

## Sustainability

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I would like to thank Paul Hogan and the other members of the planning committee for inviting me to come and be with you today. I would also like to thank Mary Eberl and Ann Monroe for your gracious hospitality. You've been engaged in an extremely important dialogue leading up to this meeting and it's a privilege to take part in it.

Obviously, there are no easy answers to the twin, connected dilemmas of accountability and sustainability ... but it's essential that we grapple with them together. I particularly salute you for engaging grantmakers and nonprofit leaders in joint discussions. It happens all too rarely in my experience, but it's critically important if we're going to craft some strategies that work.

I don't have to tell you that the context for our work is rife with challenge. Just a couple of years ago we were looking at unimagined government surpluses and unprecedented growth in the philanthropic sector. With rosy projections for an anticipated intergenerational transfer of wealth over the next twenty to thirty years that might yield a tremendous windfall for philanthropy, it seemed like a true "golden era" for nonprofits was about to unfold. Eternal summer!

Yet today we are not only confronting huge and growing deficits at every level of government but also the determined implementation of a long-term strategy to permanently restrict tax revenues so as to "starve the beast." And although foundation assets are rebounding from their recent precipitous decline, the experience of the past couple of years is enough to shake even the most optimistic soul's expectation that philanthropy can be counted on to fill the gaps in times of greatest need. And if the estate tax is repealed, we've got to rethink all those projections of anticipated transfer of wealth as well. It looks like we could be in for a long winter!

Well, what better place to discuss winter survival strategies than Buffalo? You've literally "written the book" on endurance here, in more ways than one. You begin with the most important attribute of all: a belief system that takes nothing for granted and presumes that sustained effort is necessary to achieve anything worthwhile. It's an attitude that, to me, represents the best of what this country can be, but has become increasingly rare.

A couple of years ago, my son had a part in his high school's production of "The Miracle Worker," which is about the early life of Helen Keller. It was the first time I had seen the play, and it really piqued my interest in learning more about her life. As I read more about her, I came across a quote which nicely captures her inspirational philosophy. I share it with you because it came to mind when I was thinking about this group ...and it also provides a key to sustainability:

Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature,  
Nor do the children of men as a whole experience it.  
Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure.  
Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.

Coming from a woman born deaf and blind, those words are all the more powerful. Lately, I've been carrying them around with me for a needed boost when I start to lapse into negative thinking or complacency. Perhaps they'll be helpful to you as well.

I think we'd all agree that sustainability is about more than just money, but let's be honest ... it takes money to build and maintain an organization. And since I've been working in foundations for more than sixteen years now, I have to presume that's part of the reason I was invited here today ... not just for my wonderful way with words or my sparkling personality.

So, I'd like to spend a little time talking about the potential role of foundations in helping organizations such as the nonprofits in this room wrestle with the challenge of sustainability. Then, I'd like to say a bit more about some of the non-monetary dimensions of sustainability and conclude with a few words about personal renewal.

## **Foundations and Sustainability**

Given the emphasis that most foundations place on supporting new and innovative ideas, they're all concerned with the question: what can be done to improve their staying power?

With the recent rapid growth of the philanthropic sector, it seems like the answer to the sustainability dilemma should be clearer than ever, but that's not the case. Indeed, it could be argued that the behavior of foundations (even when they're acting with the best of intentions) can actually exacerbate the struggles that nonprofits face in sustaining their work. It's also important to note that not everything foundation grants support deserves to be sustained!

If I asked one of the non-foundation folks in the room to summarize the challenge of sustainability from a grantseeker's perspective, I think you might say something like this:

Foundations will typically only give us grants for time-limited projects, for which we may have to hire new staff, buy equipment and take on a variety of unreimbursed indirect costs – yet they expect that we will then somehow find a way to sustain it on our own.

Even as more and more foundation grants are being made for multi-year periods, I've continued to hear a variety of concerns from nonprofits on the subject of sustainability. For example, they note that short-term outcomes can be very difficult to document. But even when they can demonstrate success, they may not be able to return to the foundation for continuation funding. Yet if they approach other foundations to continue a project funded originally by someone else, they frequently encounter a distinct coolness to ideas “not invented here.”

