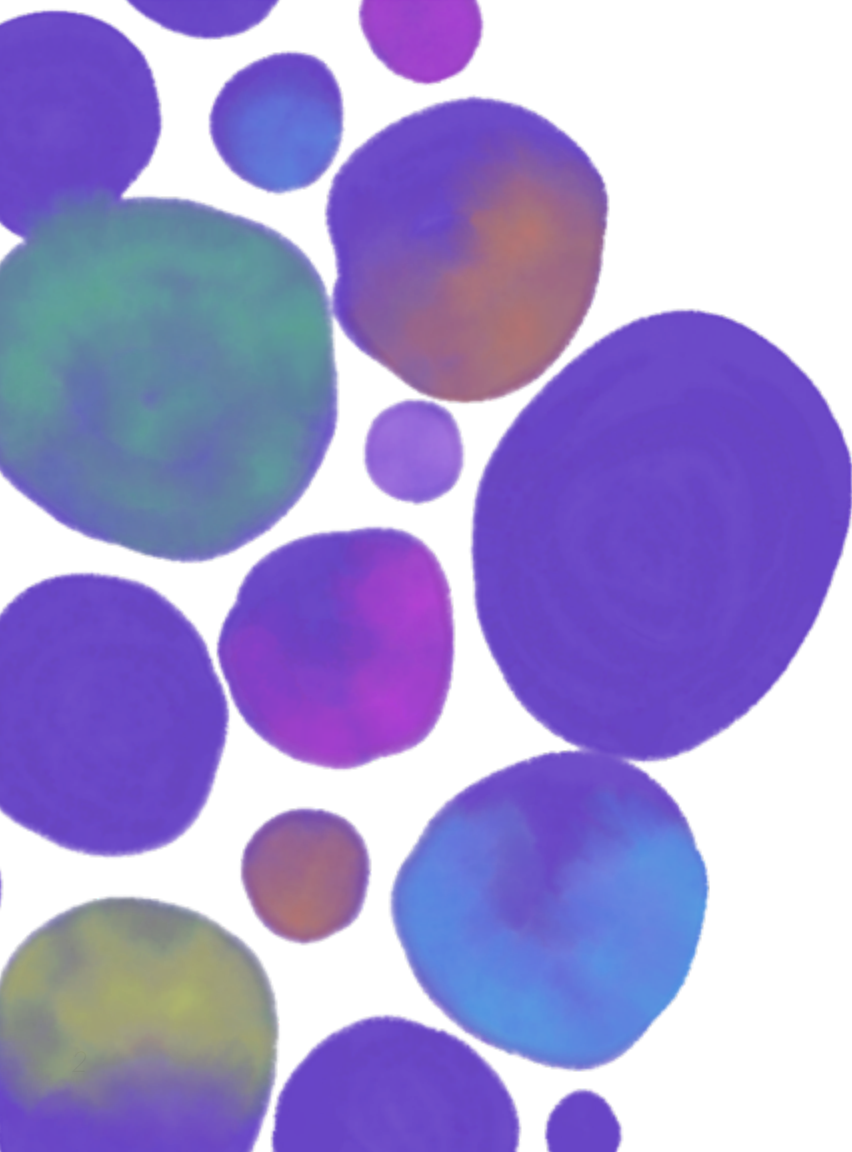


Episode #3

Purpose stories

PurposePhil
concept book





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“ Throughout the past century, the concept of organizational purpose has been subject to dichotomous meanings and interpretations, pendulating back and forth depending on its Zeitgeist.

On the one hand, the meaning of organizational purpose has been seen as instrumental, objective, functional, and outward focused and synonymously used with words such as end, aim, goal, or objective. On the other hand, its meaning has also been spiritual, telic, subjective, moral, ideal, emotional... ”



Valerie
Keller

Writing in Harvard Business Review, Valerie Keller defines purpose as “an aspirational reason for being which inspires and provides a call to action for an organization and its partners and stakeholders and provides benefit to local and global society.”

In 'Origin Stories', we explored the genesis of Western-style philanthropy, rooting its reason for being in a particular social and economic context -- that of agricultural surpluses in what is modern day Iraq.

In 'Money Stories', we took a look at the structure that history has handed down to us, and how that shapes purpose. We asked: what does the form institutional philanthropy has taken tell us about its function -- as a mechanism for redistributing wealth, for blunting the impact of wealth inequality, for blending altruism with self-interest, and/or for some other purposes?

