

Why Do We Give? A Civic Reflection Program
Association of Small Foundations
Various Locations
2005-2007

Introduction

The Association of Small Foundations (ASF) is a national membership organization of 2,900 foundations with few or no staff. Small foundations represent half of all foundation giving in the United States. ASF enhances the power of small foundation giving by providing the donors, trustees, and staff of member foundations with peer learning opportunities, targeted tools and resources, and a collective voice in and beyond the philanthropic community.

Over the past few years, civic reflection dialogues have become part of the culture of educational programs at ASF. At ASF National Conferences, civic reflection dialogues have been a big hit with members. In 2005, with the support of a grant from the Project on Civic Reflection, ASF increased its offerings in this area to an enthusiastic response. In 2006 and early 2007, with a second grant from the Project, the ASF continued developing its civic reflection offerings. Dialogues were held in Chestnut Hill, MA; Washington, DC (two programs, one with ASF staff and one with staff of the Council on Foundations); New Orleans, where ASF's National Conference was held in 2006; and Chicago.

Participants

Dialogue groups were made up of different people each time – drawing from attendees at a specific ASF conference or in a specific locale. ASF Educational Programs Manager Janice Simsohn Shaw noted that one of the fun parts of working with different groups of members is that facilitators were able to re-use some of the readings: “We really honed our discussion questions as we learned from earlier dialogues.”

Guiding Questions

Each dialogue brought out some of the central questions in philanthropy:

- Why do we give?
- Does the giver receive something by giving?
- How do we navigate the tricky power dynamic in grantor-grantee relations?
- Is shame an inherent aspect of asking for support and for giving and receiving?
- What is the value of emotional engagement and that of intellectual reserve in grant-making?
- Is it harder to help an intimate friend/family member or a stranger?
- How do we stay motivated and inspired to give, even though we can't possibly do all that we wish?

Readings

- “The Eleventh” by Henri Barbusse
- “The Death of the Hired Man” by Robert Frost
- Excerpt from “Laws Concerning Gifts to the Poor” by Moses Maimonides
- “The Lamb and the Pinecone” by Pablo Neruda
- Excerpt from “Reveries of the Sixth Walker” by Jean Jacques Rousseau
- “The Whistlers’ Room” by Richard Seltzer
- “A Work of Art” by Sylvia Townsend Warner

Facilitators

Janice Simsohn Shaw reported that “some of our programs utilized the talents of the incomparable Amy Kass, who has been well-received by ASF members in years past.” Other discussions were facilitated by ASF members and staff, including Keith Whitaker, Andy Carroll, Dan Bakinowski, and Janice Simsohn Shaw. Susie Quern Pratt of the Project on Civic Reflection also facilitated a session at the National Conference.

Feedback from Participants

- *Amazingly helpful to hear how different people read the story and contributed to the discussion—that really opened my mind to new ideas and viewpoints.*
- *We are a new foundation trying to find our way of operating. Today made our ideas seem workable.*
- *The real Homeland Security is in these dialogues.*
- *Should be required! We need to step back and be reminded about the “bigger picture.”*

Special Feature of this Program

In order to give members practical tools for bringing civic reflection to their own boards, with support from the Project on Civic Reflection ASF created “Civic Reflection: A Toolkit for Foundation Boards.” The toolkit, which includes sample readings, guiding questions, and tips for facilitators, is available free of charge through the ASF website, www.smallfoundations.org.