

Good afternoon again. Thanks for being here. Working with you—nonprofit and community leaders, donors, partners, government officials, friends, philanthropists all—It is such a privilege.

We learn from you every day. We are honored to work with you. Vermont is a special place, and it's because of you, and because of the traditions of working together.

All of us are, indeed, Better Together.

It's also a privilege each year to have this opportunity to share some thoughts about philanthropic issues of the day.

As I travel around the state, I find myself talking about community and connectedness. That makes sense, as our work at the Community Foundation is fundamentally about that, about social capital: our commitment to each other, trust, and reciprocity toward each other—*that* is social capital.

I'll talk about social capital today. I'll talk about how we're Better Together.

Beyond the natural beauty of these mountains and valleys, it is this social capital that makes Vermont such a special place.

But I want to approach this differently than in the past.

Ice Buckets... and David Letterman

People ask me about The Ice Bucket Challenge.

For those of you who don't spend much time on the Internet, or watching television, or talking to people who do, the ice bucket challenge is something that burst on the scene this summer. The idea is that people are "challenged" by friends, family and colleagues to make donations to research for Lou Gehrig's disease—ALS. They are asked to either give \$100 for ALS research, or to dump a bucket of ice on their heads and give only \$10. Pretty clever.

Since it started, the campaign has involved everybody from our Governor to Britney Spears and David Beckham to many of your nephews and nieces and children—and probably some of you in the room. It's been a stunning success, and has brought over \$100 million to the ALS Association—somewhat more than the \$2.8 million they raised in 2013.

So that seems cool...and good.

But if you read the blogs in the philanthropy world, and in many newspapers and reputable online journals, there is little love for the ice bucket challenge.

Among the questions:

- Is the ice-bucket challenge dumbing down philanthropy?
- Is it distracting people from important issues?

- Is it going to mean every nonprofit has to find a gimmick to raise money—and from people who don't even know what they do?
- Is it merely a chance for people to bring attention to themselves?
- By golly, is it the sign of the apocalypse?

Here's one of my favorite articles, from the Canadian newsweekly *Macleans*:

“The marketing gimmick is very clever. It is short, immediately understandable, and like the most popular forms of slacktivism, it is easy to do, entertaining to watch, and narcissistically self-promoting. ...It is a great way to raise money—but it is a *horrible* reason to donate it.”

Macleans goes on...

“When we decide where to spend our charitable dollars, we need to consider three factors.

1. Where is the greatest need?
2. Where will my dollars have the greatest influence?
3. What is the most urgent problem?

The ALS challenge fails all three of these tests.”

So my eleven-year old niece pours freezing water on her head, squeals, and posts a video on Instagram that is seen by a few dozen friends and family members. And she gives some of her allowance to support ALS research—what may well have been her first ever gift—and she now knows something about ALS, and is aware of something else in the world that is important.

She gave. Is that so bad? And might it not inspire her—and others—to think about other things she should support? A hundred million dollars has been raised for ALS research. How is that bad?

According to some critics, if it's not strategic, it's not good.

Here's my view. It's simple:

I believe that philanthropy is a good thing.

My friend Liz Bankowski says it even more directly. “There's no such thing,” says Liz, “as bad philanthropy.”

And I tend to agree. It's hard to go wrong when you are acting from a place of generosity.

Her point, as I hear it, is that we shouldn't fret so much about our generosity.

We shouldn't let the joy of giving be muddied by the intellectual pursuit of the best, the most effective, the most perfect giving. I'm with her.

To be clear, I think the pressure on the ALS Association is going to be immense. Their fundraising for the year has just increased by 35 times. Millions of people around the world have donated. The

ALS association now has to be *smart* and *strategic* and *effective* as they support new research projects for an ALS cure.

And sure, we do expect larger philanthropies—strategic philanthropists, foundations, and the like—to be...well...strategic and thoughtful.

I don't disagree with that *MacLeans* writer who says we should be strategic, and should try to focus on critical issues.

You rightly expect the community foundation to analyze strengths and weaknesses of organizations, and to make wise grant choices and recommendations.

Indeed, if the Ford Foundation decided to switch all of its millions of dollars in grants each year to ALS we would all be right to be skeptical, even critical.

But that's not what I'm talking about.

This campaign—launched by individuals who wanted to bring attention to the disease—ended up not only bringing awareness to ALS, but awareness of other giving issues, and money as well. That is a good thing.

In the rush to criticize, I want to say to you that giving, quite simply, is good. I'm not going to recount again the data proving that people's lives are better when they give...to anything. They are, and research has shown it. Among other things, giving makes you live longer. ...*Really*.

The questions about the ice bucket challenge may be interesting. But I'm far more interested in the *reaction* to it.

I want to talk about a kind of closed-mindedness and cynicism that is permeating too much of our culture. I want to talk about the danger of criticism becoming an end in and of itself.

I want to talk about David Letterman.

Like many of you, especially those of us born before 1970, I loved his show—particularly when it first started. It was fresh and cutting and funny. Nothing was safe. We loved it. And he changed television. We got to see inside the show—to see behind the scenes, and to feel smart and clever. And he made fun of everything and everybody.