This module explores some of those other purposes, asking what it might look like to re-purpose philanthropy towards alternative means & ends.

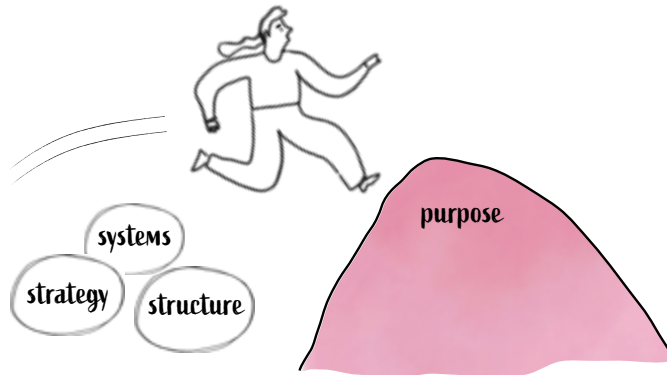




1. What is purpose?

Purpose is one of those often cited, frequently misunderstood, and especially consequential concepts.

Professors Christopher Bartlett and Sumatra Ghoshal, citing research with hundreds of standout organizations, conclude that, “Senior managers of today’s large enterprises must move beyond strategy, structure, and systems to a framework built on purpose, process, and people.” So, what’s the difference?



Bartlett and Ghoshal explain:

“Purpose is the embodiment of an organization’s recognition that its relationships with its diverse stakeholders are interdependent. In short, purpose is the statement of a company’s **moral response to its broadly defined responsibilities, not an amoral plan...**

A fundamental philosophical difference separates senior executives who see themselves as designers of corporate strategy from those who define their task more broadly as shaping institutional purpose. Strategy makers view the companies they head... with a narrowly defined role in a large and complex social environment. In their view, companies are simply agents of economic exchange in a broader marketplace. They are dependents of their shareholders, customers, employees, and larger communities, and the purpose of strategy is to manage these often conflicting dependencies for the maximum benefit of the company they serve.

This minimalist, passive, and self-serving definition grossly understates reality. Corporations are one of the most, if not the most, important institutions of modern society... Furthermore, their responsibility for defining, creating, and distributing value makes corporations one of society’s principal agents of social change. At the micro level, companies are important forums for social interaction and personal fulfillment (Beyond Strategy to Purpose, Harvard Business Review, 1994).”

Foundations aren't exclusively agents of economic exchange, but they are dependent on donors, and striking a balance between their needs, and those of charities, majority and minority communities, and staff.

When more than 90% of a foundation's assets benefit the donor and investment class, and more than 50% of their costs flow to staff and advisors looking after donors and investments, we can ask:

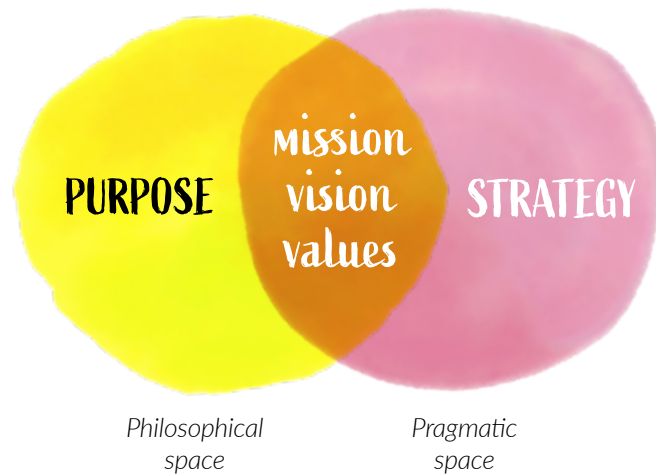
- Are foundations banking institutions, whose purpose is to expertly balance different interests, or are they social change institutions, whose purpose is to take a moral stand?
- Can you be a social change institution and claim neutrality?
- Is neutrality possible given that institutions exist within tax and legal systems with inbuilt logics shaped by particular interests?



