans are white", but no matter how many white swans you see, you can never prove it for certain. On the other hand, a single, unexpected sighting of a black swan completely disproves it. Black swan events are shocking when they happen, and their impact is huge - but in retrospect, they seem predictable*².

So what are the implications of this for philanthropy? *First*, the unpredictability and scale of the problems and challenges which will face us means that we need to be brutally honest with ourselves about what we can, and can't, do to respond to those challenges. Philanthropy alone - let alone any one or even all of the funders in this room -- is not going to bring peace to the world, remove the threat of religious fundamentalism, solve the environmental crisis, or get the world’s economies back on to stable and sustainable footing. That doesn't mean that we don't have an important role to play; we do, but we need to be clear on what are our strengths, assets and opportunities so that we can deploy them to maximum effect and not waste them by trying to take on, and being overwhelmed by, the impossible. What we *may* be able to do is to work at the margins, to do whatever we can to stand with those directly affected in order to help them to influence the shape of change. So,

¹ *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Penguin, 2008

² *The Guardian*, 28 April 2007

for example, we should rid ourselves of any delusion that because – in much of the developed world, albeit not perhaps to the same extent here -- there are major cuts in public expenditure, we have some responsibility to intervene directly, to do what we can to mitigate the effects of those cuts on the people about whom we care most. If we believe that a progressive taxation system is a wonderful thing, a higher good, a means through which we express our care and concern for each other in a practical, fair and proportionate way, then we should do what we can to make it work effectively --- and not seek to substitute for it. Since there is absolutely no way that we, as a sector, can fill the gaps, we need to concentrate our resources on what governments – and the public purse -- can't or won't do.

Second, in particular the many funders who work in the field of education need boldly to review their whole approach. We should start educating people for black swans; we should stop taking easy refuge in education as a panacea for all ills and go back to first principles. As the educationist Ken Robinson points out in one of his wonderful TED lectures, children starting school this year will be retiring in 2070³. *"Nobody has a clue ... what the world will look like in five years' time. And yet we're meant to be educating them for it."* What can philanthropy do to encourage a radical rethink, so that we move towards systems which give young people the tools to cope with unpredictability, with change, the nature of which we cannot now know, and with the will to build a better society than the one we have created? If the drive for this doesn't come from people like you, I'm not sure where it *will* come from.

Third, as we look to make effective interventions, we should review our resources, our assets, our strengths, and remember to be inclusive. When asked about our assets we tend to think first of money – sure, we have money, albeit never enough. But I believe that it's our intangible assets which are really distinctive and potentially very important in this volatile world. By intangible assets, I mean -- for some of us -- our permanence and our relative immunity to the ups and downs of the market; our light footedness, our ability to move quickly; our networks which mean we can bring unlikely people together. To illustrate this point -- I did some work for some UK foundations looking at their possible role in relation to climate change and social justice. What became really clear was that those in government who wanted to move on this needed the political space to do so, and that this was never going to be provided by 'the usual suspects'. Government knew in advance what Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace etc would say on any given issue; and it was thus to some extent discounted. What would really matter was when older people, children, people with disabilities, poor people, ethnic minorities – when *they* spoke up about the social justice consequences of climate change for them, and the measures needed to mitigate or adapt. And it was foundations which were in a unique position to facilitate that process – to enable those groups to be heard. This wasn't only, or even mainly, about money -- it was about what we are coming to think of as our convening power; the fact that if we call a meeting, for whatever ignoble or noble reason, people will turn up.

³ I have adjusted the year, as Robinson was speaking five years ago.

Fourth, as this illustrates, if we are to be effective, then we will usually have to work with others. That may mean other funders, but it is likely to mean working with people and organisations in other sectors as well. Of course, a small funder, focusing on a small area, or field of concern, with specialist knowledge and contacts, may feel that working on its own it can make a real difference; if so, go for it, I say. But a year or two back, a Ford Foundation officer speaking at a European Foundations Conference, was heard to say “*We can’t do it alone...*”. That’s Ford – a foundation which even in today’s straitened circumstances is worth over ten billion US dollars. And the reason that Ford can’t do it alone is that it chooses to work on big issues such as Democracy, Rights and Justice, Economic Opportunity, and Education, Creativity and Free Expression.

Fifth, in thinking about collaboration, we need to reflect on, and become masters of, the available technologies. It’s a commonplace to say how much easier that is today, what with the travel possibilities – leaving aside for the moment the issue of global warming – and the technology. I do think that the web and email are wonderful things which in many ways make life much easier. But they are also dangerous, when it comes to collaboration. In some ways I see the web as an obstacle to collaboration, because it creates an illusion of it. For example, when I was invited to speak at this conference, conscious of the cost and time involved, I thought briefly about offering a webinar – of sitting at home in York in my comfortable study, albeit late at night UK-time, and speaking to you from there while you watched and listened to me via a computer. But of course I soon came to the conclusion that while that might be better than nothing, it would be qualitatively a different experience from us meeting face-to-face, speaking informally, breaking bread and drinking wine together.

And quite apart from conferences, if you want to *do* stuff together, you have to be face-to-face. What we have now, in the world of social networking etc, is often called web 2.0. For me, web 3.0 is about using the internet to facilitate rather than substitute for face-to-face in person contact. Another example: I did some work with the Network of European Foundations which attempts the extraordinarily difficult task of getting people from very different cultures and types of organisation, who do not speak each other’s first languages, who have to travel over very large distances – from Turkey in one direction and from Spain in the other -- to work together on specific Europe-wide projects. And guess what? The most important thing about getting this to work was that they budgeted to spend significant time together, not just in formal meetings from which they dashed off to catch trains and planes, but over leisurely meals and drinking in the bar afterwards. No-one has yet invented a way of doing this over the web.

Finally -- given the unpredictability and the scale of the problems we face, in everything we do, it almost goes without saying that we need to be bold and courageous. For people working in philanthropy, that may mean taking a calculated risk to support people with vision, and the competence to move towards the vision, even if perhaps they don't have the usual desirable track record. And I bet that a

situation as awful, as desperate, as the Christchurch quake, will produce examples of such people. As someone once said - *Your current safe boundaries were once unknown frontiers*. And I like the quote from Andre Gide: *Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore*.

To summarise: the future is unpredictable; there are limits to what the past can teach us about it, except that we need to be tooled up to cope with unpredictability. The world of philanthropy has more than money to bring to bear on the problems which will face us, and more potential partners than just other foundations. And with courage, we can punch considerably above our weight.

Recalling that *Sliding Doors* moment, I am so glad that I decided to go to that meeting. It is an extraordinary privilege to be associated with the world of philanthropy; to be part of a foundation, or another funding organisation, with resources and, for the most part, independence -- and hence the opportunity to try new things, to tackle problems in ways that simply aren't open to the private sector, with its need to please the market, or to government, with its need to please the people. Even during days like these -- troubled days, days of uncertainty and fear -- we philanthropoids should give thanks to whoever or whatever we believe in for our good fortune. Others may simply grumble and moan; we can *do* stuff.

So, to end with, here's an idea. This conference finishes tomorrow, Thursday. I suggest you all take Friday off and make a long weekend of it -- you will need it to absorb all the exciting things you're going to hear about in the next two days. Now, if you have a boss to account to, tell her or him that it was my suggestion (I may be 30,000 feet in the air by the time you do this, of course), and then go in to work on Monday morning, and -- fired up by what you will have heard and discussed over the next couple of days -- go to it, and help to make things happen.

SB, April 2010