

Along the Road

By Terry Stokesbary, Senior Program Director, M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust

A man is walking down West Burnside Street in downtown Portland, near the Willamette River, when he is approached by three people. They demand his wallet, and as he hands it over they decide he is taking too long and begin hitting him. Fueled by adrenaline, by the aggression that comes with living on the street, and by their anger at another middle-class man who—they assume—thinks he’s better than them, they beat him savagely. They are alone, it is late at night, and no one is around to see what they’re doing. They knock the man unconscious and continue to hit him and kick him, until his life itself hangs in the balance. Startled by a sound, and aware that the Portland Police patrol Burnside regularly, one of the thieves pulls the other two away and they run off to split whatever they might find in the man’s wallet. It will be enough, at least, for the next hit and something to eat. The man lies alone on the sidewalk on death’s door.

Two men walk out of a nearby bar. One of them is the pastor of one of Portland’s most vibrant churches, and the other—his friend—owns a local restaurant. The two men, out for a guys’ night together away from the demands of their young families, see the man lying in the street. They see blood, they see that he is not moving. There is no break in their conversation about the Seahawks’ playoff chances as they pointedly turn the corner and walk away from the man. After all, everyone knows this patch of Burnside is rough—who knows what kind of trouble this guy got himself into?

Two siblings—he, the brother, is down for the weekend from Seattle to visit her, his sister—walk by. Since they were teenagers, they’ve enjoyed long walks at night together, when the city is a little quieter. It’s a good chance for them to talk and, since he moved north, to catch up. She is a resident at Oregon Health Sciences University, and he is studying ethics at the University of Washington. They see the man lying in the street, broken and alone. “Should we do something?” she asks. “It’s too dangerous,” he replies. “Besides, it’s getting really late.” “Yeah. He’s probably just drunk, anyway,” she says. They walk away.



A woman, walking by herself, comes along Burnside. She has just finished working a late cleaning shift at a local office building. She is a refugee, having arrived in Portland a year ago after fleeing political persecution in her native South Sudan. Aided by a local nonprofit, she and her family have made a home in Portland, where she and her husband both work at menial jobs while taking care of their four children. She sees the man and her heart goes out to him—she knows what it is to be in pain. She recognizes a victim of senseless violence when she sees one. She is compelled to help. She calls Yellow Cab and soon a taxi—driven by an African American man who works two full-time jobs—arrives. He is nervous about helping this woman with this strange man, but she sees the look in his eye and can't refuse. Together, they lift the man gently into the cab and drive them to the nearest hospital. The woman hands the driver a \$20 bill for payment, and insists that he takes it when he tries to refuse. The doctors and nurses in the emergency room rush the injured man into a patient room. The woman offers her Oregon Health Plan card to the intake nurse, telling the nurse that she does not know the man but will use her insurance for his treatment if they will let her.

Each day, the woman visits the man in the hospital as his recovery begins. Her husband joins her, bringing their children when they can, and the healing man becomes an unlikely extended family member to this household of refugees. After he recovers and leaves the hospital, he shares regular meals in their home and invites them to into his home.

His attackers are never found.

A STORY FOR EVERYONE

Most people reading this article will recognize the framework of the story of the Good Samaritan in the tale above. I tell a secular, modern version of it here because it is a story that transcends religion. Though it originated with Jesus and his parable in the biblical gospel of Luke, the story itself speaks to our shared humanity. It is a story anyone can enter into, understand, and appreciate.

The nonprofit organizations to which the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust provides grants are often in the work of taking care of the people who are most in need in our society—as organizations, they are our Good Samaritans. The Breast Cancer Detection Center of Alaska serves women across the



largest U.S. state, even in rural areas. Grays Harbor Community Hospital in Washington provides emergency medical care to communities surrounding Aberdeen. Because International, based in Idaho, creates shoes and other products for underserved children around the world. Shepherd's House in Oregon provides vital services for people who are poor or homeless. These organizations and so many others provide necessary services to a hurting world, just like the refugee did for the injured man in the story above.