That brings us back to the systems change literature, with its focus on rebalancing interests and reimagining power. Here, purpose is also one of the key levers for change. Shifting systems -- and the institutions which make them up -- starts by making implied purposes visible, and making ideal purposes explicit. It is not a pragmatic exercise. It is a philosophical one. Author Charles Leadbeater and Designer Jennie Winhall, in their paper 'Building Better Systems' for the Rockwool Foundation, explain,

The most powerful way to shift a system is to change what it is for, the philosophy underpinning it and therefore what its purpose is... System innovation cannot succeed merely through the application of a new set of tools, methods and processes. The entire process needs to be animated by this deeper reimagining of purpose: not just a different goal to be reached but a different philosophy to be enacted.

Purpose, then, is inextricably linked to philosophy: to how we understand reality, knowledge, and value; and to the ways in which that understanding guides our intentions and actions.



Purpose & Philosophy

- What you are here for
- Why you do what you do
- How you think about the nature of reality and what is called for

Mission

- What you want to achieve by way of overarching goals and objectives

Vision

- Imagined future state of what it will be like when purpose is being lived and the mission is accomplished

Values

- How you do what you do
- What matters in the pursuit of purpose

Strategy

- Who you will work with and how you will deploy resources to actualize the mission, expressed in terms of concrete activities and timelines



2. Purpose & narrative: Peas in a pod

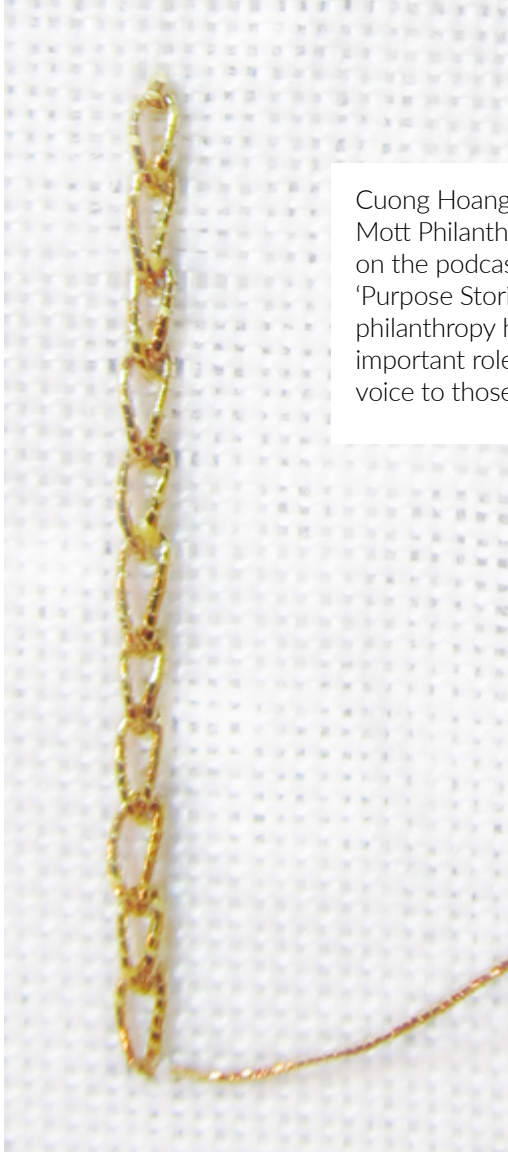
Where mission and vision are often expressed as pithy statements, and strategy as planning documents and gantt charts, purpose is packaged within narratives and internalized through everyday stories and language.



Director of Deloitte's Centre for the Edge, John Hagel, writes:

“Narratives are bigger and broader than purpose, but they provide a powerful home and setting to frame a purpose... The narrative actually gives more meaning and inspiration to purpose because now that purpose is part of something much bigger. It becomes an enabler of actions that are being taken far beyond the boundaries of the organization and achieving far more impact than any individual organization could hope to achieve.”

Narratives are a means of carrying ideas into action by creating “golden threads” and “harmonized discourse,” which set new norms for ways of thinking and behaving. Where mission, vision and value statements speak to what an institution does and how, a **narrative gives form to who an institution is and the collaborative journey it is on with stakeholders**. A narrative is not the same thing as a brand. Although a narrative can inform a brand, narratives go deeper to situate ideas within a historical and philosophical context.



Cuong Hoang, advisor to Mott Philanthropic and guest on the podcast episode 'Purpose Stories', argues that philanthropy has an especially important role to play in giving voice to those golden threads.

Cuong shares,

“ One of the things that I have learned or observed in philanthropy is that **the process of naming is very powerful**. So to name that we're working on 'climate' versus 'just transitions' versus all the frameworks that we have, in philanthropy, in society; to be able to say: "this is the one I'm working on" is very powerful.