Perhaps most powerful, however, is the complaint that foundations are not interested in helping agencies with what they really need to help sustain themselves. Instead, they must engage in an elaborate dance to fit the foundation's priorities in order to get a grant. And that gets at the larger challenge of sustaining not just a bright idea for a pilot project but providing the critical mass of resources and capacity to assist an entire organization to not only survive but thrive.

### **The Foundation Response**

When I was a Program Officer, my response to such concerns was typically to empathize with the difficulties applicant organizations might be facing but to note that foundations are “not in the sustainability business.” After all, we all know that foundation dollars are marginal in the big scheme of things and account for only a small percentage of overall charitable giving. Our efforts are also dwarfed by those funded by government. On the other hand, our independence gives us a unique opportunity to take risks. So, the most “strategic” use of philanthropic dollars is to function as social venture capital and to underwrite only new, innovative activities that have the promise to reform practice and transform systems.

That's what I believed and much of current foundation practice is grounded in the same belief system. Just in case that emphasis was not clear enough, foundations typically include a disclaimer in their public documents that they do not provide funding for core operating support, capital campaigns, fundraising or endowments ... in other words, the very things that many nonprofits would say they most need to sustain themselves.

As long as foundation dollars still accounted for only a relatively small sliver of the nonprofit funding “pie,” that might have been all well and good. Although, to be honest, there were certainly organizations that managed to get foundation

funding on an ongoing basis. They may not have been able to apply for core support, but they were adept enough at inventing new project ideas – or connected enough to foundation executives or trustees – that they were able to count on foundation dollars to help sustain their operations, despite “official” foundation strictures to the contrary.

## **Things have changed**

But the funding landscape has changed dramatically in the last ten years. Nonprofits have experienced a significant erosion of funding from government sources that they used to support their core operations. Meanwhile, traditional private sources of relatively unrestricted funding have changed their policies. In many locales, The United Way has moved away from providing operating support for member agencies and become a funder of time-limited projects. Similarly, many corporate giving programs have become much more focused in their grantmaking in support of larger company marketing goals.

Simultaneously, foundations have increased in number and in size, fueled by the economic prosperity of the late 1990s and the first phase of a promised intergenerational transfer of wealth of unprecedented proportions. In California alone, there are now ten foundations with assets of over a billion dollars... a scenario almost unimaginable just a few short years ago.

It therefore shouldn't come as a surprise that “grantwriting” has become a major industry. Consultants, how-to books and workshops abound to help nonprofits effectively tap foundation dollars. And, most important, more and more organizations are now looking to foundations as part of their long-range strategy for sustainability.

Foundations seem to be somewhat in denial about this phenomenon, even as many of them allocate a good percentage of their annual grants to a select cohort of “the usual suspects.” Their rationale for such behavior runs something like this:

- We're being strategic in our choices. These are the most effective organizations in our particular fields of interest.
- We support leadership or innovation, not institutions per se. These happen to be the groups with the best ideas or the top leaders in the field.
- Our “cohort” is different from the types of organizations the “old boys” used to support based simply on social connections or the like.

If foundations are willing to help sustain certain organizations (even though they may not call it that or perhaps even think of it that way) shouldn't they at least be more open to having a conversation on this topic with other applicants? I'm not suggesting that all or even most foundation dollars should be committed to the long-term sustainability of organizations. Indeed, I would argue that it is important for foundations to refrain from over committing their dollars over the long term in order to retain sufficient flexibility to respond to changes in their environment. Rather, it's the blanket prohibition on such funding that I question.

It's also worth noting that the vast majority of foundation grants continue to be relatively small in size. Grants are much more likely to be in the range of \$10,000 than they are to be in seven figures. But to take the perspective of a grantseeking organization for a moment, a \$10,000 gift from an individual would identify them as a major donor, the kind of person an agency would logically seek to cultivate as a potential sustainer of its work. Why shouldn't they look at a foundation the same way?