He has become far more gentle in recent years. But from Letterman and his progeny, we came to learn that criticism of anything and everything is *smart*.

I wonder, though, if that kind of “smart criticism” may have left too many of us without any real sense of what we *do* believe, of what matters.

The President of Wesleyan University, Michael Roth, in a New York Times op-ed piece this summer, raised a similar concern:

“... critical reflection is fundamental to teaching and scholarship, but fetishizing disbelief as a sign of intelligence has contributed to depleting our cultural resources.”

Fetishizing disbelief as a sign of intelligence.

That’s my worry.

My worry is that our David letterman-ness is getting in the way of our Ice Bucket Challenge-ness.

Think about that *MacLeans* article I quoted earlier. Not only did they criticize the campaign, but they were clever and biting, going so far to call those who participate “slacktivists.”

It’s almost as if we’re saying, “If you’re intelligent then you must poke holes in that ice-bucket.”

Most of you know that I’m originally from the mid-west. Born in Nebraska, grew up in Cleveland. When we moved to Cleveland we were by hundreds of miles living farther east than anybody in our family had in a hundred years or more.

I bring this up here because the particular kind of Midwest I grew up in had lots of stereotypical belief about itself—that we’re earnest, hard-working, and honest. Now that can be overdone, and there are earnest, hardworking, and honest people everywhere. And there must have been lazy, dishonest people in my town.

But importantly, those stereotypical Midwestern values also carried with them a *belief in things*.

- A belief that people mostly are trying to do good, and generally tell the truth.
- A belief in people who try to make things better.
- A belief that by working together, and helping each other, things will be better.
- And a value that you don’t criticize people too much when they are doing good work.

I want to relate this to philanthropy.

When I first started in the world of philanthropy, I was most involved in grant reviews—I ran the grants department at our fellow community foundation in New Hampshire. Like Jen and Christopher and Janet do now, I read hundreds of applications every year. And there’s a truism that became clear to me very early. It’s this:

The moment you become cynical about the proposals is the moment you’re simply done as a grantmaker.

I saw it happen. As grantmakers, we cannot make it our goal to find the problems with proposals. That kind of constant skepticism only disconnects us from our community. Our goal *has* to be to find the genius in *each and every* proposal...to find the *spark*, the *passion*, and the *humanity*.

Of course we cannot fund everything. Of course grantmakers need to maintain a skeptical eye.

But all of us can—and must—retain the capacity to believe.

We must all have a sense of wonderment and awe at what comes before us.

We all need to be willing to be swayed, to be open to new ideas.

Who would've thought—in 1980—that Shelburne Farms would become a national leader in sustainable agriculture and education? But some people believed.

Who would've thought—in the late 1990s—that the Paramount Theater in Rutland would become a thriving center of culture in that city? But some people believed.

Maybe the same kind of people who believe that the Moran Plant in downtown Burlington can become a Makers Space, event space, art gallery, and offices.

My plea to you is this: believe. Believe in *people* and their *ideas*, here in Vermont and elsewhere. Believe in yourselves. Believe in each other. Allow a little wonderment to creep into your lives. Don't be so quick to shoot down someone else's ideas.

Snarkiness is not something to be proud of.

It's okay to ask questions, but don't get in the way of other people's enthusiasm.

That doesn't mean you have to believe *everything*.
But it does mean you *cannot disbelieve* everything.

It's okay to say, I am not going to participate in the ice bucket challenge. But don't rain on the belief parade of others.

“Sure,” you say. “That's nice. But sometimes, it's more complicated than that. Sometimes the problems are complex and messy, and sometimes people fundamentally disagree about solutions.”

Fair enough.

But I choose to believe that we can find the genius—the brilliance—the solution inside the mess.

In my job, I am fortunate so see that enthusiasm—that desire to *believe*—lead to wonderful things. I see collaboration and passion and creative problem solving by many philanthropists, including some who work with us at the Community Foundation, like the McClure Foundation, Permanent Fund, High Meadows Fund, Vermont Women's Fund, and the Samara Fund.

All of them are working on complicated issues. All of them are listening for new ideas and new visions. *All of them believe.*

It's hard.

And sometimes the issues are so far beyond any one funder or one institution that it can make you cry. Sometimes you have a Ferguson Missouri. What can philanthropy do there? How can we help there?

Well that's where philanthropy—like everybody else—has to be at its most humble and most creative—and with eyes wide open. I hope and expect that smart philanthropists are sitting down already with citizens and activists and town leaders to talk about solutions—solutions in that place where there is so much disenfranchisement and discouragement.

What we know is that philanthropy, community work, civic engagement—they take many forms. Sometimes they are deeply strategic, complex, and long-term. And sometimes...sometimes they are a bucket of ice on the head and a YouTube video and a chuckle.

I haven't done the ice bucket challenge.

But I won't criticize anybody who does, and I don't view the \$100 million raised for ALS research as a bad thing.

Because I believe that philanthropy is a good thing. And what I ask you today is this: When somebody has an idea—even if it seems a little wacky—don't start with why it won't work. Start by finding the beauty in the idea.

That's how we build our communities. That's where we learn that we are better together.

#