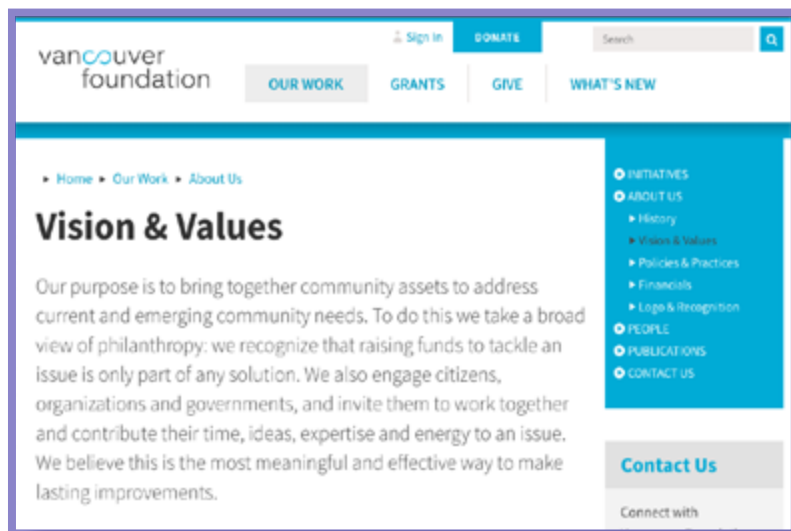
And equally as powerful is that process of recognizing that there are paradigms, or ways of thinking out there, and they don't yet have a name... You know, fourth wave feminism or trans rights, right? I mean, 50 years ago, we never talked about trans rights. People cared about things that we would read as trans rights today, but we didn't call it that. So I think the process of being able to name something is incredibly powerful. And things are recognized and differently named when there's different decision makers at the table.

”

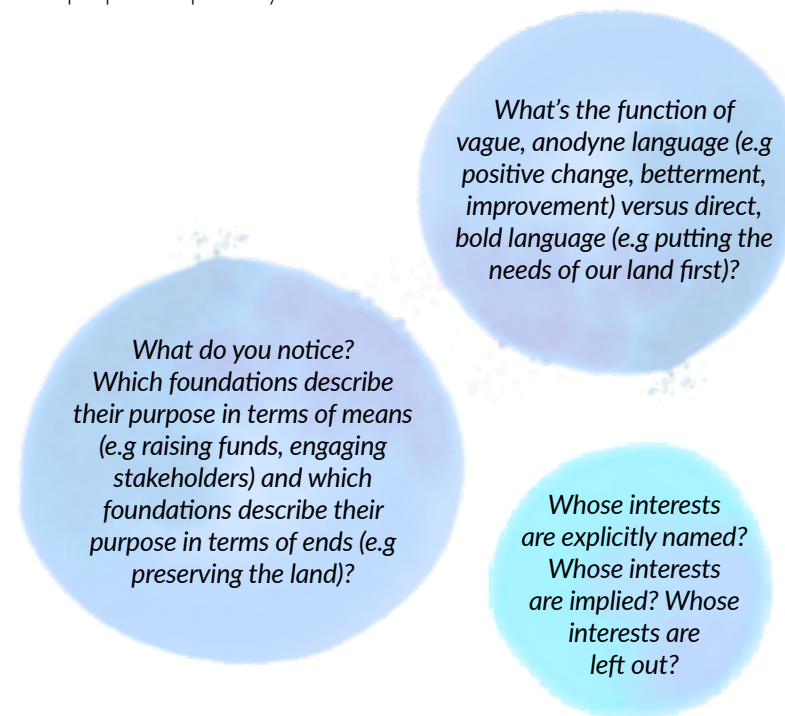


3. Parsing purpose

Vancouver Foundation's purpose, as stated on its website, is to:



Only a handful of other community foundations in Canada articulate their purpose separately from their mission.



Foundations with a stated purpose



To create a more fair and just society where everyone can thrive by mobilizing those with resources and the will to partner with others.



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Eenou-Eeyou Community Foundation
Fondation communautaire Eenou-Eeyou

Guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations, the Eenou-Eeyou Community Foundation reflects the Eeyou Istchee philosophy of putting the needs of our land, our people, and our communities first. We are deeply committed to preserving the land we've walked for thousands of years, so both the Boreal forest and species like Woodland caribou, moose, and others are secured.