All of which argues for just a bit less disingenuousness on the part of foundations when it comes to the topic of sustainability. We say it's not what we do, yet with hundreds of millions of grant dollars now available each year, how much of that can we invest in "new" ideas while ignoring the critical infrastructure needs of most nonprofits? Meanwhile, many of us continue to fund the same groups over and over (for the most strategic of reasons) ... in effect helping to sustain their work despite our public pronouncements to the contrary.

### **Our foundation's approach**

The Marguerite Casey Foundation is a "toddler" when it comes to philanthropy, having just made our first round of grants in December, 2002. But a number of our key staff have come from other foundations and have brought with us a determination to do things a bit differently than we have done them in the past. Time will tell whether we are actually successful in helping our grantees with the challenge of sustainability. But I'd like to describe for you some of the decisions we have made about how we are going to do business to see how they might assist in your deliberations.

The first decision we made was to have no grantmaking programs or initiatives. Rather, we chose four regions of the country where there were a high proportion of families living in poverty. We then set out to identify organizations that had a track record of working with low-income families and to "meet them where they are" by making grants for core operating support.

This is considered a radical approach by many in the foundation world, particularly since we have a fairly sizeable grantmaking budget (about \$30 million this year). Our ultimate aim is to help nurture movement building among low-income families. We expect that will entail providing a number of organizations

with support over an extended period of time, as well as making additional grants to help build their collective capacity.

Sustainability has been central to our thinking from the earliest days of the foundation. But we are open about the fact that we are in a period of exploration right now and that we will not try to sustain everything that we are currently funding.

In the process of getting to know our current grantees, we have also been stunned to find how dependent many of them are on foundation dollars. Most of them are advocacy groups that do not receive government or corporate funding. Nevertheless, when an organization is 70-80% funded by foundations, that is a recipe for vulnerability in my book. It's something we hope to address with our grantees over time... even as we have to be conscious of their potential growing dependency on our dollars.

As an aside, I want to note here that it's essential that community-based organizations build their capacity to fundraise from individuals. I know many think it's beyond their reach, but I'm convinced that can be an important part of the sustainability strategy for any organization—even those in low-income communities -- but that's probably a topic for another talk at another time.

At the Marguerite Casey Foundation, we've employing a variety of strategies to achieve our mission while also helping our grantees sustain their work over the long haul. There's nothing startlingly innovative or original about any one strategy, but we hope that by employing them in combination that we'll come closer to the elusive goal of sustainability. They are:

Core Operating Support. In our initial conversations with potential grantees, we surprised many of them by indicating they could ask us for core operating support. Moreover, rather than require applicants to undergo specific capacity building work as a condition for funding as many foundations do, we decided instead to make grants with “no strings attached.” That puts a special burden on our staff to conduct thorough due diligence in the selection of potential grantees. But once chosen, we allow the organization significant flexibility in how they will spend our grant dollars.

Each grant has specific objectives, but it's all right with us if they simply use the money to support existing programs. Others have used a core support grant to add needed staff, fund staff development and training, or to strengthen internal infrastructure. Since our conversation with applicants focuses on the trajectory of their organization and no “new” idea is being proposed that needs to be tested, sustainability is the goal of these grants from the outset. Progress reports from grantees so far have indicated that core support dollars have been put to a variety of creative uses that have enhanced organizational effectiveness in ways

we might not have originally anticipated. Rather than creating stress for the organization, our funding has served to strengthen their work.

Leadership. What may be ultimately most sustainable is the career of a young person whose skills have been enhanced and confidence honed by participation in an effective leadership development program. It is an “investment” that will pay dividends over their entire working lifetime and create positive ripples throughout the entire nonprofit sector. Accordingly, we are surveying the landscape of existing leadership development and recognition programs to identify opportunities to enrich the work of our grantees. This is obviously an area with a long history of foundation support, and numerous effective models exist. Rather than starting with the assumption that we will need to create a new program to meet our specific needs, we’re taking the time to see what’s already working for organizations like our grantees and then will proceed from there.