At the same time, providing services is only half the battle. In his speech “A Time to Break Silence” on April 4, 1967—one year to the day before his assassination—Martin Luther King Jr. said this: “On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”ⁱ In other words, it is one thing to take care of an injured person lying on the roadside, and it is another thing to take a step back and consider the societal and cultural forces that allow such violence to become a normal part of human life. Some nonprofit organizations are engaged in this work as well, and it is here that truly transformational work can happen. It is also, necessarily, where some of the most risky work happens, the work that comes along with uncertain results because no one has attempted it before.

Running a nonprofit organization and addressing these problems is not easy work, to say the least. The mission of the M.J. Murdock Trust is “to serve individuals, families and communities across the Pacific Northwest by providing grants and enrichment programs to organizations that strengthen the region’s educational, social, spiritual and cultural base in creative and sustainable ways.” As such, we provide tactical grants to nonprofit organizations to meet a specific need, and grants that help nonprofits with expansion so they can grow into the future. Tactical and expansion grants tend to be based on existing knowledge and expertise, best practices; they are generally given to organizations practicing tactical leadership. They are—and should be—the bulk of the grants the Trust awards each year.



There are other categories of grants, though—grants for innovation and transformation—that are risky. These grants are designed to help organizations do something new (innovation) or address a root cause of some sort (transformation). The nature of these grants is that they involve more unknowns, more what ifs, and more trial and error. Organizations with an adaptive leadership model are those who need these innovation and transformation grants.

It is these transformative grants that address the larger issues at stake in the story of the Good Samaritan—the safety of the road to Jericho, to paraphrase Martin Luther King. These grants address two key situations, which I will describe in greater detail: swamp issues and new realities.

SWAMP ISSUES

A “swamp issue,” as the name suggests, is that particular type of challenge, opportunity, or problem an organization faces that tends to bog down their work. To keep them stuck. It is the issue they face that makes the organization’s leaders think, “If only we could get past *this*, we could make huge strides.” Sharon Daloz Parks writes:

Adaptive challenges often appear as swamp issues—tangled, complex problems composed of multiple systems that resist technical analysis and thus stand in contrast to the high, hard ground issues that are easier to address but where less is at stake for the organization or the society. They ask for more than changes in routine or mere preference. They call for changes of heart and mind—the transformation of long-standing habits and deeply held assumptions and values.ⁱⁱ

Unaddressed, swamp issues can stifle an organization’s progress for years, keeping them from growing as they should or from living out its innovative and transformative potential.

NEW REALITIES

Culture, society, laws, and human progress do not hold still for nonprofit organizations. Political and social realities change, cultural realities change, legal realities change, and any and all of these changes can affect the work of a nonprofit organization. Sometimes, when faced with a new reality, a nonprofit must scramble to decide how to adapt their mission. When organizations adapt to new realities quickly and well, transformative work is possible. However, like swamp issues, new realities



present an incredible challenge for organizational leaders. Some leaders and organizations are unable to adapt to new realities. These organizations grow stagnant, their mission becoming irrelevant or impossible in a world that has moved on.

New realities may require a solution that is experimental—by virtue of the changed situation, there are generally not proven methods for handling with a new reality. It is in the face of new realities that the most risky moves may be necessary, that unknown and previously untried experiments may be exactly what an organization and its leaders needs to adapt. This makes new realities and possible responses to them both exciting and scary.

CONCLUSION

When organizations are ready to address their swamp issues—which, as Parks writes, is often difficult to do and requires personal change—and face the new realities before them, the Murdock Trust is committed to helping them do so. We can and do provide grants to the organizations committed to taking care of the people who are injured along the road, and those organizations are doing work that is vital to our communities and our greater society. At the same time, we stand ready to help organizations facing innovative and transformative moments in their organizational lifecycle. The Trust is prepared to assist organizations facing swamp issues—e.g., “This road has *always* been unsafe!”—or new realities—e.g., “Thousands of new people are now being forced, by political exile, to walk down this unsafe road.”

Together, we will address the swamp issues and new realities facing nonprofit organizations. Together, we will make take care of people along the road even as we strive to make the road safe.

ⁱ Martin Luther King. “A Time to Break Silence.” In *A Testament of Hope* (ed. James M. Washington), p. 241. New York: HarperOne, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Need citation!