Foundations with implied purpose



We inspire philanthropy, support the charitable sector and build a permanent endowment to address the current and future needs of people in our community.



Our goal is to create a more vibrant, healthy and engaged community by building positive, lasting relationships between donors and the worthy causes they support.



To be a catalyst for strengthening community wellbeing, now and for future generations, by promoting philanthropy, creating partnerships and supporting diverse charitable organizations.

Foundations with implied purpose



Foundation of Greater Montréal

The Foundation of Greater Montreal (FGM) helps individuals, families and organizations getting involved to support their community by creating funds for selected causes in all sectors. FGM manages the funds' assets and guides donors by identifying key issues and supporting community organizations. It also encourages philanthropy as a major driver for well-being in Greater Montréal.



The mission of the Thompson Community Foundation is to create a growing investment pool of capital resources and use revenue earned by the capital pool to benefit the community of Thompson.



4. Unpacking neutrality

Neutrality characterizes the purpose and mission of many community foundations. So, when is neutral meaningful and inclusive? And when is neutral weak and exclusive, defaulting to dominant interests? In what contexts is neutrality desirable? And is it even possible?

This is a critical and current debate within libraries. We might think of libraries as an analogous institution to community foundations, with a broad remit to engage a diverse public.

Writing after the tumultuous Mccarthy era, librarian David Bernighausen strongly advocated for libraries to serve an impartial role, fostering open-minded democratic discourse. Bernighausen saw intellectual freedom and social advocacy as incompatible purposes.



For Amelia Gibson and her co-authors, writing in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, impartiality is a myth. Neutrality is what systems ask us of us. They write:

“ *The construct of the library as a neutral entity limits the work that is necessary to truly provide responsive, equitable, and inclusive access to information, skill development (such as social media use, information creation, data, and media literacy), community conversations, and other library services for communities dealing with crises or social unrest. This construct (neutrality) limits libraries to a passive “diversity” designed to ensure (at best) basic universal access to already-existing space and resources (through collection development)...It does not encourage the library to actively engage with community issues unless those issues are “apolitical,” and does not obligate the librarian to seek out and attempt to ameliorate conditions within local communities (Libraries on the Frontlines: Neutrality and Social Justice, 2017).* ”

Interestingly, despite their different stances, Bernighausen and Gibson agree that libraries should stake out an explicit purpose, whether for intellectual freedom or social justice. Neither conceptualize the library as simply an institution that collects and distributes resources for public benefit. Each describes what benefit means.



5. Other purposes

What are alternative ways to conceptualize purpose?

If philanthropic institutions were initially designed to soften the impact of income inequality and foster an ethos of the benevolent wealthy, at least as historian Calum Carmichael outlines in the module “Origin Stories,” can they be repurposed for other means and ends?



Scott Burnham thinks so. He's a repurposing specialist, working with cities and local institutions to re-imagine what they use their resources for. Cities and institutions are made-up of *content*. In the case of foundations, they are made-up of cash, investments, physical assets, financial systems, technology, human resources, relationships, influence, etc. While this content may be finite, the *context* in which to use that content is limitless. He writes,

“The structures, surfaces, objects, and systems that underpin daily operations have the potential to do more, to perform an alternative function, or assume an entirely new role ...transforming from limiting palettes of resources into platforms of possibilities.”

Using Scott's lingo, we can ask: how can the resources of a foundation function as a platform of opportunity? That is, infrastructure not as the end result of a previous creative or strategic process, but as the beginning of a new one?

That's a question foundation leaders like Cuong Hoang from Mott Philanthropic and Brad Rourke from Kettering Foundation have been mulling over, and reinventing their practice around. Here's a sampling of some of the different ways our podcast guests and others are conceptualizing philanthropic purposes.



A sampler of philanthropic purposes

Purpose as ends



Like all other forms of wealth in the United States, philanthropic wealth can be directly traced back to industries that relied on economic practices of extraction and exploitation, such as the theft of Indigenous land and genocide of Indigenous people, the kidnapping and enslavement of millions of African people, the systemic undervaluing of “women’s work” and the destruction of natural systems and the web of life. Because philanthropic wealth comes from these historic (and current) practices, philanthropy has a **moral obligation** to repair these harms and redistribute wealth and power **to the communities who have been most harmed by extraction and exploitation**. Only then can philanthropy play a proactive role in building a world that works for all of us.