A related issue that is central to the sustainability of our sector is that of leadership succession. Most of the organizations we fund are led by executives “of a certain age,” many of them veterans of the era of idealism of the 1960’s that brought many young people into public service. While they may lack retirement plans (and that is another critical issue) they may also hope to not work forever. And no matter how valuable their contributions have been over time, every organization must eventually consider the benefits that new leadership can bring.

How do we address this dilemma as a sector? Many nonprofit executives I have talked with are in denial about this looming issue. Few organizations have the resources to “grow their own” new leader. Nor are there typically funds available to ensure a respectful, graceful exit for a valued leader after years of committed service. I submit that this is an issue we need to collectively address and that foundations have an important role to play. It’s not something we’ve typically done before, with rare exceptions. But it’s a matter of growing importance, particularly if we’re serious about sustainability. And, while we’re at it, let’s talk about Board leadership as well. That’s an arena where there’s lots of work to be done as well.

Advocacy. Despite the vicissitudes of constantly changing political priorities, government continues to be the single largest funder of health and human services for low-income people. Without effective advocacy, that funding is always at risk when budget cutting becomes necessary. While it may seem counterintuitive to some, we believe that support for advocacy activities is an effective strategy to enhance the sustainability of the nonprofit sector. The recent efforts of community organizing groups and other advocates in California have resulted in significant expansions of health insurance coverage for underserved children and their families, for example.

At my last job at The California Wellness Foundation, we not only provided core operating support for a variety of advocacy organizations, but we also funded an

annual Health Advocates Retreat to allow them to step back, reflect and engage in dialogue about priorities, tactics and potential partnerships. We then provided follow-up funding for joint efforts that resulted from those conversations.

A companion strategy is to provide funding to train grantees to become better advocates. Most service providers have had little experience in the political arena. Learning how government really works (as opposed to what textbooks teach) and how to effectively communicate the interests of their clients to policymakers is another route to organizational sustainability. For example, we last year underwrote participation by a number of our grantees in trainings by the Spin Project, which teaches them how to employ strategic communications.

Networks. Central to our strategy of supporting movement building is nurturing the development of a “network of networks.” I’ve seen its effectiveness in multiplying the voices of underrepresented people via advocacy work, but there are also practical benefits for sustainability. A growing field of study in management is the way in which highly successful for-profit businesses have employed the development of networks to their advantage.

In the non-profit arena, I’ve had the privilege of supporting the development of regional networks of community health centers in California that significantly strengthened their ability to compete and thrive in a managed care environment. They combined forces to hire expensive “back office” staff and buy technology, and consultation that they could not have afforded alone. They also engaged in joint purchasing and other business ventures that have made them more efficient and effective. Perhaps most important, they built a culture of learning and sharing that has benefited all of the participants, large and small.

I suspect that supporting the further development of already existing networks of nonprofits will prove to be one of the most effective strategies we can employ for long-term sustainability. We can also help underwrite the development of new networks in less heavy handed ways than the old “forced marriages” sometimes sponsored by foundations in the past. We’ve begun that task by asking our grantees if they would like to participate in “Learning Clusters,” which are totally voluntary efforts to build connections across issues and geographic regions.

No matter how much we may invest in capacity building with individual organizations, we can never bring all of them up to the level they need to be to compete effectively in this rapidly changing context. But we can all get smarter about thinking about the dimensions of collective capacity that will make a difference. We’ve begun by asking our own grantees what their needs are, with a view to investing in resources in areas like communications, technology and data analysis that can be tapped by a number of our grantees... building networks in the process.



Evaluation. I recently had the opportunity to be part of a meeting of NGOs from all over the world who were brought together to discuss how best to assess their efforts to effect social change. After two days of struggling with the political and personal dilemmas of accountability, a colleague and I had the task of kicking off a conversation on evaluation.

I surprised many in the group by contending that evaluation was key to the sustainability of their organizations. While most were committed to internal reflection on their work in order to enhance their effectiveness, they had typically been forced to respond to evaluation demands from donors that, in their view, did not begin to capture the richness of their work and its impact. Evaluation was something that had been used against them, not for their benefit, in their view. It used up precious resources and was rarely useful as a tool to improve practice, I was told.

How best to capture and “tell the story” of the impact nonprofits are having? That’s the essence of my job and it’s also part of the puzzle of sustainability in my view. We need to attract new individual donors to support this work. Many of them bring a business mindset that focuses on short-term outcomes rather than the painstaking process necessary to change communities. Achieving approaches to evaluation that help organizations learn and improve their work and also meet public expectations for accountability is an important part of the challenge that lies before us.

Indirect Costs. Part of building a healthy, sustainable organization is devoting sufficient resources to infrastructure in support of its work. When foundations refuse to pay indirect costs on their grants, they negate this need. Where else are nonprofits to turn to support these essential services? The Marguerite Casey Foundation allows (and encourages) 15% indirect costs on all its grants. Some have argued that amount is too low to cover actual expenses incurred with large grants (typically large institutions, by the way). They may have a point, but we think that amount is fair and important if we are serious about helping the organizations we fund achieve sustainability.

Other strategies. On occasion in the past, I’ve recommended a grant an organization to establish an “operating endowment” or to create a fundraising program to build an endowment to sustain its work over the long haul. Given the cost, it is not something one could consider doing very often, but what’s important is that foundations not totally rule out that potentially valuable tool for sustainability. Arts funders have long employed a variety of creative strategies for sustainability such as funding operating reserves for organizations that, by their nature, are vulnerable to chronic cash flow woes.

I am also intrigued by (but hardly knowledgeable about) recent proposals for foundations to use their resources to help create new capital markets for their grantees. In the coming year, we plan to start investigating not only Program

Related Investments but also Investments Related to Program (or Mission Related Investments) that might use our \$600 million endowment to help sustain our grantees and build wealth in their communities in ways we've not yet envisioned. One thing is certain... we're going to have to be creative and open ourselves up to dialogue and learning with folks outside our traditional philanthropic circles if we're going to realize our potential.

## **Four Dimensions of Sustainability**

While much of the discussion so far has focused on funding strategies and practices, it's worth stating a simple truth that sometimes gets lost in the grantseeking game: money is only one piece of the puzzle of sustainability. Certainly, being able to pay staff a living wage and having the funds for decent space and equipment are critical resources for long-term organizational survival and effectiveness. But some of the most powerful movements for individual and societal transformation have relied on the efforts of volunteers and have prospered despite a "bare bones" organizational structure.

Much of what is central to sustainability lies outside the influence of foundations. We may be able to recognize it and appreciate it, perhaps even nurture it at times. But we cannot control it, and we should be clear on that point. I've come to believe that sustainability, like synergy, cannot be engineered.

There are several dimensions to sustainability, and many ways to describe them. For purposes of discussion, I would like to propose four: spirit; values; niche; and capacity. These are not neat, mutually exclusive categories. Rather I view them as segments of a circle that "bleed" into one another ... overlapping, informing and reinforcing each other, and forming a complex, dynamic, interactive "whole."

Organizations that have sustained their work with integrity and efficacy over time demonstrate all four of these dimensions in abundance. If one or more of these dimensions is missing, I would argue that an organization is in decline, even if its members may not see it that way. Let us look at all four in more detail:

### **Spirit**

Whether there is a single founder or a group of founders, the impulse to undertake an activity and subsequently to start an organization – its animating spirit – is also key to sustainability. That initial energy and exuberance is inevitably tempered with time, but successful organizations find ways to renew that commitment and to infuse new members with the same sense of purpose. It is the wellspring of inspiration that members of an organization draw from in tough times to keep them going, even when they know they are engaged in an

uphill struggle. Traditionally, it has been that deeply felt “call to service” that has imbued nonprofit work with a special quality. It is more than just a job. Spirit can manifest itself in many ways. On a number of occasions, I’ve had grantseekers remark to me “You know, we’re going to find a way to do this, even if you don’t fund us.” Spirit alone is not sufficient to sustain an organization or its work, no matter how important it may be to a community. But when it fades into the background or is largely forgotten in the pursuit of personal or political agendas, something essential is lost.