A sampler of philanthropic purposes

Purpose as ends

Decoloni-
zation &
healing



Edgar Villanueva



For me, [decolonization is] almost synonymous with the word healing. And I think of decolonization as **acknowledging the truth** of what has transpired over time: what is the harm, taking some ownership around it, and really committing to a healing process that is going to, not undo, but repair as best as possible, right? Because we can't undo 500 years of colonization, but through decolonizing, or taking on a mindset of decolonization, we can try to heal and to support.

[It's] a process that involves everyone: the oppressor, and the group that has been oppressed is in a process of **restorative justice**. So there's work for White people to do, or descendants of settlers, as well as work for Indigenous people and descendants of Black folks and other People of Colour, to take some action around acknowledging our collective trauma as a result of history, and the collective healing that has to be done as well.



A sampler of philanthropic purposes

Purpose as ends



Kristen Cambell



For us, civic philanthropy means all of the different types of funders that are focused on and concerned about the state of civic life in America, which is an intentionally broad frame.

For us, we think about civic life very broadly, to include the **health of our political systems, structures, and institutions, and also our social cohesion**, our social fabric, how we're showing up for neighbours in our communities, and the sentiment of trust that underlies all of that, and a belief in the power of agency, and that that actually matters for people to participate in that.

And then when we think about philanthropies' role in that. What are the ways that funders of all types... can contribute to not only funding and supporting the system, the structures that make that possible, but also investing in those kind of **individual mobilization strategies** or the pathways for people to become involved?



A sampler of philanthropic purposes

Purpose as means

Participation
& democratic
action



Brad Rourke



Charles Kettering [was] an inventor. ...[Kettering Foundation] was an engineering-heavy kind of enterprise founded in 1927. And for the majority of the 20th century... we had laboratories and we were trying to improve life in the world, and, you know, studying how to grow wheat better, and all sorts of inventions. And... around the late 70s... we came to understand that... a fundamental problem behind all of these other problems is not technical in nature, but is, in fact, political in nature: we can grow enough food; we don't have the will to get it to the places where we need it to go.

And so the Foundation... made a real strong pivot to looking at how it is that political systems can function better for the people that are their ultimate beneficiaries... We sort of learned our way to our approach, which is this notion of people at the center of making decisions, and acting on the problems that they share by dint of living together in community. That's the fundamental essence of democracy. And that's what we study: how that can work better.



A sampler of philanthropic purposes

Purpose as means



“ Just Transition is a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy. ”



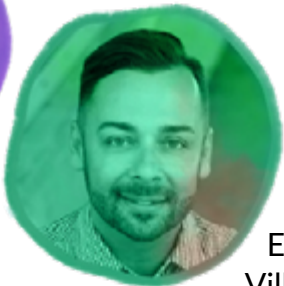
Cuong
Hoang

“ When we began to think about climate change less as the one big thing that needed to be addressed, to a symptom of a deeper crisis in society, we moved towards just transition... In an organization that has multiple priorities, only one of which is climate change, and you're a climate funder, well, the logical thing seems to be to give you a restricted grant, because we should just fund your climate work; we're not going to fund your fighting-for-minimum-wage work. [But] when you have a framework that brings those two things in relationship to each other, it's much easier for you as a funder to say, 'oh, we should just give you general operating grants, because all of these are interconnected fights. ”

A sampler of philanthropic purposes

Purpose as means

Experimentalism
& Learning



Edgar
Villanueva

“ Ultimately, I think philanthropy has a role to play and has historically played a role as a place to try out things, that place for innovation to fund and support work that the government may not fund, that when proven effective the government may adopt and take to scale. ”

Cuong
Hoang



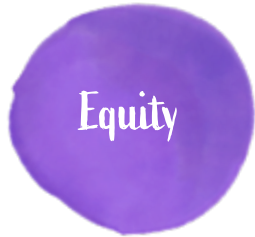
“

In the realm of experimentation, there should be a lot of small experiments and fewer bigger ones, right? We won't be ready for the big experiments until we've done a lot of small experiments. Some of that is just about learning. So many people are just risk averse, so they're only ready to do things with small risk first, before they'll take big risks. When we exercise the muscle of experimentation, it's like any muscle: at first, you just have to lift your five pound weights before you're ready to lift your 20 pound weights. And we haven't even lifted our five pound weights and sometimes, [in] our drive for something new there's so much exigency around it that we started lifting 20 pound weights first. So, where do we make room for the five pound weights? Or the small experiments?

”

A sampler of philanthropic purposes

Purpose as means



Kristen Cambell



I think of justice as being what's right, fair, and true. That's how I define justice. And I think equity, at least in the context of how we've defined it in our work, is not totally separate from that. It's about removing the barriers to what's right, fair, and true. And so, for how we've defined equity and how we've articulated it in our commitment to racial equity in particular is that if we were to achieve racial equity in the context of civic engagement, we would not see disparities along lines of race and how people show up in or participate in civic engagement or participate in democracy. If we had racial equity and democracy, we would not see such unequal outcomes by racial groups in terms of success, educational attainment, economic attainment, etc.



One way we might think about these different purposes is as means versus ends. Of course, these are imperfect categories. Sometimes means and ends are intertwined or indistinguishable. Democratic processes, for instance, are a means to a healthy democracy, but since they are so fundamental to democratic functioning, they could also be seen as an end point.

Purpose as means:

- Generosity
- Democratic process
- Fairness
- Equity
- Due process
- Consensuality/
consensual process
- Just transition
- Participation
- Restorative practice
- Experimentalism
- Learning

Purpose as ends:

- Harmony
- Democracy
- Civil Society
- Justice
- Solidarity
- Anarchy
- Autonomy
- Healing
- Flourishing



6. Artists' reflections



Episode #3: Purpose stories

Episode cover by Kyla Yin James

In this episode, I was drawn to how resources can be repurposed and thought about differently. Scott Burnham mentioned how water in Lima was repurposed to help residents, which struck me as profound symbolism - water is a fundamental need, a part of our bodies, and a resource. When we consult different ways of looking at what wealth is, and how to share it, the notions of what we define as wealth begin to shift. The vase, which is usually perceived as a solid object, transforms into liquid, then steam, then travels back into the vase to begin its cycle anew.



Episode #3: Purpose stories

Piece by Randall Bear Barnetson

While listening to the latest podcast I was moved by one of the speakers. The speaker mentioned that wealth looks different to his Indigenous community. It sparked a question for me, what would decolonizing wealth look like in my home community?

My home community is Nadleh Whut'en which translates to "the place where the salmon return". Since time immemorial wealth and health for my community has looked like salmon. Every summer my people fish day and night to get enough food for the community. Once every member has enough salmon to last the winter, then we stop fishing. The wealth and health is seen from a community level, not an individual level. This is so ingrained in our culture that it is impossible for me to imagine someone from my community not sharing their catch. This is why I decided to depict two salmon to represent both health and wealth, and community and reciprocity.

The background of the slide is composed of numerous overlapping circles in various shades of yellow and orange, creating a vibrant, abstract pattern. A large, semi-transparent orange circle is positioned on the right side, serving as a backdrop for the title text.

7. Reflection

REFLECTIONS Looking Inside

Experiences & Observations

1. How might you describe your personal sense of purpose in your work at VF? Where might it sit between pragmatic and philosophical concerns? What is the greater narrative that informs it and gives it meaning?

Reactions & Impressions

2. What did you notice about your responses to different types of purpose presented by podcast guests? When were you excited, bored, inspired, or skeptical?

Questions & Hunches to Test

3. How could you more deeply explore your relationship to different types of purpose inside and/or outside your work at VF?

REFLECTIONS Looking Outside

Experiences & Observations

4. In your interactions with community stakeholders (donors, grantees, or other stakeholders), what do you notice about how others are interpreting Vancouver Foundation's purpose? Where might it sit between pragmatic and philosophical concerns? What is the greater narrative that informs it and gives it meaning?

Reactions & Impressions

5. Research other foundations' purposes. What patterns do you see? Who are the anomalies? Which foundations have an essentially neutral purpose, and which foundations take a moral stance?

Questions & Hunches to Test

6. How might we explore the relationship between means and ends in community foundations? What would be different if Vancouver Foundation were to adopt alternative purposes (eg. justice, decolonization & healing, strong civil society, democracy) and approaches (eg. participation, just transitions, experimentalism)?

Purpose stories / PurposePhil

Concept Book / Episode #3



Produced in partnership between:

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