## **Values**

If spirit provides the initial spark and enduring “heart” for an organization, the degree to which it is able to articulate, teach and live its core values with integrity constitutes the foundation and structural framework on which organizational life is built. Virtually all nonprofits have idealized mission statements that speak to their dedication to improving social conditions and transforming the communities in which they work for the better. How is that mission operationalized in its daily life?

Does the organization take the time to spell out its core values and ensure that they infuse all aspects of its work? Are the leaders of the organization able to create and maintain an internal culture characterized by mutual respect, trust and professional integrity? Does that internal culture, in turn, shape the way the organization deals with its constituents or clients? Do they not only “talk the talk” but also “walk the talk?”

If learning is a core value of the organization, is it truly committed to receiving feedback about how it is perceived, not only by its own members but also by those outside the inner circle? Does it hold itself accountable for living up to its values ... the essence of good stewardship? A coherent, cohesive organizational culture shaped by strongly held values is key to attracting and retaining excellent staff. It is also the prerequisite for sustaining high quality services and products over time.

## **Niche**

Even an organization that operates with the highest level of integrity must also deeply understand and “fit” within its local social ecosystem if it is to achieve sustainability. Most American nonprofits now operate within a dynamic, constantly evolving environment. The demographic and cultural composition of a neighborhood can change virtually overnight. Similarly, the interests, preferences and needs of the local population are in flux. An organization founded to meet the needs of those living in a certain place at a particular time can quickly find

itself irrelevant to its current context, absent an ongoing conscious effort to connect with and learn from its surroundings.

To be sustainable in the most fundamental sense (i.e. ongoing demand for its services) an organization must regularly revisit its mission, strategies and programs to test their continuing efficacy vis-a-vis its intended constituents. It must be able to adapt to changing circumstances, whether that means hiring culturally appropriate managers and staff, developing new programmatic approaches, and/or adjusting other ways in which it does its business. It may need to seek out new partners, for example, to the benefit of all. The organization must also ensure that the voices around its Board table reflect the evolving ecology of its world.

No niche is permanently secure. Even powerful established organizations that enjoy a relatively stable funding base must effectively adapt if they are to continue to thrive. Perhaps the hardest message for an organization to grapple with is that its past success is not necessarily a predictor of future performance. The development of even small “grassroots” organizations can be hampered by self-imposed “blindness” when they close themselves off from critical feedback from individuals or groups not close to their leadership.

## **Capacity**

There are a number of key internal indicators of organizational effectiveness that help to determine not only if an agency will survive but thrive. First and foremost is leadership. It can take many forms and can be expressed in a variety of styles appropriate to the cultural context of the organization. But the organization’s leaders must be capable of articulating a vision for the agency’s work, planning for effective implementation, and ensuring appropriate day-to-day management of personnel and other resources. The identification and development of new leaders is also important for sustainability, both for the benefit of the organization itself and the broader community.

The organization must also be able to recruit, train and retain talented staff to operate its programs. A variety of skill sets are required to sustain even a small organization, ranging from program-specific expertise to financial management to marketing and fundraising to evaluating the impact of its work. In our increasingly culturally diverse society, the need for culturally appropriate or culturally competent approaches to programs and management cuts across all of these traditional domains of organizational capacity.

There’s no question that many organizations could benefit from outside assistance in self-assessment of capacity, improving their skills, and strengthening critical infrastructure. Grant dollars can be helpful in that regard.

But capacity is only one dimension of sustainability; it is necessary but not sufficient in itself to accomplish that goal.

## **Personal Renewal**

Raising the money to support the work of a nonprofit organization and paying attention to the other dimensions of sustainability is a tough job. The monetary rewards are typically modest, even though the intangible benefits can be profound. Since most nonprofits are chronically undercapitalized, there are typically never enough resources to adequately and appropriately fund professional development, let alone contemplate ways of supporting genuine personal renewal.

Most Executive Directors I have known will use what resources they have to support personal and professional development activities for their staff ... putting their own needs last. While that's admirable, there's also a cost. So, the message I want to leave you and your funders with this afternoon is probably not one you expected to hear. An essential part of sustainability of your respective organizations is your own personal wellness.

My own journey over the past nine years has brought me to a whole new appreciation for the concept of wellness, beginning with my work at The California Wellness Foundation. I had the opportunity to sit in on countless conversations with people from underserved communities throughout the state and found that they enthusiastically embraced the concept of wellness. For them, it provides an image of healing and of hope ... a really powerful metaphor for personal and community transformation. ... in a way that "health" does not. For too many of them, health and health care have negative connotations, bound up in institutions that have long been insensitive to their needs.

I'm proud to have been part of an organization that has tried to spread that message throughout California. In that process, it took me a lot longer to come to the realization that message applied to me as well. I had gained more than 30 pounds and my own health had deteriorated. As my doctor said to me repeatedly "you can't really be good at taking care of others unless you take care of yourself first."

That was a hard message for me to hear, as I think it would be for most of the people in this room. After all, we've consciously devoted our lives to issues and causes greater than ourselves. On another level, it also flies in the face of some profound societal ambivalence we seem to have about making personal health and well-being a real priority.

We've seen some high profile examples of that in the not too distant past when the Vice President of the U.S. had cardiac catheterization but was back at his

desk within 24 hours. That's role modeling for the executives of America! Or the quarterback of a pro football team who had experienced repeat concussions and his decision to stop playing to protect his health was greeted with groans of dismay from fans and the media who have come to expect that the essence of professionalism is to "play with pain."

Of course, it's also tangled up with our values about work, positional authority and power as well. Clearly, those are the things that matter most in America today. We're a culture that values urgency over deliberateness and action over reflection. You need look no further than our obsession with a stock market that rises and falls on quarterly financial indicators to get a clear picture of our national mindset. It's decidedly not the long view.

In my case, I'd been trying to do too many things, too fast, all the time. And after years of maintaining that pace, there was a cost. But the good news is that I've moved past denial. Over the past eighteen months, I've made some big changes in my eating and exercise habits and sought out a new job where I now have a short commute and a four day workweek.

If there's anything to be gained from my experience, I would hope that each of you would take a look in the mirror and ask yourself: what am I doing to apply the principles of prevention and renewal in my life? Are they really a priority? What can I do to achieve sustainability on a personal level that will also ultimately benefit my organization?

Institutional policies rarely exist to support personal renewal, even in organizations devoted to health. One of the most creative things I've seen in the foundation world is the Durfee Foundation's sabbatical program. It provides stipends each year to 10 veteran nonprofit leaders in Los Angeles. The purpose is purely personal renewal – rest, rejuvenation and reflection. The recipients are urged to get out of town, to not take on some special project, and to not call in to the office. It's great for them and for the organizations, which must learn to function without them for three months. One of my last projects at The California Wellness Foundation was to work with Compasspoint in SF to replicate that program for leaders of health nonprofits in California and they just announced their first group of sabbatical recipients.

Short of that, I highly recommend trying to set aside some time in the week for quiet reflection. It's the rarest of commodities for leaders of nonprofits, but I think it's an important way to reconnect with some of those non-monetary dimensions of sustainability we talked about earlier, namely values and spirit ... the things that give our work meaning.

One of the most articulate advocates of self renewal was John Gardner, and his book by that title is a classic. If he were with us today, I think he would argue that the ultimate key to renewal is meaningful work... something that all of us in this

room have in common. Our challenge is sustaining ourselves as we seek to serve others.

My wish and blessing for you in that regard is a quote from one of John Gardner's speeches which one of my colleagues was kind enough to share with me:

Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something that you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something. The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together in to that unique pattern that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account.

(The full text of this speech, entitled "Personal Renewal" can be found in [Living, Leading and the American Dream](#) edited by Francesca Gardner (Jossey-Bass,2003. It's definitely worth reading in its entirety)